

## BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) has presented a report to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Edinburgh on October 24-27, 1997. CMAG's recommendations with regard to Nigeria were adopted unanimously: unless there has been a credible transition to democratic civilian government, rule of law and respect for human rights by October 1998, Nigeria could be expelled from the Commonwealth and come under severe economic sanctions.

In Nigeria a number of recent events are cause for concern. Although General Abacha announced in November that political prisoners would be released, none in fact have, and the number of people in detention has increased dramatically. There has been a steady stream of journalists picked up and held without charge. Oppression of the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta has continued unabated, with a vicious crackdown on January 3, 1998 putting another 30 people in jail. The arrest on December 21, 1997, of General Oladipo Diya, Abacha's deputy, and 11 accomplices in an alleged coup plot, has been followed by the arrest of more than 100 suspects. Many others are in hiding or on the move as a result, while journalists have been warned to exercise extreme caution in reporting about the coup. The death in prison from unexplained causes of one of the country's most prominent prisoners of conscience, former military Vice-President Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, caused wide-spread shock and dismay.

The so-called Transition Plan has seen the elections for State Assemblies go ahead on December 6, 1997, but with only the five government-approved political parties in the running and a very low voter turn-out. The draft constitution, which contains the framework for the transition process, has yet to be published. Government continues to be by decree, with civilian court rulings subject to overruling by the military regime. Included in the Transition Plan are general elections planned for the fall 1998.

The UN General Assembly 3rd Committee has again passed a UK-led resolution, co-sponsored by Canada, expressing concern at continuing grave violations in Nigeria and calling on the Government of Nigeria to meet its obligations and ensure the observance of fundamental human rights and freedoms. At the 53rd session of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), Canada co-sponsored a resolution which approved, by a vote of 28 to 6 with 19 abstentions, the creation of a UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Nigeria. The new Special Rapporteur, Mr. Soli J. Sorabjee, was appointed in October, 1997. He has written twice to General Abacha to arrange a visit, but has not yet had a positive response.

Canada is a member of the CMAG and has played a leading role in urging the Commonwealth to maintain a firm stance on Nigeria's human rights performance. We have implemented the full range of non-economic sanctions authorized by CMAG. The next CMAG meeting will take place in April 1998, followed by CHOGM in June.