

**Widespread poverty** further compounds the problems outlined above. Even prior to Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua was the second poorest nation in the Americas. The under and unemployment rate is around 52%. Approximately 83% of the population does not have access to medical care, and according to the UNDP, only 53% have access to potable water. Approximately 35% of the population is illiterate and over 40% of Nicaraguans earn less than US\$1 per day.

**Violence against women** (including sexual abuse, rape and incest) remains a serious problem in Nicaragua. Either because of the lack of resources or a lack of interest, it does not seem to be an issue that will be adequately addressed by the government in the near future. There are some excellent and dedicated women's groups in the country, but they face serious problems of inadequate resources and a culture which has, traditionally, undervalued the rights of women.

On a positive note, the number of **civil society organizations**, and human rights groups in particular, is on the rise and gaining in importance. Due to the efforts of Nicaraguan NGOs, the Government passed a law in August 1998, the Children and Family Code, which protects the rights of children and adolescents. Nevertheless, child poverty continues to be one of the gravest problems in Nicaragua (1.6 million children under the age of 18 live in poverty), a situation which was severely compounded by Hurricane Mitch. Furthermore, the rate of juvenile delinquency is high, with a steep rise in the number of teenage gangs. According to human rights groups, 74% of the incarcerated population in 1997 was between the ages of 13 and 25.

### **CANADIAN POSITION**

Canada has been very active in the promotion of human rights, and the rights of aboriginal people in particular, in Nicaragua for many years. Canada's efforts to promote human rights in Nicaragua have been closely linked to **poverty reduction programs** and our approach to trade promotion, particularly in the sectors of mining and forestry, have been tied to socio-economic development and local capacity-building.

Between 1988 and 1996 Nicaragua received more than \$100 million in **development assistance** from Canada. Rehabilitation of potable water and sewage systems, rehabilitation of the energy sector, and human resources training are among our current major projects. Canada also provided \$1 million in financial assistance to help organize the 1996 elections. Current official development assistance will be effectively doubled as a result of additional support promised by Canada for **post-Hurricane Mitch relief**, reconstruction and transformation.

The **Office of the Canadian Embassy** in Managua is in close touch with NGOs throughout the country, and Embassy staff often travel to the more remote areas of the country to monitor the situation there. Canadian officials take every appropriate opportunity to emphasize Canada's commitment to the promotion of human rights and equitable development for indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups.