

Commonwealth heads of government endorsed in principle the establishment of a special human rights unit within the Commonwealth Secretariat. We hope that this unit will advance the cause of humanity by helping all Commonwealth member countries share their experience in law-making and law reform.

The brief review I have just conducted shows that the record of the past 35 years is not entirely a gloomy one even with regard to the implementation of human rights conventions. I think it is fair to say that Canada has done more than most countries to encourage better implementation. Yet Canada's responses to human rights violations — in the Eastern bloc or in the developing world — are the subject of considerable debate in this country.

For my part I believe there is a place in Canada's foreign policy for vigorous public diplomacy. In appropriate circumstances we have not hesitated to speak out openly and bluntly in expressing the very real indignation of the Canadian people. I have in mind, for instance, our condemnation of human rights violations in Poland, El Salvador, South Africa and Cambodia.

Value of quiet
diplomacy

On the other hand, there are situations where so-called quiet diplomacy may be more appropriate. Our views may sometimes have a greater impact when expressed as humanitarian concerns or concerns for the advancement of bilateral relations. Confrontation and condemnation in some cases may only serve to harden attitudes and provoke harsher measures. Should we, for instance, sever all diplomatic ties with South Africa as we have been urged to do? I think not. Such action might give vent to our frustrations. It would not, I fear, make a real contribution to ending *apartheid*.

The Canadian government is also frequently urged to suspend all aid to states that are serious human rights offenders. But doing so may only work against the achievement of basic human rights for the very victims of such offences. Our principal aid objective is to deliver assistance to the poorest people of the poorest countries. Should we doubly penalize them by cutting them off from our assistance because their governments abuse them? Obviously not. It seems to me what we can do, however, and what we do in fact is to take account of human rights considerations in determining eligibility for Canadian aid, and in deciding on the amount and the kind of aid given. Both the needs of the country and the readiness of the government to channel assistance to its neediest citizens are important factors in establishing such eligibility. In addition, we exclude from consideration that tiny number of countries whose governments' excesses have resulted in massive social breakdown — as in Uganda under Amin.

Value of public
opinion

The debate on the most appropriate way of responding to human rights violations will go on. It is a constructive debate. Governments need to be prodded and to be kept informed by organizations like the International Commission of Jurists. An alert public opinion is still one of the best bulwarks against crimes of inhumanity.
