

Introduction and Summary

Human Rights - How Can Canada Make a Difference?

Since the end of the Cold War, increasing international attention has been paid to issues of human rights--particularly those covered by the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but also those dealt with by the Covenant on Economic, Social and Economic Rights. In some areas, there has been a marked improvement as the two former super-powers have ceased to protect the more barbaric of their client states. On the other hand, conditions have clearly not improved or have actually deteriorated in many countries in every region of the world. The fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offered a suitable occasion to assess conditions and to consider how Canada can make a difference in ensuring its implementation.

This year's conference began by looking at Canada's record in the main international institutions concerned with human rights. Canada has also been involved with a number of regional or specialized international groupings: the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Organization of American States. We looked at developments in the UN Committee on Human Rights and the OAS. Canadians have also been involved in the movement for the creation of an International Criminal Court, and our keynote speaker, Warren Allmand, dealt extensively with this development.

Apart from being active in international organizations, Canada has also been urged to make compliance with international rights standards an element in its bilateral relations with other states. There has been sharp disagreement among Canadians about the merits of constructive engagement versus confrontation in dealing with states whose records are judged to be unsatisfactory. We considered four case studies from three continents: Burma and China, Cuba, Nigeria, and Bosnia.

Although Canadians tend to smugness concerning this country's domestic record, Canada has itself been criticized in international organizations for its policies and practices in a number of fields. In this regard we considered Canada's treatment of its First Nations.