

Discussion Groups

Constructive Engagement or Confrontation?

1. Asia: Should Burma and China be Treated Similarly?

Lead Speaker: Fred Bild, former Canadian Ambassador to China, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam

(Summary of group report to plenary)

The short answer to the question put to the group is no.

True, both are autocratic regimes with arbitrary measures. They intimidate the population. The regimes are generally insulated from their own media. They fear organized opposition and their own populations as well. There is a high degree of corruption.

But China has evolved since the Cultural Revolution, offering increasing opportunities to its people and increasing the standard of living. Education, a market-led economic orientation, more and more individual options, the rule of law, and greater openness are among the government's concerns and are debated as issues in magazines. For these reasons there is a gleam of hope that China is advancing with a spirit of responsibility. The Chinese government therefore has a certain legitimacy and is tolerated by the population.

In Burma, on the other hand, the coup d'etat and the military government resulting from it are not recognized by the population. The government has no legitimacy. The regime impoverishes the people. Human rights are grossly violated and there is no significant evidence of evolution to something better. Foreign investment is one of the financial supports of the regime; the drug trade is another.

The group concluded that the two cases are quite different and the two countries should be treated differently. The group approved the Canadian economic sanctions taken against Burma and favoured pressing other countries, particularly the ASEAN nations, to adopt sanctions. Canada should take strong and coherent measures against the regime. It should not impose trade sanctions on China.

2. Latin America: Promotion of a Democratic Cuba

Lead Speaker: Mark Fried, Americas Programme in Democratic Rights, Oxfam Canada

(Text of group report to plenary)

The discussion group supports the general thrust of Canadian policy toward Cuba, including trade, investment, tourism and modest development initiatives, in particular exchanges that bring Cubans to Canada and send Canadian experts to Cuba, such as the program of graduate studies at the University of Havana sponsored by Carleton University.

Given the current resistance in Cuba to fundamental change, the group recommends that Canadian policy focus on the long term evolution of the Cuban political system rather than expect dramatic short-term improvements.