

But we must be clear on what we mean by "impact". If we attempt to change the fundamental nature of a state and its society, we will probably fail. Only the people of that nation themselves have the potential ability to do so and, indeed, the sovereign right to do so. If, however, we strive to persuade governments to live up to their own standards -- frequently enshrined in admirable but disregarded constitutions -- and within their own systems, there may be some effect, in some instances.

I believe that our overall objective must be to make respect for human rights an enduring international issue -- to ensure that governments are aware that their behaviour towards their own citizens will affect their international standing and their ability to develop normal and fruitful relations with other countries. By directing international opprobrium on particularly despicable practices, the international community may persuade a government to modify those practices or deter other governments from engaging in them.

At the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, we have been trying to address some of the generic types of serious violations which prevail in many countries. We have worked for the adoption of a convention against torture. We have obtained the establishment of an international working group to monitor the widespread phenomenon of disappearances, and have secured the appointment of a distinguished special rapporteur to investigate the relationship of human rights violations to massive exoduses of people. We have also ensured the adoption of resolutions which reaffirm the rights of individuals to promote respect for human rights in their own countries. In this, we are concerned with the suppression of dissidents in Eastern Europe and in many other countries.

We do know that international opprobrium sometimes has an impact. Following the coup in 1973, large numbers of persons disappeared in Chile. Since 1977, however, no single disappearance has been documented by human rights organizations in that country. Although we cannot assume that massive international attention brought about this result, I believe it was a factor. Another case, however, is much clearer. Following the international pressures exerted on Viet Nam at the 1979 Geneva Conference on Southeast Asian Refugees, that country did terminate its brutal, and frequently fatal expulsion of its Chinese minority.

But the failures are legion, and the international situation speaks for itself. If Canada wishes to have its views heard, we must ensure our credibility. We must continue to improve respect for human rights here in Canada, and ensure that we live up to the letter and the spirit of our own international undertakings. Some of you will know that federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for human rights met in Ottawa in February to reaffirm their common commitment to do just that. When we address the subject of human rights in other countries, we must be prepared to have them, in turn, address the state of human rights in Canada.