

Mr. President of the Assembly, Mr. Secretary General,
Mr. Assistant Secretary General, Ladies and Gentlemen and
Friends:

It is a great pleasure to be in Nassau to lead the Canadian delegation to the 22nd General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS). It brings back special memories of Santiago last year when I first attended a General Assembly of this organization.

On behalf of the Canadian delegation, I would like to convey sincere congratulations to you, Mr. President, on your election. The agenda is full, and our deliberations require difficult decisions. But I can assure you of the full support of the Canadian delegation as you carry out your important responsibilities.

I also wish to thank the Government of the Bahamas for their exceptional hospitality and conference arrangements. The natural beauty and serenity of Nassau have given us welcome peace of mind to deal with the many issues before us.

Canada is proud to be a member of the oldest regional organization in the world. We joined the OAS with the intention of becoming a full and active partner in the Americas, and I am pleased that in only our second year of membership, we have moved forward along this path.

We have worked hard to support the work of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which has made important progress in the face of resistance from many quarters. Human rights must be unconditional, and we can never compromise our defence of them.

The Commission itself must remain active at its highest level -- that is, the level of Commissioners whom we ourselves elect. It must be independent and specific. And it must be objective, pointing out progress where it is appropriate, as well as condemning as necessary.

Mr. President, I urge all members to support the work of the Commission, to ensure that it is a strong, credible voice in defence of human rights. If we do not, we will abandon the field to organizations outside the inter-American system. Our organization must give clear indication of its own resolve in this most important area.

Canada also applauds the work of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and welcomes the increasing co-operation between it and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The rights of women are central to our progress on overall human rights, and I am pleased that Canada signed the three inter-American conventions on the rights of women at an event last fall