

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

ISSUE

In the past year, South Africa has undergone a "democratic big bang" with the first ever multiracial democratic elections taking place in April 1994. Nelson Mandela heads the newly elected Government of National Unity (GNU) whose members include representatives of the three major political parties. The country is currently operating under an interim Constitution that includes a Bill of Rights and provides for a series of checks and balances between the executive, legislative and judicial arms of the government. The protection of minority rights provided for in the South African Constitution is more generous than is found in most major western democracies.

BACKGROUND

The human rights situation in South Africa has improved dramatically in 1994. The elections saw the completion of the transition from apartheid to multiracial democracy. Death tolls from political violence were high for the first quarter of 1994, but have declined since the election. The desire for peace has held as governments, police and communities work together to address the serious problems of criminal violence.

Over the next two years, the new National Assembly and Senate sitting as a Constituent Assembly will approve a permanent Constitution. Basic freedoms such as the freedom of speech are now more widely respected, freedom from discrimination has improved, minority rights have been established and the Government of National Unity (GNU) has shown support for gender equity initiatives. South Africa has moved to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Disability is included in the Bill of Rights as a basis of non-discrimination. Political tolerance, however, is not always respected as some political parties are not allowed to campaign in certain areas. The centrepiece of the GNU's platform is the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) which will attempt to translate democratic gains for the black majority into concrete improvements in living conditions. Included in the RDP is primary education for all and free health care for those under six.

CANADIAN POSITION

Canada continues to support the democratic changes that have taken place in South Africa and to encourage South Africa's re-entry and active participation in various regional and multilateral organizations. Canada provided \$4.5 million (Cdn) in various activities related to the administration, monitoring and technical assistance for the election. The Secretary of State for Latin America and Africa led the bilateral Canadian Electoral Observer Mission and over 120 Canadians participated in UN, Commonwealth and NGO missions.

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