

In almost all countries, conditions of internal insecurity or extreme stress can lead to the setting aside of established norms. Even the normal performance in dozens of countries falls well below accepted standards. Amnesty International currently places some 60 countries on its list of nations practicing torture. Freedom House has another 100 on its list of societies, which judged from the western democratic point of view, are not free. If Canada were to take up human rights causes in many countries simultaneously, our efforts would be so diffuse that they would be unproductive. They would also not be taken seriously. We must then be prudent and focus our actions where they are most needed and where they may have a useful effect.

Canadian Priorities

As a priority, we must seek international action and consider as well bilateral action when there is reliable evidence that the grossest of human rights violations are systematically perpetrated. We should act where there is evidence of genocide, mass murder and widespread repression, or evidence of a government intentionally depriving a group or a region of basic resources for survival.

Apart from these extreme cases, there is also a place for Canadian action in serious human rights situations of direct concern to Canadians and where close links of one nature or another exist. We can in such cases, where reliable evidence exists, examine whether there is some action, apart from multilateral action, which the government can take to seek improvement in the situation. We must bear in mind that if we seek to rectify isolated abuses or aberrations in a state's normal performance in the human rights field, there may be prospects for progress. But if we seek to alter a firm policy or the fundamental basis of another state's society, the issue is not likely to be resolved quickly or easily. It is not desirable to generalize on the circumstances in which action should be taken or the means by which it should be taken. Each situation must be examined on its own merits and in light of the level of direct Canadian interest.