

I was honoured to address this Commission in 1995, and following the visit of Foreign Minister Axworthy last year, I am pleased to be with you again today. Regular ministerial attendance at these meetings reflects the importance human rights play in Canada's foreign policy -- as a threshold issue in our relations with other states. And it reflects the central role of the Commission in advancing the cause of human rights in all parts of the world.

Over the past 50 years, the Commission on Human Rights has presided over a transformation of the common values of humanity -- freedom and democracy, sharing and community -- into internationally recognized norms -- universal standards of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Today, our attention increasingly focuses, in this Commission and elsewhere, on the task of implementing those norms. In this, there can be no question of choosing certain rights over others. Human rights begin with the day's first meal, but without the freedom to speak, how can anyone say they are hungry?

The challenge of implementation is complex, and must be met by each society in its own way. But this does not relieve the international community of its responsibility: under the Charter of the United Nations, all of our governments are pledged, individually and collectively, to promote "human rights and fundamental freedoms for all".

So Canada considers it a matter of obligation: we must seek to address human rights concerns in a forthright and effective manner. And we must do so at every appropriate opportunity -- and certainly before this Commission, which exists for no other purpose.

The preferred approach to this shared responsibility is one of dialogue and engagement.

This explains the particular effort Canada and its independent Canadian Human Rights Commission have invested in working with other countries to assist the development of national institutions for the protection of human rights. Independent national human rights institutions are among the most effective means of safeguarding the constitutional and legal rights of individual citizens.

This Commission, and the many mechanisms created by the UN to promote human rights, offer a wide variety of opportunities for engagement. The High Commissioner has made an important contribution to assisting Rwanda begin the reconstruction of its devastated judicial and human rights infrastructure. At this session, Canada will again work closely with Rwanda and others to reinforce that effort. We hope the Commission can also contribute to a coordinated international response to the situations in Burundi, and in Zaire -- where the sacrifice of innocent civilian lives must not be regarded merely as a cost of military pursuits.