

Human Rights and the United Nations

Respect for human rights features prominently among the objectives of the United Nations, as embodied in the UN Charter. Since 1945, the UN has adopted some 60 instruments in this field (conventions, declarations, sets of principles, etc). The most fundamental of these — the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights — constitute the International Bill of Human Rights.

One of the central issues addressed in Canada's recently concluded foreign policy review was the role of human rights in Canadian foreign policy. The government has made it clear that respect for human rights is an important key to international peace, prosperity, development and to an environment where Canadians can best pursue their interests in the world. The essential question for Canada, then, is how we can most effectively influence other governments to respect human rights standards. Increasingly, Canada has been focusing on the UN and other multilateral institutions to carry its human rights messages forward. Canada has made it a priority to ensure that the UN has the capacity to fulfil the human rights standards it proclaimed in 1945.

Canada's essential aim is to increase the capacity of UN institutions to prevent human rights abuses before they occur and, when this is not possible, to use preventive diplomacy to seek peaceful resolution of conflicts. This goal is consistent with the Secretary-General's vision, as outlined in his *Agenda for Peace*, and with Canada's overall emphasis on addressing root causes of instability.

Canada and other like-minded countries have focused on strengthening mechanisms of international control and scrutiny. A great deal has been accomplished in recent years with the development of special rapporteurs, representatives and expert working groups to address specific national situations in countries like Iran, Iraq, Burma and the former Yugoslavia, or to assess specific types of human rights violations such as forced disappearances, arbitrary detention, religious intolerance and torture. Canada was instrumental in securing the appointment of special rapporteurs on freedom of opinion and expression, and on violence against women.

The June 1993 World Conference on Human Rights reaffirmed the international community's endorsement of the principle that human rights are a legitimate concern of the international community. The major legacy of that conference was the establishment in December 1993 of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights. This post carries a broad mandate to promote and protect human rights, to help prevent their violation, and to co-ordinate human rights activities throughout the UN system.