

Children's rights are a particularly high priority for Canada. We have been working hard on the two Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and hope to see them completed soon. At home, we have amended our Criminal Code to allow for the prosecution of Canadians who engage in commercial sexual activities with children while abroad. We hope that other countries, recognizing the importance of reducing the demand for this despicable trade, will follow suit.

Another priority for Canada is the adoption of a strong and effective Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during this, the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. As a demonstration of Canada's commitment to activism in promoting indigenous interests and to developing new partnerships with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, we have appointed our first ever Counsellor for International Indigenous Issues, Mr. Blaine Favel.

On the rights of persons with disabilities, the need is, above all, for a new way of looking at the issue. It is essential to recognize that this is not simply a social development issue; it is, fundamentally, a question of human rights. Until we acknowledge the need to analyse our mainstream policies and programs from the perspective of persons with disabilities, both at home and within the UN, we are denying their claim to full participation.

This concept of "mainstreaming" also underpins Canada's long-standing commitment to promoting the human rights of women. If we are to make the statement "women's rights are human rights" more than mere words, we must take action at home. When developing policies and legislation, we must integrate gender equality and respect for human rights from the start in all we do. That is what "mainstreaming" is all about.

Violations of the rights of women remain all too frequent. In Afghanistan, the most basic rights of women and girls — the right to work, to education and to proper health care — are routinely denied, not as matter of neglect, but as a result of policy. Most recently, the Taliban have imposed new restrictions on expatriate Muslim women working in Afghanistan. These women are essential to humanitarian relief efforts in that country. Restrictions on their ability to work will put at risk the lives of thousands of the most vulnerable Afghans, in particular women and children. The international community must speak out, and show women in Afghanistan that they are not alone.

Mobilizing and empowering all segments of society — including children, indigenous peoples, those with disabilities and women — is key to implementation of human rights. So, too, is an enhanced partnership between states and civil society.

Full participation by the non-governmental community, including at the Commission and throughout the UN system, is central to the promotion, protection and implementation of human rights. Equally essential as a foundation for the work of NGOs is recognition of their right to defend human rights. For this reason, Canada is strongly committed to seeing final adoption of the Draft Declaration on Human Rights Defenders at the 53rd session of the UN General Assembly. It seems to us particularly appropriate, and symbolic, to adopt the Declaration in this anniversary year.

When the Secretary-General spoke to this Commission, he sent a strong message that human rights are universal. They are limited to no continent. They are the concern of all levels and sectors of society. They are an obligation of all governments. In pursuing this goal of universal respect for human rights, an open and co-operative approach is essential. If we wish to see standards implemented, we must work together to ensure that member states have the capacity to do so.

Developing countries — particularly those struggling with the aftermath of conflict, the effects of