

allowed exiled Moslem Brotherhood leaders to return. In April-May 1995, the Syrian government permitted the US-based NGO Human Rights Watch to conduct an unprecedented six-week mission to investigate the human rights situation in Syria. The mission was given full access to government officials and allowed unrestricted travel within the country. This was a marked improvement over the October 1994 Amnesty International mission to Syria, which received little cooperation from government officials. The Syrian Foreign Ministry maintains a substantive, ongoing dialogue with the Canadian and other Western embassies in Damascus on human rights issues.

Nevertheless, it is believed that hundreds, if not thousands, of political prisoners remain in Syrian jails, although the number of new cases of arbitrary detention and mistreatment appears to be declining. The government states that its special emergency laws and powers are no longer applied, and that all cases of detention and arrest are being processed through the relevant court system; this has not been independently confirmed. It appears that the security services' extensive monitoring and surveillance activities have not been reduced.

Corruption and influence-peddling are believed to be a serious problem within the government and across the economy, contributing to a general lack of popular participation and empowerment. In addition, the disproportionate influence of the Alawite minority in the government is an irritant to many Syrians, especially the Sunni Muslim majority. To its credit, Syria's welfare system provides a high level of health care, free education and comprehensive food security for its citizens. Damascus promotes secularism, women's rights and is particularly supportive of the rights of children. One of the Cabinet Ministers is a woman, as are 24 of the 250 representatives in the National Assembly. However, the role of women is heavily influenced by traditional Islamic mores, and the law discriminates in favour of men in terms of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and like matters.

Religious freedom is fully respected and widely and openly practised. Under President Assad's rule, minorities have achieved notable success, e.g. Arab Christians in the public sector and Armenians, Jews and Druze in the private sector. In early 1994, following intensive lobbying by the Canadian government and others, Syria agreed to allow Syrian Jews to emigrate, and most have since done so, reducing the community to only 200 members.

CANADIAN POSITION

Canada actively pursues a substantive dialogue on human rights with Syria. Although we recognize that there have been recent improvements, such as the release of political prisoners, many aspects of human rights in Syria fall short of international standards.

In the course of 1995, Canadian diplomats in Damascus, including our Ambassador, met on a number of occasions with Syrian government officials to review human rights issues, to urge respect for due process of law, and to seek information on specific allegations of human rights abuses.