

Human rights conference focuses on legislation

A federal-provincial ministerial conference on human rights was held in Ottawa, last month, to focus on possible improvements in federal and provincial legislation to ensure that domestic human rights legislation conforms to United Nations human rights agreements acceded to by Canada.

It was the second conference of human rights ministers. The first conference was held in Ottawa in December 1975. The 1975 meeting paved the way for Canada's accession in 1976 to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to its Optional Protocol, and to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The covenants require that states that have acceded to them recognize and protect a wide range of human rights. Federal-provincial-territorial co-operation is a necessary part of the implementation of the covenants by each of the governments.

Some of the areas considered by the federal and provincial ministers were earlier identified by the United Nations Human Rights Committee when it considered Canada's first report on implementation of this covenant in March 1980. Some of the main areas of discussion were: additional prohibited grounds of discrimination; emergencies legislation; compensation of victims of unlawful arrest or detention; compensation of victims of judicial error; affirmative action and special support programs; and the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Discrimination of disabled

The ministers recognized the importance of providing protection against discrimination on the basis of physical disability and that 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons, is a good occasion to consider what further steps could be taken. They also discussed the possible inclusion of mental disability as a prohibited ground of discrimination. The ministers also examined the possible prohibition of discrimination on the basis of political opinion in the light of the experience of some governments.

The federal government affirmed that a new and more detailed federal emergencies act that could incorporate the human rights safeguards set out in the covenant

may be desirable. A conference of ministers responsible for emergency planning is scheduled for May to consider this matter further.

The conference examined the rights of citizens to compensation for unlawful arrest or detention. There was general agreement that laws in effect in Canada currently provide a measure of protection. Possible ways of increasing the level of protection were discussed. The ministers said they were generally supportive of providing compensation for victims of judicial error in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Affirmative action

Various approaches to affirmative action and special support programs were examined, in particular as they relate to employment. The ministers agreed on improving equal access to employment through co-operative action by the various levels of government. They said they would encourage employers and unions to review their procedures to ensure equal opportunity in the work place. The ministers asked their respective officials through the Continuing Committee of Officials responsible for Human Rights to prepare and submit periodic reports on the status of affirmative action and special support programs across Canada.

Last year federal and provincial governments agreed that Canada should sign the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. As a subsequent step to the signing, which took place in Copenhagen in July 1980, the ministers considered the next steps that should be taken towards ratification of the convention. In this connection, they asked that the Continuing Committee of Officials undertake the necessary study relating to possible ratification and subsequent implementation by Canada of the convention.

The Continuing Committee of Officials was also asked to prepare and submit to ministers periodic reports on emerging areas of human rights and of new prescribed grounds of discrimination.

Resolution on racism

The ministers unanimously endorsed a resolution calling upon all Canadians to

reject unequivocally the racist principles articulated by persons associated with organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Further, they emphasized that theories of white supremacy and racial superiority are scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and have no place in Canadian society.

They said they would be vigilant with regard to all manifestations of racism, and would effectively enforce the provisions of the criminal law and anti-discrimination legislation to counter those manifestations whether they emanate from the Ku Klux Klan or any such group.

Loan for Barbados project

Canada is providing Barbados with a \$6.5-million loan to further develop the island's water supply system to reach 98 per cent of all households by 1985.

A loan agreement between the two countries was signed recently in Bridgetown, Barbados, by Secretary of State for External Affairs Mark MacGuigan and the Prime Minister of Barbados J.M.G. Adams.

Barbados will contribute \$6.09 million in design, engineering, construction, management, labour and other local costs to what is the third five-year phase of the water development program.

The Canadian loan funds will cover the cost of Canadian pipe, fittings, mechanical and electrical equipment, water tanks, related supplies and shipping.

The current Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) project brings Canada's contributions to the three phases of the project to \$12.1 million over the past ten years.

In the first two phases Canada provided \$5.6 million in supplies and equipment. The work included the laying of 162 miles of various sizes of water mains, construction of seven reservoirs which increased storage capacity from nine million to 22.6 million gallons, seven pumping stations, improvements in communications and general water management.

Last February, CIDA experts carried out an evaluation of water supply improvements since 1968 and concluded that water-borne diseases had decreased and standards of hygiene rose in the areas serviced in the first two phases. (Occurrence of typhoid was reduced from 5.5 per 1,000 persons to 0.8; amoebic dysentery and water-borne gastroenteritis in areas serviced were eradicated.)