

Foreign aid and human rights

by Irving Brecher

Last June, in Ottawa, a major international conference on human rights came to a dead end. Thirty-three European countries, Canada and the United States were supposed to examine compliance with the Helsinki Accords — an heroic effort which they had enshrined in 1975 as the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The scenario was depressingly familiar: while Western delegates were alleging violations of individual human rights, the Soviet Union was churning out vacuous rhetoric about the right to world peace. Not surprisingly, after six weeks of sparring behind closed doors, the conference failed to reach consensus on even a modest concluding communiqué.

Early in August came a three-day conference marking the tenth anniversary of Helsinki. Concrete results, once again, were minimal: while the United States was naming human rights victims and Canada was deploring human rights abuse, the Soviet Union was condemning US policy on arms control.

Long or short, these sessions have been mostly a "dialogue of the deaf." Western optimists, naturally, have tried to put the best face on things. They take comfort from noting that the Accords remain in force, and that they continue to generate conferences which keep human rights issues in the public eye. But this is cold comfort. The overriding truth is that the prospects for rapid human rights advancement along the Helsinki route are about as bright as they are for a snowless Canadian winter.

Why linkage?

What does all this have to do with foreign aid? A great deal, in my view.

There is ample cause for Western donors to reassess their development assistance programs for the Third World. The past three decades have produced some impressive success stories, to be sure. And there has been overall economic progress. But it has often been painfully slow; and sometimes — as in sub-Saharan Africa — the trail has led heartbreakingly backwards. No less worrisome, donor interest has been flagging, and there is a dearth of fresh ideas for revitalizing the aid-giving process. The federal government's current search for new Canadian directions is timely in this context. It is bound to stimulate some rethinking on the economic and technical facets of Canada's aid policy. My fear, however, is that the human

rights dimension will continue to suffer from benign neglect.

For whatever reasons, Canadian governments have striven mightily to camouflage the issue of political rights — the rule of law, representative government, freedom of speech, press and religion — in a foreign aid setting. From the earliest Colombo Plan days, there has never been a forthright official statement on the promotion of free societies as an objective of development assistance policy. "Human rights" were not even mentioned in the federal government's landmark *Strategy for International Development Cooperation 1975-1980*. True, "basic human needs" — health, housing, education among the lowest income groups — were coming to the fore, and this was long overdue. But not so Western-type democratic values and decision-making, which typically languished in embarrassed silence.

More recently, in *Elements of Canada's Official Development Assistance Strategy 1984*, the government did confront the human rights issue. The sum-total of its approach, however, was to affirm that while "gross violations should not be endorsed . . . by the maintenance of a substantial ODA programme . . . populations already suffering because of these violations should not be doubly penalized by the withdrawal of ODA programmes." In a similar vein, the President of the Canadian International Development Agency has stated that "there is no hard-and-fast rule" on human rights violations, and that "foreign aid policies must balance human rights issues against long-term goals" (*The Globe and Mail*, May 17, 1985).

Ottawa's 1985 green paper on *Competitiveness and Security* poses the question: "Should our bilateral aid be made more directly conditional upon the performance of recipient governments in . . . respect for human rights?" My answer is an unequivocal "yes!" It is high time that Canadians took the human rights skeleton out of the foreign aid closet.

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