

No government has a monopoly on the moral high ground on human rights, and no country is without problems. This Assembly's annual debate on human rights situations thus presents one of the most difficult, sensitive challenges we face each year.

It is nonetheless a challenge from which we cannot shrink. For it provides an essential demonstration that the United Nations is serious about the standards and institutions we have developed over the past 50 years on the foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration itself embodies obligations that, by virtue of our membership in the United Nations, all of us owe to all of our citizens. And we are obliged to take notice when these obligations are breached.

This necessity is recognized not only in the United Nations, but also in other fora.

Last month the Commonwealth took an important and welcome step when it set firm objectives which the government of Nigeria will have to meet if it wishes to remain a member of that organization. The Commonwealth acted because the continued absence of representative government in Nigeria hinders progress with regard to due process and the rule of law. Important visits by thematic Special Rapporteurs have not taken place, while key recommendations of the 1996 UN fact-finding mission go unimplemented. Full cooperation with the newly appointed Special Rapporteur would send an important and welcome signal of Nigeria's commitment to return to democracy and to full participation in the international community.

Tragically, there is no sign of any such commitment by the government of Iraq, which continues to show a blatant disregard for the lives and human rights of its citizens. The regime continues to rule by terror, brutality, indiscriminate arrest, imprisonment and execution in order to maintain its grip on power. It has taken no steps to end widespread human rights abuses, and has refused all cooperation with the Commission's Rapporteur.

In Burma, the military regime has refused to comply with repeated UN resolutions and offers no prospect of engagement with the international community on human rights issues. It shows no commitment to negotiations with Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy towards national reconciliation and the restoration of democracy. In August, Canada joined other countries in imposing selective economic measures against Burma, to convey the seriousness of our concern over the suppression of political freedom.