

Ladies and gentlemen:

I am pleased to be here once again for the consultations between the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and human rights NGOs in preparation for the 51st session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. These consultations are integral to the process of formulating Canada's foreign policy with regard to human rights. I therefore want to thank you for participating and to assure you that the Minister [of Foreign Affairs] and I look forward to hearing the results of these consultations.

The Canadian NGO community has a deservedly high reputation internationally. Indeed, much of the progress Canada has achieved on the international human rights front has been due to the highly effective partnership forged between the Government and the NGO community. A good example of this was our collaboration to secure the establishment, at last year's Commission, of a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. Over the past year Canadian officials and organizations have continued their leadership in this area, for example by working with the Rapporteur in developing an approach to her important mandate.

While these NGO consultations are the largest and most formal the Government holds on human rights issues during the year, I know most of you are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the Department - be it through correspondence and meetings with Minister Ouellet, Mr. Chan or myself, or through discussions with departmental officials. While there are often differences over strategy, I believe that as Canadians we share a fundamental belief in the importance of promoting universal respect for human rights. This ongoing dialogue is critical to defining the Government's position both in multilateral fora such as the Commission on Human Rights, and with respect to our bilateral policies.

The promotion of human rights and democracy is a tenet of Canadian foreign policy. It is a reflection of Canadian values. As was demonstrated by the report of the Special Joint Committee reviewing Canadian foreign policy, Canadians expect their elected leaders and government officials to uphold the democratic principles upon which our society was founded. Respect for human rights is a key to international peace and prosperity and thus crucial to creating a world environment in which Canadians can best pursue their interests. Furthermore, the UN Charter obliges all members to promote universal respect for human rights and Canada regards the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as entrenched in customary international law binding on all governments.

Human rights is not only a UN Charter goal in its own right, but an objective of direct relevance to the UN's security, development and humanitarian aims. Canada played an important role in creating the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights with a broad mandate for promotion, protection, prevention, and technical