

human rights organisations for being intolerant of criticism, routinely jailing vocal opponents and failing to respect the independence of the judiciary. NGOs have been concerned by the High Court's refusal to hear matters deemed by the PA to involve "security issues". The PA also been criticized for actions taken to repress free expression by detaining journalists reporting opposing opinions.

Respect for the rights of **vulnerable groups**, such as women and children, is relatively good in the West Bank and Gaza although their situation remains difficult due to continued Israeli occupation and the harsh economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza which magnify existing difficulties. The rights of the Christian minority are well respected. **Homosexuality** remains a taboo but the PA does not publicly discriminate against homosexuals.

CANADIAN POSITION

Canada follows closely the human rights situation in the West Bank and Gaza and stays in close contact with local Israeli and Palestinian human rights NGOs. We raise human rights issues with the Government of Israel in both bilateral and multilateral fora. Canada has raised its concerns with Israeli authorities regarding the ruling of the UN Committee Against Torture, Israeli treatment of Palestinian detainees and on-going settlement activities. At **CHR54** in March 1998, the Canadian statement conveyed our opposition to Israeli practices which are contrary to international law and counter-productive to the peace process.

The **Canada Fund for Local Initiatives** continues to support Palestinian human rights organizations and the Canadian Fund for Dialogue and Development maintains human rights as a priority area. In 1998, Canada opened a new **Representative Office in the West Bank** which will be well placed to work more closely with local human rights NGOs through our development assistance program and thus contribute to improving the human rights situation in the Occupied Territories. The Representative Office has emphasized at the highest levels in the PA our belief that adherence to international human rights norms is fundamental to the peace process.

In support of democratic development and good governance, Canada sponsored in April 1998 a visit to Canada by a delegation of the **Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)** lead by the Speaker of the PLC, Ahmed Qurie, to provide the delegation with an overview of the Canadian parliamentary system, to view concrete examples of democratic practices and to exchange views on human rights issues. They also met with the Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Canada is a **member of the Palestinian Municipal Elections Steering Committee** and has offered to provide **technical assistance** in support of municipal elections in the territories which have been delayed several times since 1997.

Canada's efforts as Gavel or Chair of the **Refugee Working Group** in the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process serves to highlight the needs of the Palestinian refugees and address the social and economic needs of this vulnerable group without prejudice to their political rights and future status. Canada continues to believe that a just, lasting and comprehensive peace between the parties is the best means of ensuring respect for human rights in the West Bank and Gaza.