

Canada's support to refugees and displaced persons

Canada has a special national interest in seeking action in situations as serious as that of Kampuchea. Tragic human-rights situations frequently trigger a major outflow of people from countries where the grossest violations are occurring. Massive financial and material resources are required for emergency humanitarian assistance to the destitute refugees and displaced persons from such situations. The Canadian Government, with the strong support of the Canadian public, has always played a full part in contributing to international emergency-relief operations. It has supported the subsequent efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to bring about resettlement of the refugees. The first preference is that refugees be returned to their countries of origin if improved conditions can be obtained or, as a second alternative, settled in the neighbouring countries of refuge if conditions permit. But if, as a last resort, homes must be found for them in third countries, only a small number of countries — and primarily Canada, the United States and Australia — are able to accommodate a refugee inflow. Since the Second World War, Canada has resettled more than 350,000 of these persecuted and displaced persons.

Should aid and trade be affected by human-rights considerations?

Canadians often complain to me that the Government is not doing enough to help individuals in countries where they have relatives or friends. They frequently call upon the Government to cut all existing ties — economic, cultural and political — with the country in question. Generally speaking, this is not desirable. To attempt to make any impression bilaterally on the attitudes of other governments we must be able to exert influence. We cannot do so by rhetoric alone. We can sometimes do so more effectively by making use of existing ties. On the other hand, we can and do take actions that reflect moral judgments.

Our development-assistance program is designed to help meet the basic human needs of the poorest people in the poorest countries. Those living in countries whose human-rights standards are low are usually helpless to change the situation or the regime that governs them. Our program is, therefore, governed by humanitarian and developmental criteria. Human-rights considerations are, nonetheless, a factor in determining levels of aid and the orientation of programs. We must also consider in each case whether a country with an extremely poor record in terms of human rights has the will or is in a position to implement aid programs in accordance with Canadian objectives. Thus, on a few occasions when the human-rights situation in a country has deteriorated to a stage where the effective implementation of the aid program is made extremely difficult, Canadian assistance has been suspended or not renewed.

I turn now to the question of trade and trade-related operations of the Government. In considering the impact human-rights considerations can have on these, it is important to recall that Canada is a trading nation. The economic welfare of our own citizens is at stake. For this reason the Canadian Government has not traditionally used unilateral economic measures as a tool to put pressure on a given country. Our policy takes into account not only the economic interests of Canadians but also the fact that in few countries is Canadian trade critical to the regime. Therefore, Canada trades in peaceful goods with all countries, except any against which the UN Security Council has imposed mandatory sanctions.
