

While the crisis in Burma has regional and international peace and security implications, it is the people of Burma who continue to suffer. Yet, despite the tyranny of dictatorship, there remains enormous hope for the future. Thousands of democracy activists – monks, students, teachers, writers, intellectuals, ordinary men and women – continue to defy the regime, braving arrest, imprisonment, torture and summary execution to work for a democratic Burma. It is upon the ideals of these people that a democratic Burma will be founded.

2. Canada and Burma

Canadian public interest in Burma has grown over the past decade due to the public education efforts of Canadian Friends of Burma, the Canadian churches, NGOs, trade unions, and solidarity groups. Burma solidarity groups are active in more than twenty Canadian cities and on almost as many university campuses. Canadian NGOs and institutions have a long history of supporting the Burmese democracy movement. The International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development undertook pioneering work related to Burma and was the first organization worldwide to support the National Coalition Government for the Union of Burma. Inter Pares has been working with counterparts on the Thai-Burma border since 1990-91, supporting humanitarian activities as well as human rights and advocacy organizations. More recently, the Canadian Lutheran World Relief has become involved in an international peacebuilding project coordinated by the EURO Burma Office.

The Government of Canada has also demonstrated its support of Burma's democracy cause and Minister Axworthy has indicated his personal interest. Minister Axworthy has met with NGOs and members of the democracy movement on several occasions. In August 1997, the Minister withdrew Burma's General Preferential Tariff eligibility and placed the country under the Area Control List of the Export and Import Permits Act. Canada has expressed its concern about the situation in Burma in multilateral fora as well as in bilateral meetings with members of the junta itself. CIDA is providing humanitarian assistance to Burmese refugees in Thailand and in Bangladesh and is supporting a peacebuilding project through the EURO-Burma office. The Canada Fund administered by the Canadian embassy in Bangkok has supported important refugee activities and women's projects in the Burma-Thai border region.

Canadian NGOs welcome these initiatives. However, Canada can and must do more. This paper outlines the actions which NGOs recommend that government take in helping to secure a democratic future for Burma.