

**Socio-economic inequality and access to arms** continues to pose one of the greatest threats to human rights in El Salvador. Over the past three years, the PDDH has focussed its attention away from civil and political rights and increasingly towards economic, social and political rights. Over half the population lives in poverty, with up to 30% living in extreme poverty. The harassment of union activists, and violations of workers' rights, including the right to organize, were prevalent in the now shrinking maquila industry. The minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation. Despite greater government spending on education, 20% of Salvadorean adults are illiterate, though this number is decreasing.

**Women's rights organizations** are active and public consciousness of violence against women and gender discrimination is increasing, but there has been little change in practice. Violation of women's rights in El Salvador include family violence, discrimination in the workplace and limited property rights. Abuse and exploitation of children, including child labour, are serious problems. The PDDH has made children's rights a priority and has undertaken education campaigns aimed both at the general public and the public sectors affecting children (ie: courts, media, police). The Government believes that its "Escuela saludable" program, which improves nutrition and basic health care for primary school children, is encouraging many parents to keep young children in school. Children in gangs poses another serious problem as the violence within and outside of those gangs increases, a phenomenon increased by the return of deportees from major gang centres in the USA. Rights of the **disabled persons** have yet to be constitutionally protected, although advocacy groups for disabled persons are becoming increasingly well organized. There is little public support for recognizing rights for **homosexuals**, but there is no systematic government discrimination in this regard. **Aboriginal people** constitute about 3% of the population.

The PDDH continues to play an important role as an **independent advocate for respect of human rights** though the present incumbent is a compromise candidate heavily criticized by NGOs for both his past record as a judge and certain actions he has taken to date. His office is severely underfunded by the Government. Nevertheless, opinion polls suggest that the PDDH continues to be the most credible public institution in the eyes of Salvadoreans. To support the efforts of the PDDH, the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights** established an office in El Salvador in April 1997. The Office carries out various projects to consolidate the human rights protection system and to strengthen democracy and the rule of law.

### **CANADIAN POSITION**

Canada has reiterated the importance it attaches to respect for human rights, full implementation of the Peace Accords and continued democratic development in multilateral and bilateral meetings. Individual cases are followed through the Office of the Canadian Embassy in El Salvador. **CIDA's Social Reconstruction Fund**, with its three target themes of human rights, democratic development and poverty reduction, has supported projects dealing with violence against women, child support, voter education, job-related training for the handicapped (particularly, victims of anti-personnel mines), human rights education in the schools, and promoting community-motivated youth groups. The **Canada Fund for Local Initiatives** supports grass-roots projects including those in human rights and the environment. The **Canadian FONAES** program is an official debt swap for environment program which involves a number of local NGOs who are supporting community environmental development.