

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

ISSUE

Canada continues to be concerned over human rights violations in Syria, especially with regards to the large number of political prisoners, conditions of detention, including torture, inconsistent application of laws and procedures, and legal guarantees (access to legal counsel, notification, charges, visiting rights, etc.). Progress has nonetheless been achieved in recent years, as attested by the ongoing release of political prisoners and the departure of most Syrian Jews. The Syrian authorities now seem prepared to maintain a dialogue, even with international human rights organizations.

BACKGROUND

Syrians continue to live under an authoritarian political regime in which power is monopolized. The political system has not been liberalized in the direction of wider participation in truly democratic elections, such as those held earlier this year. The state of emergency continues to be in force after more than three decades. However, given the changes in the international political and economic situation, the demise of the Soviet Union and the Middle East peace process, Syria is apparently adopting a more conciliatory attitude on human rights issues with a view to improving its relations with the West.

Since 1991, thousands of prisoners (political and common law) have been released, but many remain in jail. During 1994, more prisoners have been released and Syria hosted a representative from an international human rights organization. Apparently Syria is prepared to recognize the value of working with foreign representatives in Damascus and with international organizations, at least for the sake of improving their image with the international community.

The Syrian authorities have allowed the vast majority of Syrian Jews to leave, implementing a decision of April 1992. This has effectively put to this issue to rest as of 1994.

CANADIAN POSITION

Canada hopes that Syria will continue to take measures demonstrating beyond question its willingness to comply with the international human rights standards and conventions. Despite recent improvements, such as the continued release of political prisoners, the situation still leaves something to be desired in many respects.

In the course of the year, coordinating their efforts with like-minded colleagues from other countries, Canadian representatives in Damascus have maintained an active dialogue with the Syrian authorities on a number of issues including due process and freedom of speech, and the implications for Lebanon.

In July 1994 we took advantage of the official visit to Canada by the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister to take stock of the situation.