

Human Rights

Promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is one of the goals of the United Nations. Since the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (of which a Canadian, John Humphrey, was a principal drafter), the United Nations has adopted a series of treaties and declarations to establish a framework and set of standards to protect and promote human rights.

The UN General Assembly and the UN Commission on Human Rights play key roles in human rights decision making. The General Assembly's Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee conducts a far-reaching, substantive debate on human rights matters.

The Commission on Human Rights is the main UN forum for addressing human rights issues. Its annual six-week session publicly scrutinizes the human rights situation in a number of countries and also addresses thematic human rights issues, such as torture, religious intolerance, racial discrimination, violence against women, freedom of expression, and economic, social and cultural rights. Since 1994, special sessions of the commission have been called to discuss situations in Rwanda, East Timor and, in 2000, Israel.

The commission has 53 member states elected for three-year terms. Canada has been a member for 25 of the last 40 years and is seeking re-election in 2005.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is the UN official with principal responsibility for activities that promote and protect human rights.

Canada, the United Nations, and human rights issues

Canada has been a consistently strong voice for the protection of human rights, from the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights over 50 years ago to the present.

In addition to being an active participant in the annual meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights, Canada has sought to ensure consideration of human rights issues in all UN activities and support for the increasing number of human rights field operations of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, including units attached to UN peacekeeping operations.

Canada also played a significant role in establishing the International Criminal Court. It actively took part in the preparatory discussions and chaired the June 1998 international negotiating conference, led by Canadian ambassador Philippe Kirsch. Canada's contribution helped bring about an international court to try cases of genocide, crimes against humanity, and other war crimes.