

The main political problems of the 1980s have complicated solutions to specific human rights issues. In such areas as Central America, the Middle East, Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, it has become difficult to isolate human rights problems from the political environment of confrontation. In East-West relations, human rights have become an increasingly prominent and divisive issue. The Helsinki Final Act, signed in 1975, set basic standards for the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the freer movement of individuals across the frontiers between East and West. Lamentably, in spite of strenuous efforts on our part, the Soviet Union and certain other East European states still fall far short of meeting these standards.

Human rights have also — and unfortunately — been the subject of more frequent exploitation for other than humanitarian purposes. I am disturbed by this use of human rights principles as tactical weapons in larger wars of ideology or economic interest. It complicates the work of international organizations, and seriously compromises the ability of the international community to respond quickly and fairly to humanitarian tragedies.

These problems directly affect international efforts to promote human rights. International enforcement mechanisms, when and where they exist, are still very much in an embryonic stage. The concept of due process is not often appreciated. Much depends on how governments can present their cases, and whether there exists a degree of influence and persuasion which one government can exert on another government. Thus, the problem we share, as Canadians concerned with human rights violations in many regions of the world, is how to promote human rights in the most effective manner in an international environment which is less than favourable to the full promotion of human rights.

Canada's experience in human rights matters has enabled us to take different approaches to a variety of situations. Each situation, of course, has its own set of imperatives and complications, its own array of difficulties and areas for constructive action. In any situation, we have to keep one criterion in mind — effectiveness. This is the key guide to our actions, and the measure which determines how we proceed and in what ways.

Canada has paid special attention in the past few years to multilateral activities, particularly in the UN Commission on Human Rights. Here we have taken two main approaches. First, we have sought action on "generic" or thematic violations of human rights, such as torture or discrimination on grounds of religion. We have then sought to define these violations, and to put into place legal regimes which would progressively develop into protective bodies working against these violations. Second, we have sought opportunities to develop new human rights machinery for monitoring violations or acting upon reports of violations. The working group on disappeared persons is a notable example of a Canadian initiative combining both approaches in a single vehicle that has become increasingly effective since its initial creation in 1980.

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