

We need not await some distant perfect future, however, to assist the victims of violations. Over the years, Canada has provided millions of dollars worth of emergency relief assistance to refugees around the world. Food, medicines, blankets and agricultural implements are just some of the things we have given to refugees to help them start again. For many others, Canada has provided even more -- a new home and new hope for the future.

In addition to that Government assistance, thousands of Canadians from across the country have volunteered their time and their skills to help people who, in many cases, they will never meet.

This afternoon in Ottawa, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will pay tribute to that dedication and generosity of Canadians. On behalf of all the people of Canada the Governor-General will accept the 1986 Nansen Medal, in recognition of the major and sustained contribution that Canadians have made to the global refugee problem. It is the first time that a country has received this award, and that is a distinction we should reflect on.

There may still be debate in Canada about our national identity, but the world knows who we are, and knows what characteristics define us consistently. One of those characteristics is the selfless, hard-headed compassion that caused ordinary Canadians, from every community, to respond so effectively to the famine in Africa, and before that, to the atrocity of the Vietnamese Government casting Boat People adrift to die on the China Sea. In both those cases, I was involved in the official Government response, and so am in a position to know that what defined Canada was not so much the reaction of its Government, as it was the response of our people. It was the Canadian people whose contributions to African relief caused us to double our level of matching grants. It was Canadian individuals, in neighbourhoods across the lands, who rescued thousands of Vietnamese from the certain death that their Communist regime had ordained.

That was the first time Governments and the private sector joined in direct partnership to sponsor and establish refugees, and it was a magnificent success. That personal practical compassion is deeply rooted in the Canadian character, and defines us as surely as our languages, our literature, and the other elements of the culture that is Canada.