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The Canadian view of the complex issue of human rights

Addressing a seminar on human rights sponsored by the Canadian Council of Churches and the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops, held on March 16 in Ottawa, Secretary of State for External Affairs Don Jamieson was at pains to emphasize the need for "delicacy and balanced judgment" in deciding what action to take in response to individual instances of the violation of human rights.

The text of Mr. Jamieson's speech follows:

* * * *

Canada has already established a reasonably good record in international human-rights-oriented activities over the years.

Unfortunately, it seems that, in this struggle, while there have indeed been developments that are encouraging (no major wars for over 30 years, a measurable improvement in international awareness of the interdependence of the world community, a heartening increase in developmental-assistance flows from richer to poorer nations, an apparent increase in the enjoyment of personal liberties even within the restrictive regimes of Eastern Europe), nevertheless there still exist too many gross violations of human rights in many countries, violations that are naturally a cause of concern to Canadians and that all of us would like to be able to rectify or at least ameliorate in one fashion or another. How Canada should react to such situations, what considerations should guide us, what constraints affect us, will be the theme of my talk this evening.

Context of international action

I should like to stress at the outset that there is a fundamental difference — which, it seems, is not always readily appreciated — between our domestic activities in the human rights field and the action that Canada can take internationally. The difference between the domestic and international spheres of action is twofold: the first is the problem of *standards*; the second is the question of enforcement *machinery*.

We in countries of Western traditions too frequently assume that those standards of conduct and behaviour towards our fellow man are perceived as having equal validity by other governments.

But the perspective of other countries is, in fact, often different, partly because they may not be Western or democratic in background, or partly because their economic situations are vastly different from ours. Western democracies traditionally accord priority to civil and political rights, while Third World countries often place their pressing economic needs ahead of human rights issues. It may seem callous or insensitive to Canadians, but we are told regularly in international bodies that a majority of underdeveloped states are more concerned with alleviating starvation and promoting their development and, in so doing, attaching a greater priority to the duties of citizens than to their rights.

Although Canada's approach to international human rights reflects our traditions (the ethics and moral codes of a Western Christian society), our approach is only one of many, and, I should add, not an approach that enjoys majority support internationally. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not a binding legal instrument, and other covenants and conventions that may have enforcement provisions are binding only upon their signatories. Even when a state accedes to a convention or signs an agreement, it does not necessarily mean that it accepts its obligations immediately. Not all the parties who signed the Helsinki Final Act feel bound to accept its provisions at once; rather, it is regarded as a long-term program towards which participants should strive.

Moreover, even when states disregard their obligations, there is frequently little that can be done to urge compliance. The UN Commission on Human Rights has a fairly cumbersome pro-

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