

**Changed
attitude**

Although action and concern for human rights has been a factor in international affairs for decades, there has been, nevertheless, a significant change in the tone of the international debate that has ensued. Years ago, Canada responded to specific human rights issues as they arose. And because of the complexity of the issues and the impossibility of ever achieving consistency in approaching them, we hesitated to enunciate a global approach. Hence, although we dealt with human rights concerns as important issues, they still remained distinct from our broader foreign policy concerns. This is no longer the case. There has been a change of attitude in Canada as, I believe, in most Western-style democracies, and human rights are now recognized as a *bona fide* issue in foreign policy.

What brought about this change in attitude? As I said earlier, I believe it may have been the dialogue and debate which surrounded the Helsinki Conference of 1975 and the adoption of its Final Act. As you know, in preparing for the Helsinki Conference, Western parliamentarians and groups became involved in intensive discussions with governments and among themselves about the objectives and realities of dealing with human rights in Eastern Europe. Then, in the Final Act, all participants including the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries reiterated their international human rights undertakings. The Final Act, and the review of its implementation at the first follow-up meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in Belgrade, effectively countered earlier Eastern European insistence that, notwithstanding international legal obligations, human rights violations were an internal affair and not a fit subject for international debate. Following the Helsinki Conference, the United States' parliamentarians themselves initiated legislation which tied the administration's actions, in respect of international aid and finance, to assessments of human rights situations. This action, as well as the subsequent enunciation of a high-profile human rights policy in the United States, made human rights a controversial and popular consideration in foreign policy debate.

Turning to the broader question, there is no doubt that member states of the United Nations have an international legal obligation to promote respect for human rights both at home and abroad. By ratifying the Charter of the United Nations, they freely assumed this obligation. These provisions have been spelled out in a series of impressive and radical documents – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, and Civil and Political Rights.

The charter and covenants are treaties, and are no less binding than treaties on trade or maritime boundaries. But although they have been ratified by dozens of countries, nevertheless international human rights obligations are well observed by very few of the 154 member states of the United Nations. Indeed, international human rights organizations tell us that in more than 100 countries in the world, with *régimes* of both the left and the right, the fundamental rights of citizens are denied.

I don't question this estimate; respect for human rights internationally is weak and is not making significant progress. At the same time, I am not persuaded that the situation is necessarily deteriorating. Rather, I believe we are experiencing increased expectations of human rights and broader social justice. In many cases, partly due to

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