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## HUMAN RIGHTS IN CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

### Context

In 1986, Parliament's Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations declared an all-party consensus that "the international promotion of human rights is a fundamental and integral part of Canadian foreign policy." In its February 1995 Foreign Policy Statement, the Government of Canada has made clear its position that human rights has been and will remain a priority area of international concern and action for Canadians. The Government regards respect for human rights not only as a fundamental value, but also as a crucial element in the development of stable, democratic and prosperous societies at peace with each other.

The Government regularly consults interested Canadians on international human rights issues. This process takes many forms, including Parliamentary debates and annual consultations organized by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, as well as consultations undertaken by the Canadian International Development Agency. In addition, in March 1994 the Government instituted an annual National Forum on Canadian Foreign Policy. Throughout the year, there is ongoing formal and informal dialogue with human rights institutions such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission, various non-governmental organizations, churches, universities, representatives of Native groups, the private sector, unions and ordinary citizens.

The importance Canada attaches to human rights reflects the basic values of Canadian society. This does not, however, mean our policy is motivated by a desire to impose Canadian values on other countries. The policy is, rather, a reflection of Canadian international interests: international events daily demonstrate that respect for human rights is an important key to international peace and prosperity, and to an environment where Canadians can best pursue their interests in the world. It is also a matter of basic international law: the human rights obligations of all governments find their origins in the UN Charter, which requires all United Nations members to promote universal respect for human rights, and in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose principles Canada regards as entrenched in customary international law binding on all governments. In 1993 the World Conference on Human Rights unanimously reaffirmed the principles of the Universal Declaration. Promoting them internationally is therefore not purely a question of values but a mutual obligation of all members of the international community.

### The Canadian Approach

Canada does not expect other governments to respect standards that it does not apply to itself. As a signatory of all the principal UN treaties on international human rights, Canada regularly submits its human rights record to review by UN monitoring bodies. It also accepts the authority of the UN Human Rights Committee to hear complaints from Canadian citizens under the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These undertakings strengthen Canada's reputation as a guarantor of its citizens' rights and enhance our credentials to urge other governments to respect international standards.

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In seeking to advance human rights internationally, the essential question is how a country like Canada can most effectively influence others to respect international human rights principles. Our ultimate aim is not to punish offending governments, and certainly not their innocent citizens, but rather to influence governments to respect their people's rights.

Bilaterally, in most cases, Canada finds it can maximize its influence by continuing the dialogue with the government in question, rather than isolating it, and by employing positive measures, rather than coercion. Economic development, bilateral trade and business partnerships can improve the climate and accelerate progress in ensuring respect for human rights. Positive measures include direct support for development of democratic institutions and practices, legal and administrative training, support for election processes and provision of observer teams.

Multilateral fora often provide the most effective means for influencing governments. The United Nations, the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), are institutions where internationally agreed human rights standards and machinery afford both a stamp of legitimacy and increased leverage. Such institutions represent crucial and often the only viable channels for effective action. Canada is recognized as a world leader in building international institutions for the advancement of human rights, and the Government is committed to enhancing that leadership.

### **The Development Assistance Program**

Canada's development assistance program, administered mainly by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), is an important tool in the promotion of basic rights and freedoms throughout the world. Aimed at creating an environment for sustainable development, Canada's aid efforts increasingly focus on practical ways to advance human rights and good governance principles.

It is the people of developing countries, their organizations and governments who play the central role and hold prime responsibility for achieving progress. Canadians and their government, through CIDA, play a critical but supporting role. The Agency seeks to work carefully and sensitively with those in developing countries best placed to achieve positive change.

CIDA's approach is broad, including a wide range of partners and activities to foster rights, democracy and good governance. It emphasizes organizations in civil society as key vehicles for articulating popular concerns and channelling popular participation in decision and policy making. CIDA has helped to build their capacity to advocate for access to the legal system, advance the rights of children and women, and, increasingly, to hold governments accountable for their actions.

It also focusses on governments, for their responsibility to respect rights and govern well in an honest, effective and accountable manner. CIDA has helped improve processes, such as elections and the rule of law, as well as institutions, like legislatures and independent media.

CIDA's approach also includes decision makers who must demonstrate political will and leadership. Through dialogue on rights, democracy and governance issues, pursued at many levels, CIDA seeks to deepen its own understanding of the interests and positions of partner organizations and governments, and to influence the development of the partners' approach. Through the multilateral system, CIDA has supported initiatives that address rights, democracy and governance issues.

