

Statement

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**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE CHRISTINE STEWART,
SECRETARY OF STATE (LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA),
TO THE 51ST SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

**GENEVA, Switzerland
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Government
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Canada

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great honour for me, personally and as a Secretary of State for the Government of Canada, to address this Commission, which has played such a central role in the history of the United Nations.

Since its creation in 1946, the Commission on Human Rights has presided over a fundamental shift in the international norms concerning the behaviour of governments toward their own citizens. In the process, absolute sovereignty has been rendered as obsolete as absolute monarchy.

The International Bill of Human Rights and numerous other instruments elaborated by this Commission have established that the integrity and basic well-being of people in any country are a legitimate concern of all governments. This transformation – the recognition of individuals, as well as states, as subjects of international law – has represented a quantum leap in the evolution of international affairs, and stands as a priceless legacy of this Commission's first half-century's work.

But here, as in most other fields of international law, what remains to be done is the hard part – that is, to ensure effective, timely and universal respect for the human rights norms we have established. Canada sees this as one of the major concerns of our time and as the principal modern-day challenge of the Commission on Human Rights.

Over the past year in Canada, the Government, Parliamentarians, organizations and individuals, from all corners of the country and from all sectors of society, have together conducted a far-reaching assessment of Canada's interests and its place in the world. The considerations I have mentioned – the changing character of international relations, the evolving nature of state sovereignty, and the central importance of basic human values in world affairs – all played a pivotal role in the debate.

This week, the Government presented the conclusions it has drawn from this process, and affirmed that "human rights, good governance and democratic development are universal values that should find central expression in Canadian foreign policy." In the report tabled by Minister of Foreign Affairs André Ouellet in the House of Commons, the essence of Canada's approach was put as follows:

The Government regards respect for human rights not only as a fundamental value, but also as a crucial element in the development of democratic and prosperous societies at peace with each other. The essential challenge is to decide how we can best influence other governments to respect basic human rights. Our ultimate aim is not to punish countries and innocent populations whose governments abuse human rights, but rather to change behaviour and induce governments to respect their people's rights.... Canadian efforts to support human

rights will rely on a variety of means, including dialogue and co-ordinated efforts through multilateral forums.

The United Nations clearly has a central role to play in advancing these ideals. The promotion of respect for human rights is, after all, a UN Charter purpose.

But freedom and democracy command our attention not only as goals in their own right. They are also instruments, indispensable agents of progress towards the UN's other basic aims, in the security, development and humanitarian fields. Through his work on the Agendas for Peace and for Development, the Secretary General has reminded us of the interdependence of the fundamental purposes of the United Nations. Canada agrees with his analysis. And we believe that the implications for our work here are clear: we must ensure that the UN's human rights program serves all of the goals of the organization — peace, freedom and prosperity for all.

Particular responsibility to this end falls upon the new post of High Commissioner for Human Rights, with its broad mandate for promotion, protection, prevention and technical assistance, and for co-ordination of human rights activities throughout the UN system. Canada was honoured to play an active role in the creation of this office and in supporting Mr. Ayala Lasso's response, so early in his tenure, to the unprecedented catastrophe in Rwanda. We commend the High Commissioner on the initial steps taken to launch his operations, and we pledge our continued support for his efforts to meet the tasks ahead.

The responsibility borne by this Commission is no less crucial: we must provide the direction and political impetus needed to give practical effect to the High Commissioner's mandate and to the Program of Action set down by the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights. I would like now to review a few of the directions in which Canada believes the Commission should focus its efforts.

A central preoccupation of Canada's foreign policy is to enhance the capacity of the international community to identify and address potential causes of instability before they lead to violent conflict. Clearly this Commission has a crucial contribution to make in the fields of early warning and preventive diplomacy.

My own travels this past year have made me painfully aware of the direct connection between peace and security and respect for human rights. This is a two-way street: war and civil unrest clearly produce major violations of human rights at the most basic level. This we are reminded of daily by graphic television images of the violence and continued suffering in the former Yugoslavia, or in central Africa — where I will next week attend a conference to consider the plight of some two million refugees of the tragedy in Rwanda.

At the same time, it is often unchecked violations of human rights that lead to such tragic conflicts in the first place.

A wealth of valuable information and analysis, which can assist in identifying and responding to early signs of potential conflict, is regularly produced by the Commission's rapporteurs and working groups, and by the committees charged with monitoring human rights treaties. In his opening remarks to this session, the High Commissioner emphasized the potential for progress in this area through improved co-ordination and information sharing and through effective action on recommendations of rapporteurs. Canada will pursue consultations on how to develop this potential, whether through the annual Canadian-led resolutions on mass exoduses and on human rights treaty bodies, or through a new resolution focussed on early warning and preventive action.

Human rights is also fundamental to creating an environment for sustainable development. In this connection I want to commend the Secretary General for the central importance he has accorded to national human rights institutions and systems of democratic and accountable government in his Agenda for Development.

In its foreign policy statement this week, the Canadian government identified human rights and democracy as a priority for its official development assistance program. We will pursue this priority through both bilateral and multilateral channels. And we urge the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in seeking to refurbish the UN's programs in this area, to work closely with those agencies, like UNDP [United Nations Development Program], which are best equipped to deliver effective projects. At a later stage in this session, Canada's Chief Human Rights Commissioner will report on the activities of an international committee of independent human rights institutions. We urge the Commission to support their work.

Mr. Chairman, when it comes to human rights, there can be no second-class citizens anywhere. Clearly, the UN Charter's promise of "human rights and fundamental freedoms for all" will not be fulfilled until the rights and equality of half the world's population are recognized and respected, in law and in practice, in all countries. Over the past two years, Canada has worked closely with other governments and with the non-governmental community to bring the struggle for women's equality and human rights into the mainstream of this Commission's deliberations.

We will continue this enterprise at the present session by introducing two resolutions. The resolution on the integration of women's rights into UN human rights activities should this year provide direction on how the High Commissioner and the various human rights mechanisms of the UN can contribute in practical terms to the success of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing this September.

In a separate resolution, the Commission should give careful consideration to the observations of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Radhika Coomaraswamy on her first report, which provides an excellent basis for pursuing concrete action to promote respect for the UN Declaration on Violence Against Women.

Mr. Chairman, no country is without its human rights problems, and for my country the plight of its Aboriginal citizens is a matter of particular concern. Since its election in October 1993, the Government of Canada has launched efforts to build with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada a partnership based on trust, mutual respect and participation in the decision-making process. We are also determined to help build stronger, healthier and more self-reliant Aboriginal communities.

This commitment to partnership extends to the work on which this Commission is about to embark, in giving consideration to the Subcommission's proposed "Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." Canada has signalled its determination to ensure that those whom the declaration is intended to benefit will have a meaningful voice in the work of the Commission.

We have also emphasized our strong belief that the time has come for this Commission to establish a separate agenda item for consideration of the draft declaration and other international issues of immediate concern to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and their indigenous brothers and sisters in all parts of the world.

Mr. Chairman, no list of priorities for reform of the UN's human rights institutions would be complete without mention of the working methods of this Commission itself. The Commission on Human Rights is the most important and complex United Nations forum apart from the General Assembly. Yet in recent years, we have all come increasingly to realize that we are not equipping ourselves with everything we need to meet the ever-growing demands placed upon us by the world community.

Most important, we need better preparation; and better preparation requires, above all, more time between the closing of the General Assembly's human rights debate and the start of the Commission. The current six-week interval is clearly insufficient for rapporteurs and the Secretariat to prepare documentation for the Commission, let alone for governments to consider their contents.

Canada therefore urges this session of the Commission to consider urgently this matter and to propose to ECOSOC [Economic and Social Council] a more appropriate timeframe for its meetings on the basis of advice from the High Commissioner and Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights.

Mr. Chairman, with these remarks, I have outlined but a few of Canada's priorities for strengthening the institutional framework for promoting and protecting human rights. Clearly, the mechanisms at our disposal are imperfect, often fragile, and they require constant nurturing.

But human rights machinery is of no consequence if it is not put to work in addressing real situations of human rights violations wherever they may occur. We cannot allow our activity here to be dismissed as mere academic irrelevancy.

Accordingly, Canada's delegation will participate actively in the Commission's efforts to reach concrete conclusions on a wide range of specific situations.

And in two weeks time, it will contribute in a forthright and constructive fashion to the Commission's annual keynote debate on human rights violations in all parts of the world.

Canada regards that debate not as a matter of interference in the internal affairs of others, but as a common quest for the universal application of standards, which we are all, as members of the United Nations, obliged to respect and promote.

There is clearly scope for improving the basis on which that quest proceeds. Concerns about excessive politicization might, for instance be alleviated, if deliberations on specific situations were based on an objective report by the High Commissioner on the state of human rights worldwide. The work of the many treaty bodies and rapporteurs might afford ample basis for such an annual report. Canada intends to pursue discussions on this idea.

In the meantime, Mr. Chairman, it is our intention to pursue the debate on human rights problems, just as we pursue the need for institutional reform, in a spirit not of confrontation but of solidarity and co-operation.

These are the challenges we collectively face - building our human rights institutions and putting them to work in real-life situations. Daily, we are confronted with stories of human atrocity - defenceless human beings, the elderly, students, children, mothers, fathers - innocents all - tortured, abused, imprisoned, murdered. We must keep faith with the citizens of all of our countries, whose well-being we are pledged by our Charter to serve.

That is both our minimum, and our highest, responsibility: our responsibility to our common humanity.

Thank you.