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Address by the Right  
Honourable Joe Clark,  
Secretary of State for  
External Affairs, to the  
Ninth Annual Conference on  
Human Rights and Foreign  
Policy, Canadian Human  
Rights Foundation,  
on March 21, 1986

OTTAWA

March 26, 1986

Dr. Humphrey, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be with you today for your ninth annual conference on human rights and foreign policy. The subject is one that has preoccupied - and often discomfited - governments throughout the Western world. So I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you the perspective from which we have approached this most difficult and emotionally charged issue.

Let me begin by asserting that the first responsibility of policy-makers has always been to protect and promote the national interest, and to conduct relations with other countries accordingly. But if the 20th century has taught us anything, it is that the single-minded pursuit of one's own political or economic advantage is a formula for disaster. While there may be short-term returns, in the long run everyone loses when one nation's benefits are secured at the expense of another's. The result invariably has been war, whether military or commercial. And even when you win, you lose. In an age of interdependence, nations share the consequences of both victory and defeat.

What we have learned this century, then, is that the global community is better managed cooperatively than by a handful of powerful states in competition with each other. What we need to focus on now is the direction in which we would like to see the global community evolve - during the rest of this century and into the next. Here let us have no illusions. The world is not agreed on the question, and ideologies compete - sometimes ferociously - for the right to determine how we all should live.

The Canadian interest, therefore, is more than a matter of political and economic gain. It is also a matter of ensuring that the international environment develops in a way which is compatible with our basic values, with how we believe human beings should treat each other, with how they should be treated by the state, and with how states should treat each other.

Concern that the fundamental values in which Canadians believe should be reflected in Canadian foreign policy is a longstanding tradition. It is a concern which has been most prominent in the post-war period.

We did not just help to found the U.N. in 1945. We helped to write its charter, to ensure it reflected our views about how the world should be managed in the interests of international peace and security and respect for the rights of peoples and individuals. And in the years that followed Canadians, such as John Humphrey, played an enormous part in

codifying and proclaiming human rights and freedoms - in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in the International Covenants on Human Rights.

Similarly, we were not just founding members of NATO in 1949. We ensured that the North Atlantic Treaty expressed the desire of the parties to live in peace with all peoples, and that it imposed obligations beyond common defence including the strengthening of free institutions and the promotion of conditions of stability and well-being. And in the years that followed the founding of NATO, Canadians were among the most prominent proponents of the two-track approach to East/West relations - combining defence with detente - and among the most active advocates of respect for human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Concern for human rights is no less of a cornerstone of Canadian foreign policy today. In the past year alone, we have witnessed some quite remarkable movement on the human rights front - with Canadians very often in the forward trenches. Let me cite a few examples.

March 21 is observed by the U.N. as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, commemorating the time in 1960 when South African police killed 69 demonstrators and wounded nearly 200 at Sharpeville. In the intervening generation, a variety of U.N.-sponsored sanctions were applied against South Africa, with little discernible improvement in its policy of apartheid. In the past twelve months, world opinion has been mobilized against apartheid, placing the South African authorities under enormous pressure to dismantle their system of institutionalized racial segregation.

The last twelve months have also seen actions advancing human rights in other continents and countries. The government of Chili has been subjected to serious new pressures - including from the United States - to put an end to the security forces' systematic resort to physical and psychological torture of opponents to the regime.

In El Salvador, there are positive signs in comparison with the situation two years ago. The Government has had some success in improving its human rights record, but kidnappings, assassinations and urban terrorism by both right wing death squads and left wing terrorists continue. We have encouraged both the Government and insurgent groups to choose the path of peaceful reconciliation rather than violence.

In Guatemala, gross and widespread violations of human rights continue. However, we are encouraged that the newly-elected civilian government has committed itself to the difficult task of building the legislative and judicial bases without which human and civil rights cannot be fully protected.

In Haiti and the Philippines, the departure of dictators has seen the release of political prisoners and holds out the promise of an end to persistent violations of human rights in those countries.

Iran has been publicly rebuked in the U.N. for failing to respond to allegations of torture, extra-judicial killings, religious persecution and mistreatment of ethnic minorities.

Even in the Soviet bloc, there has also been some movement.

Anatoly Shcharansky has been released from detention in the Soviet Union and allowed to emigrate to Israel, while Elena Bonner - the wife of Dr. Sakharov - has been permitted to seek medical attention in the West.

The situation in Afghanistan has once again been roundly condemned by a very large majority of the members of the U.N. General Assembly.

International attention has continued to focus on the deplorable condition of Kampuchians suffering under foreign occupation and abuse, and on the so-called "re-education camps" of the occupying power, Vietnam.

Meanwhile, at Nairobi, the Conference marking the end of the U.N. Decade for Women has mapped out a strategy for improving the status of women over the next fifteen years. And in Geneva, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights has made good progress on a draft convention on the rights of the child.

In cataloguing some of the movement which has taken place on human rights in the last year, it is clear that much remains to be done - not only by those guilty of human rights abuses but also by those who recognize that it is in their longer-term interest to improve the human condition throughout the world. But let it not be thought that for countries such as Canada it is a simple question of being more vocal. The only real test of a nation's commitment to human rights is the effort it makes to achieve practical results.

To achieve practical results requires, in the first instance, examination of the problem.

In some cases, rights and freedoms are denied consciously and systematically for reasons of state. In the case of South Africa, a unique form of legalized racial discrimination is written into the Constitution and implemented through a host of supporting rules and regulations passed by legislators who are fully aware of what they are doing. In other cases, rights are guaranteed in law but severely limited in practice. In the

Soviet Union, human rights are secondary to the rights accorded the Communist Party and the Soviet State itself. Furthermore, the ambiguity of many Soviet laws permits easy prosecution of individuals for policy purposes.

In the case of other countries, human rights may exist in law but the law itself may be routinely ignored, particularly in single-party states where there is no check on government. Indeed, it is hard to imagine cases in which non-democratic regimes have not also systematically denied human rights whenever they have found it convenient to do so - whether these regimes are of the right, or the left, or are merely despotic.

In still other cases, the rights of individuals may be incidental victims of war and conflict. Violence seldom brings out the best human traits of those engaged in it, frequently dehumanizing even the noblest of peoples. Combatants and non-combatants alike suffer the consequences, as we have seen in the Middle East, Central America and elsewhere.

Because each category of human rights abuse has its own distinct characteristics, and because within each category the character of individual cases may vary greatly, ideology and preordained responses are rarely helpful.

Therefore, having examined the problem, we need to proceed next to a consideration of our standing in a particular case, and to a judgement of what means are likely to be successful.

Canada has more than a duty to address abuses of human rights.

Our record on behalf of the world's poor and neglected, and a host of international legal instruments, together have given us an established right to address abuses and to seek practical ways of ending them.

Over the years, Canadians have provided tens of billions of dollars to combat poverty and hunger throughout the world, to alleviate the economic and social conditions so often at the root of human rights abuses.

We have also resettled and funded refugees in the hundreds of thousands over several generations - last year alone more than 15,000.

And we draw on the U.N. charter, the Universal Declaration, the Human Rights Conventions, and the Helsinki Final Act as sources of authority for concerning ourselves with what - in earlier times - were considered strictly internal matters. Even today, there are states who claim that international

instruments must remain subordinate to their own domestic legislation and practices on human rights. But that claim is progressively losing force as its advocates diminish in number and find themselves engaged in public reviews of their performance on human rights. A notable instance of that review occurred in Ottawa last summer when human rights experts met to review the human rights situation in CSCE countries and we fully expect a similarly open and vigorous scrutiny of the record in Berne in May on East/West contacts and exchanges.

But if we have standing in general, our grounds for intervening are stronger in some cases than in others - because of the development assistance or emergency relief we may have given a particular country, because of the refugees we may have harboured from a region in conflict, or because we may have longstanding human or other ties which underpin our interests and concerns.

And if our standing in some areas of the world is stronger than in others, it is also true that we are more likely to be effective if we are selective in targetting particular human rights cases rather than diffusing our efforts too greatly.

All of which argues for a universal policy of support for human rights, with special attention focussed on those human rights situations where our standing is the strongest and the impact of our involvement likely to be the greatest.

Having focussed our efforts, we have finally to decide on our approach. I will not hide from you that governments, this one included, face a major problem in this respect.

Pressure against another can rarely be applied without cost. No government takes well to being pressured by others, particularly when the pressure is applied publicly and so places national reputations on the line. Very often the response is not compliance but defiance. In some instances retaliation can follow against the very people whose welfare is at stake. Usually the relationship with the regime in question is damaged, reducing influence in the future.

Nor is the inventory of means at the government's disposal a very large one. There are, of course, a variety of ways in which we can make our voice heard. But it is not enough just to be heard. Our voice must also count.

To achieve that may require some back-up, first in the form of promises of material rewards and penalties, later in the form of sanctions. None are implemented with ease.

Some have argued that our aid programs ought to take full account of the human rights record of countries receiving

that aid, and that aid should be denied if a recipient government fails to improve its human rights performance. It is an argument of some force, for aid obviously provides leverage; sometimes it is all that keeps a government in office. But we cannot overlook the counter argument that aid is for people, and for development over the long term, and to deny it to them because they are also being abused by their government is to penalize them twice and to disadvantage future generations as well.

That is a dilemma I have discussed specifically with the Joint Committee studying the Green Paper. I look forward to receiving their considered views.

Another weapon is sanctions. They cover a broad range of action, up to and including the total interruption of all diplomatic and commercial contacts. But it has proven exceedingly difficult historically to select sanctions appropriate to the offence in question, and to secure the degree of collaboration from those whose participation is necessary to ensure the sanctions work. It is a sad truth that there are always people around prepared to argue that their own private interests ought not to be disadvantaged, and others prepared to help in the circumvention of sanctions. And even when sanctions have the desired economic impact, they often don't work in the sense of having the desired political impact.

The recent history of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union provides an example of how difficult it is to alter the behaviour of a powerful government by economic threats or other pressure tactics. In a broad sense, it could be argued that Soviet willingness to permit Jews to emigrate has waxed and waned with the perceived level of détente. In other words, if the West - and the United States in particular - shows greater sympathy for Soviet interests, more Jews will be granted exit visas. But it is also argued that greater Soviet willingness to conform to its undertakings in the field of human rights - including the U.N. covenant on free emigration - is an essential step in the development of the trust and confidence which underlies any improvement in relations.

Despite the fact that these difficulties remain, for our part we shall continue to press the Soviet Union to live up to its undertakings under the Helsinki Final Act and to take other initiatives to improve relations between East and West.

Obviously it is essential to sustain and enlarge the commitment of Canadians to the protection of human rights everywhere in the world. But I would urge you to help focus the public debate rather less on human rights violations themselves and rather more on what we can actually do to improve particular situations. Rhetoric has its place, but our real purpose is to find practical solutions. I appreciate the help and advice which

the Foundation has so consistently extended - and I trust it will continue. I hope the question might be addressed further in response to the Green Paper.

Let me close with an assertion. I have spoken of the problems governments may face in taking account of human rights considerations in foreign policy. Those are challenges not obstacles, and this government has placed human rights in the forefront of Canadian foreign policy since we came to office.

We have helped bring the Commonwealth back into the picture on South Africa, and have helped to lay down a Commonwealth timetable for the dismantling of apartheid - placing South Africa under steady pressure and confronting it with the prospect of total diplomatic and economic sanctions.

We have spoken plainly to a number of governments about Canadian concerns over their human rights record - in Africa, in Asia and in Latin America - and left them in no doubt that political relations, trade and development assistance are all subject to review.

And we have impressed upon the Soviet Union and its allies, in direct bilateral talks and at international conferences, that they will have to improve their respect for human rights if they ever expect to benefit from the potential which full cooperation with us holds.

That is both our record and our intention.

I trust your afternoon sessions will be as stimulating and productive as I understand your morning ones were. I look forward to a further opportunity to meet with you.