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Statement made in the United Nations General Assembly on October 22 by Miss Helen Marsh, Canadian Delegate to the Third (Social, Cultural and Humanitarian) Committee

Human Rights

In my intervention in the General Debate, I emphasized the importance which my country attaches to the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are the objectives of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I need not, therefore, take up the time of my colleagues here in a lengthy description of the way in which by elucidating and fortifying the ancient safeguards of the twin heritage of common and civil law systems, a far-reaching Bill of Rights guarantees to all Canadians the full enjoyment of the rights and freedoms specified in the Declaration. Still, I think that the steady flow of thousands of new arrivals from abroad which continues today, as it has for decades past, to swell our population year by year attests to the fairly widespread belief that Canada is among those fortunate countries where the dignity and the worth of the individual are two essential elements of the economic, social and political organization of national life.

From the outset, therefore, my Delegation has had a very special interest in the question that now engages our attention. As I see it, that question is really in two parts. The first is how best, and most appropriately, to mark the 15th anniversary of the Declaration. The second part of the question before us is what fresh impetus we can now give to the Commission on Human Rights and to the conscience of mankind so as to ensure continuous hard effort in the future to further the purposes of the Declaration.

The Resolution tabled in Document L/991 Rev. 1, by 12 co-sponsors, including Canada, is more specifically directed towards commemoration of the 15th anniversary of the Declaration. From the point of view of my Delegation, the best way in which to mark that important anniversary is to do so in simple, straightforward terms that will impress upon the world the sense of dedication that all members of the United Nations should feel on such an occasion. We do not think that it would add either to the dignity or to the persuasiveness of such a re-affirmation of high purpose if we were to encumber it with extraneous matters and to imbed it in extravagant language. Accordingly, it was our hope that the twelve-power text, as a straightforward attempt to draw attention to the 15th anniversary of the Declaration and to set the stage for its proper commemoration would be accepted without substantial change by this Committee. The U.S.S.R. amendments in Document L/993 seem to my Delegation to go beyond the essential purpose of commemoration and to some extent beyond our concern to express our convictions with the power of simplicity. However, as the Committee has been informed, the co-sponsors of L/991, Rev.1, including Canada, are prepared to accept the revised form of the sub-amendments which my own and other delegations have tabled in L/1000.

Turning to the second aspect of the issue before us, namely, what impetus to give the future programme of activities in the field of human rights, my Government feels strongly that the touchstone of our efforts must be our co-operative determination to see those rights enjoyed universally. I emphasize the important words "enjoyed universally". This is a task of high purpose and of potential significance to the lives and welfare of millions of people all over the globe.

Here again the loftiness of the endeavour should compel us to choose our words carefully so as to keep in this great work the tone of measured dignity and conviction of purpose that it deserves. Our objective must be to demonstrate to the world at large that the United Nations' interest in human rights is solemn, mature and sincere.

We have already been inspired in this regard for many years by two documents which hold an unequalled place in the minds and hearts of the people of the world. One is the Charter of the United Nations; another is the Declaration of Human Rights. How can we do better when looking to the future than to borrow heavily from the very words and phrases that have been so inspiring to us. More recently the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples has come to be a similar focus of dedication to the advancement of human rights. This too is a valuable source for selecting the means of giving expression to the deep feelings most of us share in regard to fundamental human rights.

Mr. Chairman, my Delegation felt that the draft Resolution tabled by the Ukraine was weakened by the extravagance of some of its paragraphs and by its effort to have future emphasis laid on the colonial Declaration to the detriment of the Declaration of Human Rights. Some of those defects have been corrected with the addition of the new co-sponsors of Document L/992, Rev.1. Still my own and other delegations have tabled amendments in L/1000 which are designed to take this process some way further. We trust these amendments will be accepted as improvements in the interests of the dignity, solemnity and dedication that should attach to a question like that of human rights.

As I have indicated above, the unshakable conviction of Canada is that human rights and freedoms must be fostered for the benefit of individuals in all corners of the world. That is, they must be "enjoyed universally" -- to stress again the two singularly important words I have already emphasized. Canada is dedicated to the view that the thrust of United Nations concern must be to develop actual conditions throughout the world in which the precious rights enunciated in the Declaration are, in fact, enjoyed by the peoples everywhere. Whenever we speak of these matters but more specially when we discuss them here in the United Nations Headquarters, all of us ought surely to speak for humanity as a whole.

Moreover, when the United Nations enquires about freedom of religion throughout the world, to mention but one of the basic rights, surely it is not enough for any country to answer that it has legislation in regard to that freedom. The United Nations knows formal laws can be a mere facade disguising the unpleasant truth that government policies in some areas of the world deliberately aim at making it in fact most difficult freely to practice religion. The United Nations' interest therefore goes deeper and searches to find whether or not the institutions and forms of worship and the right to use them freely are in reality unhindered by governmental interference and in fact conform to the spiritual needs of the group of individuals concerned as those needs are defined by those groups.

Similarly, when we speak of the freedoms of speech and thought which are hallowed in Articles 18, 19, 20 and 21, to name but some of the other great provisions of the Declaration, we are expressing United Nations' interest in facts, not in mere protestations of good faith. Moreover, we have in mind what is perhaps the most essential freedom of all -- the indispensable right to choose the form and substance of the government peoples are prepared to accept in authority over them. This complex of rights relates to the equally important freedom to choose not to be subjected to foreign domination. This is the right of self-determination which the Declaration on colonial independence has singled out for particular emphasis. In doing so, that Declaration has solemnly proclaimed that peoples of all races and creeds whatever their colour and wherever they may live have the right to choose not to exist under the domination of another country. Here, too, United Nations' interest seeks to remove the facade and to see the reality whether it be domination by overt military oppression, by military oppression by subversion, or by political control lying exclusively in the hands of one party.

Most members of the United Nations in speaking passionately and working indefatigably to safeguard the right to enjoy such freedoms as these, do so on behalf of persons in all parts of the world. There are some members, however, who would exempt their own areas from the writ of United Nations' authority in respect of the application of the Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on colonial independence. One wonders whether the peoples in the Ukraine and throughout the vast territory now embraced in the system of the U.S.S.R. have the very deep satisfaction of knowing that the principles of these inspiring documents were meant to apply to them as to the peoples in other areas of the world. The United Nations must not ignore any area, which, despite the secrecy now shrouding the conditions it harbours, is a persistent source of disturbing suggestions of flagrant denials of human rights.

With this in mind, and having very much in mind also the unsparing criticism which the U.S.S.R. and its closest friends are keen to direct towards conditions in other parts of the world, the Secretary of State for External Affairs for Canada, in his statement in the General Debate in plenary on September 25, contrasted the progress towards independence exemplified by the Commonwealth and the absence of any evidence of such progress in the area under Soviet domination. He stressed in this context that "the principles of human rights and self-determination are clearly intended to be universal in their application.

To recapitulate, Mr. Chairman, the text in L/992 Rev.1 could, we believe, be improved by a greater emphasis on the objective of the universal application of the Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on colonial independence and that its language should stick as closely as possible to that employed in those inspiring documents and the Charter of the United Nations. To achieve these ends the amendments in L/1000 have been tabled and I commend them to the support of this Committee.

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