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Statement by the Honourable
Monique Vézina, Minister
for External Relations,
on the occasion of the
opening of the Preparatory
Meeting for the Conference
on Security and Cooperation
in Europe -
Meeting of Experts on
Human Rights

OTTAWA

April 23, 1985

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

On behalf of my government and the people of Canada, I would like to welcome you to Canada. It is indeed an honour that such a distinguished array of delegates from the countries of Europe and North America have gathered here in Ottawa to discuss questions concerning respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the participating states of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. It is an honour not only because this human rights experts meeting is the first meeting of the CSCE held outside of Europe, but also because it is the first such meeting dedicated solely to consideration of the protection of human rights.

It has long been the view of my government that efforts in the CSCE to improve co-operation and confidence in the security area should be balanced with a corresponding degree of effort and serious resolve to bring about a more effective implementation of the Helsinki and Madrid commitments to respect human rights and to cooperate on humanitarian matters. This meeting therefore marks a significant step forward in the CSCE process itself, a process to which Canadian men and women attach great importance.

Our interest in holding such a meeting also derives from the high priority which human rights have in Canada, and the important place which we believe human rights considerations should play in our foreign policy in general.

Domestically, one only has to follow the Canadian media for a few days to realize how aware Canadians are of their rights and how active they are in pursuing them. This may reflect the character and complexity of Canadian society, which embraces indigenous populations, two main language groups, a multiplicity of ethnic groups who have come here from every corner of the globe, and a great diversity of backgrounds and beliefs. Such diversity is not exclusive to Canada, but we believe that it can bring particular strengths to any society or country, and there is much that governments can do--or refrain from doing--that will preserve it.

For our part, we are keenly aware of the importance of respecting the human rights of all our people. From the beginning, Canada has sought to build and maintain its unity on the basis of freedom, tolerance and openness. These ideals are as vital for us as they are for people everywhere.

Last Thursday, we experienced an historic moment in our country when Article XV of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect. Under this Article, the law applies equally to everybody, and discrimination on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or physical or mental disability is prohibited.

As Minister in the External Affairs portfolio responsible for human rights considerations in Canadian foreign policy, I am aware of the high degree of interest among Canadians in the promotion of human rights in all countries. Prime Minister Mulroney's government recognizes the important place of human rights in Canada's relations with other countries, whether reflected in our bilateral ties or in the work we share with you in the U.N., in the CSCE and in other multilateral forums. As the CSCE Final Act and the Madrid Document make clear, human rights are an essential factor in building the good relations among us that we all desire.

I do not say these things to suggest Canadians are somehow unique in wanting to promote and protect their own rights, or those of others. In all our countries one can find the same interests and concerns to one degree or another, or in one form or another. Rather, I am making the point that Canada sought this meeting because of the deep and abiding interest of its citizens in furthering human rights and because of the influence respect for human rights inevitably has on the search for improved cooperation among the CSCE states.

As you live among us for the next eight weeks, I invite you to talk to individual Canadians and to follow our media. I believe you will come to see that concern for human rights permeates my country.

Here in Canada, there are many people who have followed closely our domestic preparations for the experts meeting, who have expressed their concerns to the Government in consultations and in carefully drafted letters and briefs, and who have made known their hopes that the meeting should lead to productive results. No doubt there are many men and

women in each state represented in this room who will also follow closely the proceedings of the next weeks, hoping that your deliberations will lead to improved respect for human rights. Obviously the six weeks set aside for your main meeting falls far short of what will be required before respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is as complete and as universal as it must one day be. It is your task to fix the procedures to be followed during the main meeting, which opens on May 7, and to organize its discussion in the way that will best serve the expectations that are centred upon it in all of our countries.

The crucial nature of your responsibility will be obvious to all of you. Nor will it be easy for you to discharge it in the time available, for the mandate set out in the Madrid Concluding Document is couched in brief and general terms. Moreover, and this is not surprising, each of your delegations will have its own distinctive views about how the discussion on procedural and substantive questions should evolve. However thorny or complex the issues may be with which you are called upon to deal, I have every confidence that with a shared determination to do justice to the promise implicit in the CSCE process and with a shared appreciation that mutual interests are best served by a spirit of reasonable compromise, you will succeed in launching the main meeting on a positive course.

In concluding, let me say again how pleased the Government of Canada is to welcome you all to Ottawa. My government will do everything it can do to facilitate your important work, and also to ensure your stay is enjoyable. We look forward to a successful conclusion to your efforts in this preparatory meeting and to a result for the Ottawa meeting as a whole which will fulfill the hopes of Canadians.

Distinguished delegates, I will conclude by citing the words spoken by Alphonse Desjardins the founder of our co-operative movement who said: "The Task is great, and it will take many hands to complete it." I urge you to take up the challenge of cooperation and in this undertaking I wish you every success.