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89/4



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STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

Speech by

The honourable Monique Landry,
minister for External Relations
and International Development,
on the Occasion of the
Annual Consultations with the
Non-governmental Organizations
Concerning Human Rights

Canada

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your kind introduction. I am pleased to again have the opportunity to address this Assembly, at these annual consultations in preparation for the 45th session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

Our meeting takes on added importance for us in the sense that after a four-year absence, Canada will again this year sit on the Human Rights Commission. In previous years we have played an active part in the Commission's work in an observer capacity, and have promoted a number of initiatives, but this year we will be able to play a leading role. We can submit resolutions and exercise a greater influence during the informal consultations. We will attend closed-door sessions of the Commission, in which the human rights situation in a number of countries is discussed. Thus more than ever, Canada will be in a position to pursue its active commitment to human rights.

Allow me to take this opportunity to reaffirm the importance ascribed by my government to the international promotion of human rights. This key element of our foreign policy reflects the abiding interest of the Canadian people in the protection of human rights, and rests on deeply-rooted national convictions. When we are confronted with flagrant violations, our short-term goal internationally is to work toward rapidly improving the conditions of those who are deprived of the full enjoyment of their human rights. In the longer term, on both the bilateral and the multilateral levels, Canada strives to promote the acceptance of international human rights standards and to ensure that states act in accordance with these standards. We have an enviable reputation in this area, proof of the sustained effort we have put forth over the years to defend the cause of human rights.

Canada has played an active and often crucial part in writing, codifying and applying the principles set forth in the various international instruments on human rights. This role was highlighted a month ago when the United Nations honoured a Canadian, Professor John Humphrey of McGill University, by awarding him the Human

Rights Prize for his remarkable contribution to the furtherance of human rights. Professor Humphrey, and other Canadians, have worked over the years to develop and codify solid principles in this area. Although it can be said that a good deal of the codifying at the United Nations has now been done, Canada intends to continue playing an active part in preparing new instruments for areas in which existing instruments do not provide sufficient guarantees, such as, for example, protection of the rights of children and of native peoples.

In the future, however, we plan to devote more and more attention to developing and improving mechanisms by which to apply and monitor international instruments used in connection with human rights. We are convinced that violations of human rights are more often a result of failure to comply with the existing international standards rather than of the absence of such standards. For this reason, Canada has begun to consult and to negotiate with other UN member states to consider changes in the financing of certain bodies in charge of seeing that the international instruments are applied. These bodies are often insufficiently funded, and their workload is sometimes too great for them to complete their mandate. This is why my government has acted in increasing the resources available for the Working Group on Disappeared Persons. In spite of many obstacles this group, which was formed on a Canadian initiative, has done a remarkable job of handling one of the most flagrant violations of human rights. Canada continues to encourage the efforts of this body, and I am pleased to mention the project prepared by Acadia University, with government assistance, to reinforce the Working Groups on Disappeared Persons. Through this program, Canada is reaffirming its support for an important United Nations mechanism.

Canada's interest in the orderly operation of committees monitoring the application of treaties is also seen in the value we place in our presence, in the person of Mr. Peter Burns, University of British Columbia, on the ten-member committee in charge of applying the Convention Against Torture.

Unfortunately, although we have international instruments on human rights and mechanisms to apply them, it must be acknowledged that human rights continue to be violated in many parts of the world. One need only mention some recent events to see the need for constant vigilance to ensure respect for human rights and for more

rapid and more effective international cooperation. Those here today who have some experience with the international system, and they are many, know that the process of putting effective mechanisms in place in this field is a slow one. However, Canada sees one of its priority objectives to be that of reinforcing these mechanisms, since we are convinced that respect for human rights can be guaranteed only by the combined effect of standards and pressure applied on an international scale. This is why we have paid special attention to the phenomenon of mass exoduses. We have continued our efforts to improve the provisions of the United Nations in respect to these cases. Just two weeks ago, the Canadian Ambassador to the UN made representations to the Secretariat to reinforce the early warning system, the purpose of which is to make rapid intervention possible when we are confronted with mass exoduses. We emphasized the need to increase our capacity to react rapidly in such crises.

Among the other priorities that we intend to pursue, I would like to mention the importance we ascribe to the World Information Campaign on Human Rights. We are aware of the key role played by dissemination of information activities in the overall success of human rights program. Wider dissemination of information will create an enhanced awareness of human right and their importance. Such awareness is essential if the enjoyment of human rights is to become a reality. Last December's ceremonies commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a new phase introduced with the affirmation of the need to envision human rights as a universal cultural reality, based on the dissemination of information and on education. Canada subscribes fully to this objective, and we have made constructive suggestions to carry out the information campaign. I am pleased that the success of the project will hinge in large measure on the contributions made by non-governmental organizations. This undertaking will surely be furthered by the complementary nature of our various roles.

Parallel to the activities of the World Information Campaign, Canada ascribes particular importance to the UN Voluntary Fund for Advisory Services in the human rights field. We believe that the Fund's main purpose is to provide technical assistance and support for the long-term projects most likely to promote greater respect for human rights in a tangible way. In order for these projects to succeed, there must be close

cooperation on projects supported by the fund between the government and the non-governmental organizations. Thus, when the mid-term plan for the Voluntary Fund is examined at the next session of the Human Rights Commission, Canada will draw attention to the need for refined coordination and resources sufficient to enhance the effectiveness of this important instrument in the promotion of human rights.

I have briefly outlined some of the guidelines we use internationally in promoting respect for human rights. Your presence in such numbers at these consultations will enable us, I am sure, to engage in some beneficial and useful interchange, since we are sharing information on something in which we have a common interest. On behalf of my government, I thank you for your support and cooperation, and I trust that the Canadian delegation soon to travel to Geneva will be enriched by their two days here.

Thank you very much.