

Statement

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**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE ANDRÉ OUELLET,
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
TO THE
CONFERENCE OF THE POLITICAL INTERNATIONALS
ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

**OTTAWA, Ontario
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Before I begin, I want to salute Senator Robert Hill of the International Democrat Union, Sir David Steele of Liberal International, and Dr. Peter Jankowitsch of Socialist International, for leading their organizations to this important meeting. I want to thank Ed Broadbent and the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development for organizing this conference. And I want to pay tribute to my colleague, Senator Al Graham, for his able work through the years in promoting the growth of Liberal International, and links with the other political nationals.

Let me say, on behalf of the Government of Canada, how honoured we are to have this important meeting take place in Canada. As you know, Canadians are ardent defenders of human rights and have always been involved in the struggle for human dignity and freedom worldwide.

This meeting of the four Internationals shows that regardless of our ideology, regardless of our party allegiance, the promotion and protection of human rights are fundamental values and are the primary objectives that must guide our actions. This is essential to the development of democratic societies, not only to enable them to live in peace among themselves, but to live in peace with their own citizens.

The fact that we find ourselves here in a spirit of co-operation and non-partisanship clearly demonstrates our joint commitment to seek ways of improving human rights protection. We are sending an important message.

All who, like us, work in the field of human rights know that good intentions alone will not set political prisoners free, end torture, gain recognition of the equality of minorities or enable refugees to return home.

Our words must be backed by action.

In my opinion, Canada is in a unique position to play an effective role in this regard. If other nations listen to us, it is because they recognize our long tradition of respect for the individual, a tradition which is among the world's strongest, and because they know that we are not trying to increase our influence at their expense.

Freedom, democracy and respect for human rights are not just objectives, they are also the instruments whereby the international community can achieve its objectives of peace, development and security.

A two-way relationship exists between peace and security on the one hand, and human rights and freedom on the other. War and civil conflict clearly give rise to the most basic violations. The poignant images from Central Africa remind us of this daily. Moreover, and Rwanda provides a cruel example, it is when

intolerance and human rights abuses go unpunished that such tragedies occur in the first place.

Another major cause of most armed conflicts – and this is indeed a matter of human rights, of economic and social rights, to which all here subscribe – is the persistent and growing gap between rich and poor.

I believe that this presents us with a major threat to world stability today. We live in an age of instant communication. It is easy for people to see who are better off than they are. And those who are in more desperate circumstances, the "have-nots," can more easily be manipulated and led into violence by others. "What do you have to lose?" becomes the rallying cry and the promise of change. War, death and even greater poverty are too often the only results.

It is clear that the international community working together is the best hope for breaking this cycle.

That is why Canadians are active supporters – and even outspoken reformers – of the United Nations.

The Canadian government is working to strengthen its ability to respond to crises, primarily in three areas.

We must take preventive action to stop simmering tensions from turning into open military conflict. If we can prevent a crisis from erupting, we will not only save money in terms of troop movements and military intervention, we will also be saving lives and protecting the rights of the people in the area concerned.

We have at our disposal a number of tools for detecting potential problems and we can use a variety of methods to resolve situations before they hit the boiling point. In most cases, we have all the information we need; however, what we lack is the ability to analyze it, prepare a response and quickly mobilize the international community to take action.

Analyses of the information generated by the UN human rights monitoring systems need to be improved and distributed more effectively throughout all member states. Their findings should also go to the Security Council and the Secretary-General so that appropriate preventive measures can be undertaken.

Canada has also provided to the UN Secretary-General an inventory of resource people suited to missions of peace and negotiation, or specializing in elections, human rights, the administration of justice and other such fields. These are prominent and well-respected individuals who are available on short notice to put their expertise and credibility to work to settle disputes.

But, we do not believe these individuals should go in empty handed. In negotiating solutions with belligerent parties, for example, there has to be a clear indication that non-settlement will have consequences. Parties need to understand that there will be a price to pay for continued aggression.

That is why an essential requirement of our approach is that the world community develop the capacity to intervene quickly in the event that preventive diplomacy fails. We need a quick response to back up our diplomatic initiatives. We need to be able to act before a dispute spreads, before it becomes an entrenched war, too difficult or impossible to resolve. That is why Canada is sponsoring an in-depth study of the short- medium- and long-term options for improving the rapid reaction capability of the UN in response to crisis, such as that which took place last year in Rwanda.

I believe that having this capacity may, in many cases, be enough to bring about a resolution. The threat of intervention may be sufficient to compel the parties to reach a peaceful solution. And, since belligerent parties are not likely to listen to reason without it - it is essential for success.

We are also encouraging - and attempting to lead by example - on the wider question of building the capacity of certain states to provide protection for human rights. We need to help rebuild in places where war and oppression have left deep scars - scars which have either destroyed democratic institutions, or left little hope that any such institutions could ever be developed.

Too often, in the past countries devastated by war or oppression were left alone by the world community to heal themselves. Instead of healing, the same wounds grew worse. The same problems re-emerged. The same bloody conflicts ensued.

To reverse the cycle and to ensure long-term peace we must be ready to provide the expertise and experience that has kept our own societies relatively free of violence and oppression.

This includes such bilateral initiatives as our work on the establishment of electoral systems and election monitoring in South Africa. It includes the legal and judicial training we are providing in Haiti and the dialogue on human rights and human development taking place between Canadian and Chinese academics.

It includes the efforts we are making in Haiti - with the co-operation of the RCMP, one of the most respected and recognized police forces in the world - on police and security training. We are helping the Haitian police evolve from a combative and partisan organization into a neutral force for the protection of individuals.

It includes our work in El Salvador where we have initiated a social reconstruction program. It will carry out a number of projects to strengthen democratic processes, human rights, and the condition of women as well as help integrate back into society those who have been involved in the fighting and others who have been displaced by it.

Our aid program also plays an important role in the protection of human rights. The purpose of Canada's development assistance is to promote sustainable development in developing countries. A priority of our aid program is to increase respect for human rights and to promote democracy and better governance. In almost all situations, it is possible to take a constructive approach by supporting the work of governments, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and international organizations to build respect for human rights.

But, in some cases, it is not possible. In some cases, we must seriously consider the value of assistance to regimes that do not respect the rights of their own citizens.

Those who are more concerned with the size of their military arsenal than with the welfare of their people cannot expect to receive international aid without conditions.

We are also discussing with our allies and friends – such as Japan and others with large ODA [Official Development Assistance] budgets – ways to act together to assertively bring home the message and encourage certain recipient countries to get their priorities right.

Our goal is not to punish countries, and thereby punish innocent populations, whose governments abuse human rights.

Our goal is to change the behaviour of those governments.

I want to compliment the work of all Canadian NGOs in their work for the cause of human rights. As a bilingual country with an NGO community that has strong links to both English- and French-speaking countries, we have a special role to play in areas such as Africa, which contains many of the countries with the greatest need.

We also encourage activities of NGOs and other institutions to build linkages on their own where, at times, we are not able to. The International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development is an excellent example of an organization that is making a real difference in the world. Another example is the Canadian Human Rights Commission, which is helping in the development of similar commissions in other countries.

As I think most people agree, promoting human rights and pursuing trade are seldom, if ever, mutually exclusive objectives.

In fact, growing trade and the increased economic prosperity it brings will often help to nurture more open and more democratic societies.

Governments that have opened their markets to international trade are likely to be more sensitive to the views and reactions of other countries. An inward-looking society that depends little on trade and international investments is less likely to respond to concerns raised by foreigners. Trade reduces isolationism. Trade also expands the scope of international law and generates the economic growth required to sustain social change and development.

We support the building of more and better trade linkages between and among all nations of the world, and we will continue to work toward a better, more open and freer world trading system.

Just as Canada was engaged at the beginning as a founding member of the United Nations; in helping to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; in reaffirming its principles at the world conference in 1993 and in countless interventions and peacekeeping missions in between, we intend to stay engaged in all parts of the world.

We do not favour isolationism. We do not believe in cutting ourselves off from other countries even if we do not like their human rights records. We believe that the way to help bring about change is by confronting the issue head on.

We must, and we will, continue to insist in all areas of the world that crimes and atrocities against individuals not go unpunished. We will continue to take a lead – as we have in Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia, for example – in the establishment of war crimes tribunals to bring guilty parties to justice.

But, as difficult as the human rights issues we must face appear to be, we also need to be aware that there is cause for hope and optimism on many fronts.

The definition of "national security" has shifted to the economic, social and political security of people within societies. We want to encourage that shift. One of Canada's major objectives at this year's World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen was to promote the acceptance of a people-centred approach to sustainable development, good governance and respect for human rights and diversity.

By putting the focus on human needs, we are trying to deal with global issues that in many ways transcend the power, ability and scope of individual governments. We hope that in so doing, we not

only will have helped to create an awareness of the importance of the new challenges, but also will have inspired people to work on collective responses.

We do not fool ourselves that this will create instant solutions. The problems we face will not yield to quick and easy answers.

But, we have made a beginning. And, as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions celebrate their 50th year, we have rededicated ourselves to making these international bodies more responsive and more relevant to the needs and hopes of people the world over.

This will be the focus of discussions when the G-7 leaders meet in Halifax in June.

Canada has supported and will continue to support the United Nations in its efforts to tackle complex and interrelated global issues — issues such as those discussed at the Children's Summit, the Rio Summit on Environment and Development, the Conference on Human Rights, the Conference on Population and Development, and the World Summit for Social Development, and which will be discussed this September in Beijing at the World Conference on Women.

In mentioning the Beijing Conference, I want to underline one point that, frankly, cannot be overemphasized: the UN Charter's promise of rights and freedoms for all will not be fulfilled until the rights and equality of over half the world's population are fully recognized and respected in all countries. Canada is working closely with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to ensure that this message is heard loud and clear at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

By way of conclusion, let me say that while these conferences are important, they are not, of course, an end in themselves. They must be followed up by action. Meetings such as yours, which build on the work begun in Vienna, contribute greatly to this effort. I therefore wish to pay tribute to the International Centre and the efforts of Ed Broadbent, which have brought you here to discuss this urgent matter.

The goals of peace and security, development and prosperity are every bit as important and as relevant as they were 50 years ago.

I believe there is cause to be optimistic and there is cause to hope that one day we will clear away the ignorance and fear that breed oppression and abuse of human rights.

Thank you.