

Canadian Groups Call On UN Human Rights Committee To Hold Canada Accountable for Human Rights Violations

October 18, 2005—Geneva: 19 representatives of Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are in Geneva, Switzerland for the review by the United Nations Human Rights Committee of Canada's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Yesterday, on the International Day for the Elimination of Poverty, the NGOs made submissions that provided Committee members with the benefit of their experience and that of their constituents on the realities of what has been happening on the ground in Canada.

The NGOs represent a wide range of interest areas and are in Geneva to highlight the desperate situation faced by members of numerous disadvantaged groups in Canada.

“The members of the UN Human Rights Committee were plainly troubled by the deepening of poverty in Canada and by the continuing inadequacy of welfare programs, which the National Council of Welfare has called an ‘utter disaster’. They particularly noted the negative effect on women, Aboriginal peoples, racialized minorities and people with disabilities. Canada was also asked about the concerted slashing of social programs and protections undertaken recently by the Government of British Columbia,” said Shelagh Day of the Feminist Alliance for International Alliance.

Vince Calderhead of the Charter Committee on Poverty Issues stated: “The Committee expressed serious concern to Canada's representatives about why people with mental disabilities languish in detention—after being medically and legally approved for release—solely because of a lack of appropriate housing. This situation has now risen to a international human rights question.”

Bev Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) said, “We were encouraged to hear Canada inform the Human Rights Committee that NWAC will finally receive the \$5 million that the Government has promised us so that we may document the scope of the human rights violation involved in the missing and murdered Aboriginal women. We are pleased as well that the Committee expressed concern that the money was insufficient. Importantly, the Committee asked Canada to ensure that adequate statistics are gathered about the extent of violence against Aboriginal women and pressed for more information about whether protocols for action are being adopted to guarantee effective policing responses to this pressing human rights tragedy.”

Kim Pate of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies said: “Notably, on Person's Day, the Committee told Canada that it should remedy the violations of human rights experienced by women prisoners, and asked Canada what it intends to do to implement the recommendations of the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Arbour Commission.”

Margaret Parsons of the African Canadian Legal Clinic said: “For the first time this Committee has considered seriously the issue of racial profiling, and other specific human rights violations experienced by Canada’s diverse African Canadian population.”

“The Committee was clearly concerned that Canada’s counter-terrorism practices may be falling far short of Canada’s international obligations,” said Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada. “Issues raised included Canada’s policy of deporting alleged security risks to countries where they face torture, immigration security certificates, the statutory definition of “terrorism” and concerns about the possibility of a Canadian version of extraordinary rendition in cases where Canadian citizens, under investigation in national security cases, have ended up being detained and tortured in foreign jail cells.”

“Fifteen years ago, this Committee concluded that the plight of the Lubicon Cree in northern Alberta constituted a violation of Canada’s obligations under this treaty,” noted Ed Bianchi, Aboriginal Rights Program Coordinator with KAIROS. “Committee members were clearly concerned that all these years later there is still no just resolution of this longstanding land and resource dispute. Questions were raised as to the legitimacy of the government’s negotiating position.”

The Committee was understandably frustrated that many of the issues covered at this session have come up in the context of past reviews as well, and that there are numerous recommendations the Committee has made previously, which Canada has either failed or outright refused to implement. This lack of progress reflects wide concerns Canadian NGOs have about an ‘implementation gap’ when it comes to Canada living up to its international obligations. The federal and provincial governments do not have a publicly accountable, well-coordinated approach to ensuring compliance with international human rights treaties. The need for a new approach is long overdue.

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