Canada World View

Interview with

Paul Heinbecker

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DFAIT's senior officer responsible for global and security policy talk with Canada World View

photo: DFAIT

The term "human security" may be of recent origin but the ideas that underpin the concept are far from new. For more than a century-at least since the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the 1860s-momentum has been gathering for a doctrine based on the security of people. Core elements of such a doctrine were formalized in the 1940s in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions.

Yet despite these legal instruments, human rights are violated on a daily basis around the world. What can be done to change this sad reality? This is the question *Canada World View* asked Paul Heinbecker, Assistant Deputy Minister (Global and Security Policy) at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

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Mr. Heinbecker, first of all, can you explain to us how the concept of human security was developed and how it became a central element of Canadian foreign policy?

Mr. Heinbecker
First we have to look at the concept of sovereignty, which goes back some centuries. The Westphalia Treaties of 1648, which put an end to the Thirty Years' War and which established the notion of national sovereignty, gradually changed the nature of society in Europe.

The end of the Second World War and the creation of the United Nations in 1945, followed by the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN, marked a turning point. As the world became more democratic, it naturally became more concerned about the safety of people.

Spectacular technological developments in the last 50 years-particularly television, satellites and now the Internet-contributed to a dramatic change in the way we perceive the world. Images of merciless and bloody conflicts in Europe, Africa and elsewhere come to us every day, engaging our conscience.

Another key factor is the fact that the nature of war itself has changed. Wars used to be fought between professional armies. Now, warlords deliberately target the most vulnerable: women, children, the poor and the weak.

This made us realize that while the concept of national sovereignty is necessary, it is not sufficient as a central organizing principle in international affairs. Between 1990 and 1995, some 70 states were involved in 93 internal and regional wars that resulted in more than 5 million victims. We realized as well that globalization brought new threats to people's safety: drug trafficking, terrorism, transnational crime, people smuggling, small arms proliferation and others. In the practical response to these threats, the concept of human security was born. It is fair to say that Minister Axworthy pioneered both the concept and the practice.

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Have there been any concrete results yet?

Mr. Heinbecker
There have. If you look at the Landmines Treaty [see "Landmines" article in this issue], it is clear that when governments, non-governmental organizations and ordinary citizens work together, positive things can be accomplished.

The UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone is another example. For the first time, a UN mission has been given the mandate, within the limits of its capabilities, not only to maintain peace but also to protect civilians whose lives are threatened.

In many other areas Canada is working in partnership with like-minded countries in such multilateral forums as the UN, the G-8, the Organization of American States, the Commonwealth and La Francophonie. The aim is to achieve progress on issues such as the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, the protection of and assistance to war-affected children, the campaign to reduce accumulations and trade of small arms, the protection of humanitarian workers, the negotiations to establish the International Criminal Court, the promotion and protection of human rights internationally, the 12 conventions against terrorism, the proposed transnational organized crime convention, drug trafficking, the smuggling of people, and so on. These issues are priorities for Minister Axworthy and form the core of the human security agenda.

As a matter of fact, in Canadian foreign policy we can now say that the security of people is treated with the same concern and urgency as the security of states.

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This raises the highly sensitive issue of the right of intervention in the affairs of other states. When is it appropriate to intervene and when not to? There seem to be contradictions in the way the principle is applied. What do you say to those who accuse Western democracies of inconsistency in putting the principle into practice?

Mr. Heinbecker

Obviously this is a difficult question. Let me begin by saying that humanitarian intervention is not just a Western concept. It is a human imperative, particularly when governments grossly abuse their own people, or when states fall and warlords prevail. Whether we want it or not, we are inevitably affected by these conflicts. First, the abuse of the innocent affronts our values and is in violation of the growing body of international humanitarian law. Second, we have a direct interest: we accept refugees, we send humanitarian assistance, we contribute peacekeeping troops, we help rebuild afflicted societies and rehabilitate their populations. When we see acute suffering and widespread loss of life, we have a moral obligation to respond and, if necessary, to intervene.

Having said that, it is important that the international community act collectively, preferably through the UN, first to try to prevent a conflict and then to intervene to stop a conflict or gross abuse of human rights. The most difficult issue is whether to intervene when the Security Council is paralysed. There was no consensus in the Council to intervene in Rwanda in 1994, and a genocide ensued. There was no UN Security Council consensus to intervene in Kosovo in 1999, and NATO decided that it could not turn a blind eye to inhumanity on its doorstep.

Another difficulty is coherence. But consistency can never mean doing nothing because we cannot do everything. The international community helps where it can and over time gives itself the ability to expand its reach. That is why it is so important to ensure the effectiveness of the UN Security Council, including its political will to act. And we are working very hard at it.

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Talking about future generations, how do you see the role of youth? Should they be involved in the human security agenda? Should they be educated to learn such values as tolerance, openness to other cultures and generosity?

Mr. Heinbecker

I think many of the conflicts and human rights abuses in the world are the result of attitudes that are taught in the home and in schools. If we want the world to become more democratic and peaceful, we have to educate people in democratic values. And this starts at an early age. We also have to educate the educators. It does little good (in Kosovo, for example) if teachers on the opposing sides inculcate hatred in their students. I have no doubt that educating young people and involving them in human security activities will bring a better world.

YouthLinks: [see article on "Canadian Youth" in this issue] is an excellent example of this. I hope that other Canadian schools can become linked to schools in countries around the world. Our international internships are also important. In my view, they enhance global understanding and help to reduce tensions in the world.

The Internet revolution has the potential to become the single most important instrument of human security in the world. Let's put it to good use!