

Editorial

A Day of Shame for Canada

On September 13 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Four countries voted against the declaration: Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. This was not surprising given these countries past histories of genocide against the indigenous peoples of those lands and their continuing refusal to recognize the hereditary rights of indigenous peoples in any meaningful way.

The declaration, which carries only symbolic power and is not binding on the signatories, declares that aboriginal peoples have the right to retain and revive unique cultural traditions, to use traditional lands or be compensated for their loss, to self-determination, including the maintenance of distinct political, economic, social and cultural characteristics, as well as to special measures to improve health, housing and social programs. The declaration has been the subject of ongoing

discussions for the past three decades and was endorsed by previous Canadian governments.

Canadian Minister of Indian Affairs Chuck Strahl defended his government's vote, claiming that the provisions of the Declaration on Indigenous Rights violate the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, various Supreme Court rulings and the tradition of negotiated land claims settlements in Canada. In particular, he singled out for criticism sections of the declaration guaranteeing the rights of indigenous peoples to the use of their traditional lands, arguing that this might give Canada's Aboriginal peoples mineral and hunting rights that Ottawa does not currently recognize. He also specifically opposed a clause which asks UN member states to seek the free and informed consent of indigenous peoples before passing laws that affect them, claiming that this would give Aboriginal peoples veto power over a

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HARPER'S VISIT TO LATIN AMERICA

Stephen Harper used his six-day, four country visit to Latin America in July (with stops in Chile, Barbados, Colombia and Haiti) to present a model for the countries of the Americas that he described as the "Canadian way". According to Harper, the "Canadian way" offers an alternative to both U.S. imperialism and capitalism, and to the governments in the region that are promoting nationalization and investments in social programs as a means to improve the lives of their people.

Harper underlined this message during his main public speech during the trip – to the Canada-Chilean Chamber of Commerce in Santiago, Chile on July 17. Without directly referring to the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or to the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Nestor

Kirchener in Argentina, he described "...cases of regressive economic policy, dangerous political conflict ... and insecurity. ... While most nations are turning toward economic reform and political openness, too often some in the hemisphere are led to believe that their only choices are – if I can be so bold to say – to return to the syndrome of economic nationalist, political authoritarianism and class warfare, or to become 'just like the United States.'"

Instead, he proposed, why not be more like Canada? "Our political structures differ substantially from those in the United States. Our cultural values and social models have also been shaped by unique forces and we've made our own policy choices to meet our own needs."

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broad range of government legislation.

Strahl also went on say that his government would not sign a declaration it disagreed with just to be “politically correct”, stating that the Conservative government prefers to move forward on practical help for Aboriginal peoples instead of signing a document that is purely symbolic. Of course, many of the countries that voted for the declaration also have shameful histories in regard to their indigenous peoples and a large number of those probably have no intention of actually implementing the provisions of the declaration. Indeed, there can be little doubt that previous Canadian governments that claimed to support the declaration also had no intention of implementing any of its provisions, just as no Canadian government has ever implemented any of the provisions of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights dealing with economic rights.

Nevertheless, the refusal of the Harper Conservatives to sign the Declaration on Indigenous Rights is more than symbolic. Rather, it is a clear statement that this government intends to continue the centuries-old policy of colonialism towards Canada’s Aboriginal people and to continue previous governments’ practice of expropriating Aboriginal land and extinguishing Aboriginal rights. As such, it certainly puts the lie to Strahl’s claim that his

government is interested in moving forward on practical help for Aboriginal peoples.

As for Strahl’s claim that this declaration violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, this is the worst kind of demagogy and a blatant attempt to split the Canadian people. Quebec already has the right to veto any federal laws affecting the people of Quebec and every province has the right to opt out of federal legislation. Why is Mr. Strahl and his government afraid to extend the same right to Aboriginal peoples? This is, after all, a matter of a basic democratic right. Any minority lacking the right of veto over matters that deeply affect it exists at the whim of the majority – it has privileges, not rights. Furthermore, numerous Supreme Court decisions have recognized the rights of Aboriginal peoples to use their traditional lands and, increasingly, these decisions are recognizing the right of Aboriginal peoples to the economic benefits of those lands, including mineral, timber and hunting rights.

Minister Strahl and the Conservative government have taken this stand not in defence of Canadian law but in defence of the rights of the huge multinational corporations that are determined to maintain unrestricted access to Canada’s vast natural resources. It is a shameful position which deserves the condemnation of the entire Canadian people, as well as the entire international community.

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Harper’s remarks would be amusing if they weren’t so disingenuous. After reducing sovereignty to a matter of some policy choices, he offered Canada as a partner for investment in the Americas. “It is not in our past, nor within our power, to conquer and dominate,” he said, suggesting that somehow Canadian multinational capitalists would be better for the region than American ones. Canadian foreign direct investment in the Americas reached almost \$100 billion in 2006, which is double the amount of Canadian foreign investment in Europe and second only to the United States.

Many of the Canadian multinationals investing in Latin America and the Caribbean are involved in resource extraction, including a number of highly controversial mining projects which have met with considerable resistance from local indigenous

communities. For example, Barrick Gold’s Pascua-Lama mining project is set squarely on the Chilean-Argentine border high in the Andes and has led to massive dislocation of indigenous communities and the destruction of the natural environment. Toronto-based Barrick is also involved in mining exploration projects in Colombia, Peru and Argentina.

Canada has also been involved in propping up U.S. imperialist interests throughout the Americas, including the provision of military and RCMP support for the coup against the democratically elected Haitian government and ongoing training for the current U.S.-backed military regime in that country.

Interestingly, Harper’s visit to the Americas was announced within a month of George Bush’s disastrous March visit to the region, when he was met by tens of thousands of protestors in each country he

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Negative Effects of Israeli Settlements On Palestinian Life

In the past couple of weeks a series of reports from UN agencies and human rights organizations have been released each of which paint a grim picture of life for Palestinians in the occupied territories. Two of these reports specifically examine the impact of Israeli settlements on Palestinians living in the West Bank, both in cities and in rural areas.

A report released on August 30 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) found that for Palestinians living in rural areas, the settlements separate them from the agricultural land they own and have been growing progressively more disruptive of their day-to-day life. In addition to routinely being blocked from accessing their land, the report also highlights an Israeli policy of diverting water to small Israeli settlement groups at the expense of much larger Palestinian populations.

For example, in the Palestinian village of Um al-Khir, which is located near the Carmel settlement, Palestinians receive water through an old above-ground network of thin pipes which they cannot refurbish. They are forced to supplement this with water brought in by tankers at a high cost to themselves, while the Carmel settlers are connected to Israel's main water system. One local resident told reporters that settlers' chicken huts have better access to water and electricity than the Palestinian villagers.

In the West Bank village of Susya water is scarce from July to October when the cisterns, filled by rainwater, run low. Residents routinely report that heavily armed settler security forces prevent them from accessing their wells which are located adjacent to the nearby settlement. Instead, the well water is taken and used for settlement agricultural activity or sold back to the Palestinians in Susya.

These are just two examples, but overall the OCHA report found that, as a result of lack of access to an adequate water supply, Palestinian water consumption per person in the West Bank is 40 percent lower than what the World Health Organization (WHO) deems to be an acceptable level for human health and well-being.

Shlomo Dror, a spokesperson for the Israeli Ministry of Defence, responded to the OCHA report by stating that Israel was increasing the amount of water allocated to the Palestinians by more than the three per cent per year as required under the Oslo

Accords signed in the early 1990s. At the same time, he suggested the Palestinians were causing some of the problems of inadequate water supply because they were failing to invest in water purification systems to maximize the use of the water they do have. Dror also said that Israel cracks down on illegal acts by settlers and added that the IDF does not distinguish between Jews and Palestinians. "And the Palestinians always have the option of going to the Israeli High Court to contest land claims," he continued, noting that this would include claims to water sources.

In addition to the issue of water, the OCHA report also found that there has been and continues to be a slow but steady shrinking of Palestinian grazing and agricultural areas which is debilitating to small Palestinian farmers and to the Palestinian economy overall.

Many Palestinians living in Um al-Khir report that settlers, working with the IDF, have been increasingly bold in seizing both agricultural land and Palestinian homes, destroying the latter and replacing them with far more lavish dwellings. Homes are targeted for destruction under the pretext that they were constructed without permits from the Israeli Civil Administration, regardless of the fact that many of them actually predate the creation of the state of Israel. Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948, when they were ethnically cleansed from much of Israel, rebuilt in areas designated for them to live but few were given permits for their dwellings. All of the residents of Um al-Khir are refugees from the 1948 war and are registered with the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

Another report, published by the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem and the Palestinian Association for Civil Rights and entitled "Ghost Town", examines the plight of the 150,000 Palestinians living in the West Bank City of Hebron alongside 800 Israeli settlers. The report points out that since 1994 over 1,800 Palestinian businesses in Hebron have been shut down and thousands of Palestinians have been forced out of their homes. "Israel's policy severely impacts thousands of Palestinians by violating the right to life, liberty, personal safety, freedom of movement, health and property, among other rights," the report states.

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In 1997, Hebron was divided into two sections. H1, covering about 80 per cent of the city, came under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Israel maintained control of H2 where the Israeli settlers live and a significant part of the city's commercial centre is located. About 115,000 Palestinians live in H1, while another 35,000 Palestinians live in H2 alongside about 800 settlers. Eight out of 10 Palestinians living in H2 are unemployed, while an estimated 75 per cent live below the poverty line. Furthermore, basic liberties for Palestinians living in H2 are severely restricted. For example, in most of the area Palestinians are forbidden to drive cars, while in some areas they cannot open new shops and are faced with impossible obstacles when they try to renew business permits for existing shops. A number of streets are off limits to Palestinians except during specific posted hours, while there are other areas where they cannot go at all.

For their part, Israeli settlers moving around H2 are routinely accompanied by armed settler security officials or IDF soldiers, who also escort them when they go through H1 on their way into Israel or to visit family and friends in other settlements. Furthermore, Hebron settlers are considered to be among the most violent, with Israeli and international human rights organizations documenting dozens of attacks by settlers on Palestinians each month. B'Tselem has charged repeatedly that not only are IDF soldiers doing nothing to stop these attacks but, in many instances, they are participating in them.

Israeli court rules portion of apartheid wall must be rerouted

On September 4, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that a section of the wall it is building in the West Bank must be rerouted. The ruling follows a two-and-a-half year legal battle between the Israeli government and the residents of the small Palestinian village of Bilin.

The route of the wall in Bilin has cut villagers off from their fields, making it impossible for them to live and work and wiping out their local economy. The Bilin villagers have become a source of inspiration for all Palestinians living in the West Bank. Every Friday for the last three years, the entire village has gathered at the wall to protest its construction, the land grab by Israel of Palestinian lands and the Israeli policies of occupation in the West Bank. They have been joined by Israeli peace activists and foreign supporters and their weekly protests have been the site of violence when IDF soldiers have tried to remove them by force, on several occasions shooting tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd.

Following Tuesday's ruling, the jubilant residents gathered in front of a throng of IDF soldiers, jeeps and tanks, waving Palestinian flags and chanting "They demolished the Berlin wall, we want to demolish the Bilin wall," and "Soldiers, go home."

Israel begun constructing its apartheid wall in 2002, despite the condemnation of the international community. The International Court of Justice in The Hague has already ruled the walls construction illegal, a ruling which Israel has completely ignored.

In response to the Israeli high court ruling, an Israeli government spokesperson said Israel will need to study the decision closely. Almost two weeks after the ruling, no work to reroute the wall has begun.

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visited. The U.S. president's attempts to isolate the Chavez government in Venezuela were a failure, with Bush being publicly rebuked by Brazilian president Lula, Argentina's Kirchner and Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte, all of whom praised Chavez to varying degrees and strongly suggested that the U.S. needed to respect the right of all countries in the Americas to choose their own paths.

So then comes Stephen Harper, offering a so-called Canadian way as an option for the Americas. Of course, despite the rhetoric, the Harper agenda for the Americas is no different than the Bush agenda for the Americas – with a Canadian face.

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