

Jan. 19, 2003. 01:00 AM

Sri Lanka looks to Canada as a political role model

Bob Rae leads federalism team
Working to bring a lasting peace

JOHN DEVERELL
STAFF REPORTER

September, 2002.

Bob Rae is travelling from Colombo to the Tamil town of Killinochi in northern Sri Lanka to meet leaders of the Tamil Tigers — the tenacious rebels who perfected assassination and mass destruction by suicide bombing.

He descends from a government military aircraft at Jaffna airport in search of his suitcase.

"I know you," a surprised baggage handler says to him in English. "You're Bob Rae. I voted for you."

And just what, he might have asked, was Ontario's former premier up to on the far side of the world anyway?

The devastated, land-mined territory of Tamil Ealam in northeast Sri Lanka is far from Queen's Park and Bay Street where Rae now practises law with Goodman Phillips and Vineberg. The Liberation Tigers, as disciplined and hard-minded a guerrilla force as any the world has known, aren't folks you seek out to share a cocktail.

But there is serious political business afoot in Sri Lanka, a financially distressed island country of 18 million, and few people in the world are quite so nicely prepared to help revive it as Canada's Bob Rae.

After nearly 20 years of civil war and more than 60,000 deaths, Sri Lanka's factions have acknowledged the obvious.

Neither can prevail by military means. For a year they have declared and maintained an uneasy truce. Leaders of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority last year began to concede they couldn't simply keep their



AP FILE PHOTO

Former Ontario premier Bob Rae is leading a federalism team to help former rivals in Sri Lanka find peace.

unitary state, which dated from national independence in 1948, and lord it over the Tamil minority.

Leaders of the Tamil Tiger fighting force began to admit that their following among Tamil Muslims was weak, their shattered Eelam would never be a sovereign state, and their quest for a secure homeland needed a less ambitious formulation. The fighters were yielding to the diplomats.

Canadian high commissioner Ruth Archibald in Sri Lanka at the time of Rae's visit and others flagged the opportunity. Ottawa was among the governments eager and ready to respond.

Canada and Scarborough are home to more than 200,000 Sri Lankans including the largest group in the entire Tamil diaspora, so Ottawa's inclination to encourage the truce required no long thought. But how? Norway organized the talks between the Sri Lankan government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, his constitution minister G.K. Peiris, and the Liberation Tiger forces headed by Vellupillai Prabhakaran. So what role for helpful Canucks?

Since 1999 Ottawa has pumped \$4 million a year into the Forum of Federations. Chaired by Bob Rae, its mission is to spread and improve federalism. It's above all "a network of practitioners of federalism, of practical people," said Rae, and it needs to be "because a lot of this stuff isn't written down."

Backed by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion, Rae's Forum launched in 1999 with a conference in Quebec addressed by the presidents of two notable federations — Bill Clinton of the United States, and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico.

Part of the agenda, was to show Quebecers that Canadian federalism was not simply tolerable but inescapable, desirable and the way of the future. The main point though, said Rae, "was and is to build on Canada's strengths by using federalism as a cornerstone of our foreign policy."

The world has much to learn from Canada and other federal countries about how to defuse the conflicts which arise along the fault lines of ethnicity, language and religion, Rae said.

Rae, son of Canadian career diplomat Saul Rae, has reconnected with the family vocation.

Last spring, Sri Lankan government and Tamil leaders led by chief negotiator London-based Anton Balasingham, were invited to a federalism conference in Switzerland and there introduced to Bob Rae and other Forum personnel. The Rae team offered to be available to both sides. The Sri Lankan dialogue about federalist alternatives to ethnic/religious slaughter began to take shape.

By September, with project financing from the Canadian International Development Agency, Rae and Alberta's constitutional adviser Peter Meekison were by invitation lecturing in Colombo, meeting Sri Lankan notables, and travelling with government consent, to Tamil Eelam to discuss with the leader of the Tigers' political wing, S.P. Thamilselvan, such concepts as split-jurisdiction policing and fiscal sharing.

At the same time David Cameron, former Ontario deputy for intergovernmental affairs, was in the Sri Lankan university town of Kandy with other Forum colleagues assuring leading Sinhalese intellectuals that federalism need not be, as they feared, the short road to Tamil secession.

"To them federalism was the f-word," Cameron said. Vague locutions such as multiple governments, devolution and decentralization were in the air, but the Sinhalese outnumber the Tamils four to one and for more than 50 years their tradition has been centralist.

"They listened carefully and politely without agreeing," Cameron said.

Even so, something good must have happened. In December, 2002, working in Oslo through Norwegian diplomats led by socialist politician Eric Solheim, Rae's Forum of Federations consultants again met the Sri Lankan teams headed by Peiris and Balasingham.

The former adversaries emerged from Oslo with some immediate understanding about matters such as clearing land mines, getting displaced families back into their homes and avoiding confrontations between government police and still-armed Tiger fighters.

On the future fundamentals, Peiris and Balasingham issued a joint statement saying federalism will be the principle on which Tamils and Sinhalese will learn to coexist peacefully. Now all they have to do is figure out what they mean by federalism.

Rae, Cameron, Meekison and other graduates of Canada's perpetual constitutional review will be on the big jets once a month, whether to Colombo or London or Bangkok, to supply helpful elements for the Sri Lankan constitutional recipe as and when they're asked.

Success and peace are far from guaranteed, but now there is hope.

As advocates of Canadian constitutional deals which didn't fly — the Meech Lake and Charlottetown packages — the Forum's leaders all know they live with an irony. To some it will appear that Canada is exporting constitutional failure.

The Forum of Federations sees it quite differently.

"Bear in mind that through all the years of Meech and Charlottetown, nobody in Canada suffered so much as a hangnail as a result of the arguments," said Forum publicist Karl Nerenberg. "In Sri Lanka, if the politicians fail to agree, more people will bleed and die. Federalism is the better answer."

Legal Notice:- Copyright 1996-2003. Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Distribution, transmission or republication of any material from <http://www.thestar.com/> is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. For information please contact us using our [webmaster form](#).