

# Norway Slips into Canada's Mediator Role on World Stage

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August 21, 2002

OSLO—When Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres arrived in Oslo yesterday, his Norwegian hosts did more than wade again into the Middle East crisis. As they returned to their role of peacemaker to one of the world's most troubled spots, the Norwegians displayed their growing status as a trusted intermediary, reliable negotiator, and faithful aid donor—in short, the new Canada.

On the international stage, the Scandinavian nation of 4.5 million people has quietly displaced Canada as a political mediator, as well as top country on the United Nations human-development index.

In Oslo, Norwegian politicians and diplomats like to point out they are upstaging Canada at every turn. Norway spends 0.8 percent of its gross domestic product on international aid, more than any other industrialized country. (Canada spends 0.25 percent.) And Norway is the Western country many developing nations turn to for mediation in a crisis.

"Norway is on top of the world in terms of foreign-aid policy," said Ragnild Imerslund, representative for the UN Development Program.

"Norway plays a very active role in supporting developing countries both socially and politically. It's perceived as neutral... The parties in a conflict don't perceive that Norway has a hidden agenda."

In the past decade, the country has mediated in such trouble zones as Myanmar (formerly Burma), Colombia, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and the Middle East. Though they seem less significant today, the 1994 Oslo peace accords for the Middle East, shepherded by the late Johan Jorgen

Holst, then the foreign minister, were a diplomatic triumph.

This week, with the visit of Mr. Peres, Norway again plays the role of honest broker in the Middle East, one that the United States long ago relinquished. Norway's diplomats are also chairing peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, helping to end a brutal conflict dating from the early 1980s that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Norway's Foreign Minister, Jan Petersen, is arguably the most influential politician in the country. He not only leads the Conservatives, the largest party in a minority government, but also oversees the ministry that is considered the most important.

"We play the role of mediator because we have no hidden agenda," Mr. Petersen said in an interview in his office in Oslo. "In many ways our involvement with the Third World has been an instance of the right place and the right time. We try not to overstretch, but we make difference where we can."

Norway has a history of being ruled by wealthier nations, a history about which many Norwegians are still prickly.

A Danish colony for 300 years, it was handed over to Sweden in 1814. It was not until 1905 that Norway gained independence and instituted its cherished monarchy.

The country remained neutral during World War I, but occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II put a swift end to the constitutional monarchy's neutrality.

Another key factor in explaining Norwegian foreign policy is the country's sense of being an outsider. It is

the only member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that shares a border with Russia, and it is ambivalent about membership in the European Union, which its citizens have twice rejected in referendums.

Norway's role as home to the five-member Nobel committee has further enhanced its image as the world's most concerned nation. In 1994, the committee awarded its annual peace prize to Mr. Peres and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

A selective comparison of Canada and Norway (figures from 2000, except where stated):

	Norway	Canada
Total population	4.5	30.8
DGP per capita (\$US)	\$29 918	\$27 840
Foreign aid as a percentage of GNP	0.80%	0.25%
Foreign aid per capita of donor country (\$US)	\$276	\$55
Percentage of people lacking functional literacy skills (1994-1998)	8.5	16.6
Cell phone subscribers (per 1000 people)	751	285
Internet hosts (per 1000 people)	101.1	77.4