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NEWS STORY

Martin takes on position with UN

Former minister didn't discuss job with prime minister

Joe Lauria and Anne Dawson
The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, July 26, 2003

ADVERTISEMENT

UNITED NATIONS -- Paul Martin says he accepted a job as co-chair of a new UN commission without first talking to Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

"I've not talked to the prime minister about this," Mr. Martin said yesterday. "Foreign Affairs does know about it. They were advised that I would be undertaking this quite early on."

Mr. Martin will co-chair a UN commission on the private sector and development that will attempt to help small and medium-size businesses in the developing world.

"I'm doing this as an individual. This is a matter of great personal interest," he said. "It certainly fits in with my concept of the kind of role Canada ought to play and the kinds of things Canada can do."

Mr. Martin said that running for the Liberal leadership will not prevent him from taking on responsibilities outside government.

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"This is going to take a lot of time, but it's time I think I will be able to devote essentially by coming to New York, or I'll be able to do it from Canada," he said.

"In terms of what might be my new job (in Ottawa), I think Canada has to play a very important role on the international area."

Asked in a later interview whether Canadian Maurice Strong -- a member of the commission and touted as a possible adviser to Mr. Martin should he become prime minister -- played a role in his UN appointment, Mr. Martin said: "Maurice Strong is a man to whom I'm very close and he's had certainly ... a great deal of influence on me and on my thinking over the course of the last 25 or 30 years."

At his appointment, Mr. Martin was flanked by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo and UN Development Program head Mark Malloch Brown.

Both Mr. Zedillo and Mr. Brown playfully commented on Mr. Martin's run to become prime minister.

"I know that these days Paul doesn't have much time for this, but he will put in high quality time," Mr. Zedillo said.

Mr. Brown added: "The fact that Paul, who has a few other things on his mind at the moment, would find time to do this, is an indication of how we all share this view that this is a critical key to turn in the door of development."

The new UN board will broadly aim to foster the development of small and medium-size businesses in underdeveloped countries. It will look at questions of economic policy, taxation, trade, financing and training.

Mr. Martin said it is necessary to end protective measures by First-World countries, like the "massive subsidies in agriculture in Europe," in order to "develop a private sector that is capable of trading."

"If you open up your markets to trade, but the net result is that the large developed countries have goods to sell to you but you have nothing to sell back ... then opening your borders to trade isn't going to do you much good."

The commission is to report back to Mr. Annan by year's end with specific recommendations as to how it intends to achieve its goals. The ideas will be put into practice on the ground in Africa and other developing areas in a series of pilot programs, Mr. Brown said.

After the wave of democratic change in many parts of the underdeveloped world, the next challenge is to create a successful private sector and middle class in these countries, he said.

"We are here to build a new pillar in development, one that supports the ambitions of the least advantaged, through the energy of local enterprise," Mr. Martin said.

While progress has been made to combat global poverty, 54 nations saw their income fall in the past decade.