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Martin moves to strengthen ties with India

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NEW DELHI - Prime Minister Paul Martin was in New Delhi on Tuesday, as part of his nine-day tour to see the devastation wrought by the Dec. 26 tsunami. At the same time Martin took the opportunity to strengthen Canada's economic and diplomatic ties with India.

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Martin laid a wreath at Raj Ghat, the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritual father of India.

Martin also had a meeting with Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former prime minister Rajiv, who was assassinated. She is head of India's Congress party.



Paul Martin talks with Indian PM Manmohan Singh, right. Included are Canadian parliamentarians Ruby Dhalla and Gurbax S. Malhi, top, in New Delhi, India, Tuesday. (AP photo)

But in his formal talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Martin achieved some of what he set out to do on this Asian tour in terms of building economic and diplomatic ties. Singh welcomed and supported Martin's plan for a new global leaders forum, called the L-20.

The two countries agreed to use their expertise to create a tsunami early warning system for countries of the Indian Ocean.

Both countries moved closer to signing an investment protection agreement that would give reciprocal rights for Indian and Canadian firms. Businesses would be treated equally under each country's legal system, which is seen as a major necessity to boost trade.

Martin addressed a concern in India that Canada is granting fewer visas to skilled Indian workers who want to emigrate. India is the second-largest source of immigrants to Canada, about 24,000 in 2003. But

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more are starting to turn to Australia because of the three- to four-year wait, in some cases, for Canadian visas.

Martin highlighted the the fact that Canada has opened nine new visa processing offices in India to deal with the problem.

But an issue that has caused enormous controversy in Canada also managed to stir some controversy in India: same-sex marriage.

Earlier this week the holiest priest of the Sikh religion, Jaginder Singh Vamenti, issued an edict against same-sex marriage, ordering all practising Sikhs to oppose it.

One of the MPs travelling with Martin, Liberal Gurbax Singh Malhi, who is also a Sikh, says he is prepared to fight against it. "I believe in religion," said Malhi, "that's why I'm against same-sex marriage, because according to the Sikh religion it's against it."

It's an issue that matters to Martin, because six of his MPs are Sikh and will vote on his proposed same-sex marriage legislation.

The issue also managed to slip unexpectedly into the meeting between the two prime ministers.

When asked what he thought of Canada's proposed legislation, Manmohan Singh would only say it isn't "proper" for him to comment on domestic Canadian politics. "I don't think it would be appreciated," he said.

The prime minister tried to reassure Sikhs back home, many of them Liberals, that the legislation would not compromise religious rights.

"No church, no temple, no synagogue, no mosque will be forced to [perform] same-sex marriage [ceremonies]," said Martin.

Martin is now in Tokyo.

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