

Diplomat with a past

Rarely has a diplomat kept so low a profile yet frayed ties so badly between two friendly countries as Sri Lankan High Commissioner Tissa Weeratunga.

The envoy, a relative of Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene, was dispatched to Ottawa as a reward for (armed) services rendered: he was the officer who commanded the army's brutal campaign against Tamil separatists.

Probes by human rights investigators from Amnesty International amassed testimony by Sri Lankan Tamils that Brig.-Gen. Weeratunga (at the very least) tolerated torture and disappearances of Tamil civilians while he was stationed in Jaffna in 1979. This week, a Tamil refugee visiting Canada from Paris claimed he was personally tortured by Brig.-Gen. Weeratunga.

The Canadian government has been loath to rock the diplomatic boat over the controversial diplomat. External Affairs Minister Joe Clark was aware of most of the allegations when the Sri Lankan was nominated for the Ottawa post, but made little effort to verify them. External tried for a few months to discourage Colombo from sending

him, but Mr. Jayewardene vouched for his kin's innocence and Ottawa finally accepted him.

Faced with new accusations aimed at this ex-officer, however, Mr. Clark has belatedly decided to make "cautious inquiries" about him. Anything less would be a betrayal of the UN Convention on Torture, of which Canada is a signatory. In contrast to the circumspection — to the point of fecklessness — that Ottawa has shown, Colombo has been all too quick to escalate the controversy.

Two Sri Lankan cabinet ministers on Tuesday issued provocative statements, one demanding the extradition of the Tamil refugee who is visiting Canada from France, the other threatening reprisals against Canadian diplomats if Ottawa pursues its inquiries concerning Brig.-Gen. Weeratunga.

Mr. Clark should be equally blunt. Canada does not extradite exiles wanted for political offences. But Canada is prepared to expel diplomats if there is solid evidence they have committed war crimes. Or if Canadian diplomats face reprisals for inquiries into such abuses.