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COMMON FOLKS MAKING FOREIGN POLICY

By Ruth Walker

Ottawa – If war is too important to leave to the generals, foreign policy may be too important to leave to the guys in the striped pants.

Several countries are trying new ways to involve their citizens on international issues.

Canada has established itself as a leader in this field, sometimes called “public diplomacy.”

In round-table discussions and other forums, knowledgeable citizens have joined politicians and diplomats not only to consult but actually to make foreign policy. Just days after a discussion on East Timor in February, for example, Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy issued a statement that followed the citizen recommendations very closely.

Moreover, the Canadian model is having wide influence. “We consider Canada among the pioneers of this concept, especially since Minister Axworthy took over,” says Rudiger Lemp, an official at the German Embassy in Ottawa.

The Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development (CCFPD) is at the heart of Ottawa’s efforts to include citizen policymakers. Over the past 15 years, says CCFPD National Director Steven Lee, “There’s been an awareness that the public can add value to thinking about foreign policy.”

Mr. Lee hesitates to connect policy elements too directly to specific citizen inputs. “That would be unfair to the dynamic of the policy process.”

But he cites a number of examples where they have made a difference. “On small arms, for instance,” Lee says, “including people outside of government gave us the medical perspective, and the gun-control/policing perspective.”

One of the many countries watching Ottawa’s efforts to include citizen policy-makers is Slovakia. Britain is another country whose representatives in Ottawa have



looked closely at the CCFPD. Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook have just in the last year launched the Foreign Policy Centre in London, intended, like the CCFPD, to provide government with an alternative stream of policy choices.

The appeal of citizen-influenced foreign policy appears poised to spread. Two other countries whose diplomats have consulted at the CCFPD are Norway and South Africa.

