

# Francophone summit will be first for Chrétien

## Quebec will also be represented at African meeting

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OTTAWA — Prime Minister Jean Chrétien makes his first official visit to Africa later this week to attend a summit of la Francophonie being held in Benin.

It is an event that will be marked by a number of firsts.

The Dec. 2-4 summit of the French-speaking commonwealth in Cotonou, the commercial centre of the tiny central west African country, will be the first for Chrétien.

It will be the first attended by a Liberal Canadian prime minister; the previous six meetings of heads of state and government held since 1986 were attended by former Tory prime minister Brian Mulroney.

It will be the first francophone summit to witness the spectacle of a Canadian prime minister flanked at the conference table by a Quebec separatist deputy premier Bernard Landry, who is to represent outgoing Parti Québécois leader Jacques Parizeau.

And completing the Ottawa-Quebec-Paris triangle, the summit will be the first for French President Jacques Chirac as his country's head of state, although he attended the 1987 Quebec summit in a previous incarnation as prime minister.

"There's no doubt it will be a peculiar sight," said one federal official who will be part of Chrétien's delegation.

La Francophonie brings together representatives of 47 countries as well as Quebec and New Brunswick, which have the status of "participating governments."

And while protocol dictates that the federal delegation take the lead at such gatherings, with the provincial governments speaking only on areas within their jurisdiction, "it's hard to say what could happen," the federal official said.

Chrétien is to arrive early Friday in Benin. The formerly Marxist state was one of the first to move to multiparty politics after the collapse of communism in 1989.



**FRENCH FACT:** Canada's Jean Chrétien, France's Jacques Chirac, Quebec's Deputy Premier Bernard Landry unlikely trio.

Security will be intense around the beachfront conference centre, already the target of a rocket attack on Nov. 15. There have also been reports in one independent Benin newspaper of threats by militant Algerian Islamists, who want to disrupt the meeting.

Nevertheless, summit organizers have set an ambitious agenda to make changes to the organization, most importantly by creating the post of secretary-general.

"The Francophonie doesn't really have a spokesperson, a person who is identified the way the head of the Commonwealth or United Nations is," the federal official said.

Canada was a founding member of the main Francophonie body, the Agency for Cultural and Technical Cooperation, in Niger, in 1970. Quebec journalist Jean-Marc Leger was its first secretary-general; its current head is Quebecer Jean-Louis Roy. There is a small secretariat that is always headed by the host of the coming summit.

But Canada wants to broaden those institutions and is pushing for la Francophonie to become a much more political organization. Creating the post of secretary-general is part of that strategy.

Canada will also be pushing hard for la Francophonie to become much more involved in conflict prevention and in the promotion of human rights and good government, particularly in Africa, where a majority of members run states.

"The Francophonie was barely involved, as an organization, at the time of such crises as Rwanda and now in

Burundi," even though both are francophone countries, the official said.

"Some members don't have problems talking about Bosnia, but when you start talking about the family, that concerns them a bit."

With its track record of activism in the anti-apartheid movement and more recently as a critic of Nigeria's military regime, Canada wants la Francophonie alliance to become more proactive.

"We're not talking about forming francophone peacekeeper forces or things of that nature but the Francophonie should facilitate talks between opposing parties and send special missions at times of crisis," the official said.

This summit is to deal with plans to promote French use on the information highway.

But for Chrétien, the conference agenda is almost certain to be sidetracked by domestic politics. It wouldn't be the first time.

At the first summit in Paris, in 1986, Mulroney, flanked by Canada's then ambassador to Paris (now separatist Bloc Québécois leader) Lucien Bouchard, did a diplomatic sidestep with Robert Bourassa, then Liberal premier of Quebec over matters of jurisdiction.

At last December's summit, there was a protocol flap when Landry arrived before Foreign Affairs Minister André Ouellet. Landry later met Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré without no federal official present.

"They played with the doors and our ambassador stayed outside. That wasn't appreciated," the Ottawa official said.