

Gird for long haul, Kabul tells Canadians

With Harper planning spring vote on deployment, envoy hails visits to Afghanistan by French, Italian and Australian leaders

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Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada wants Canadians to take a world view of the problems in his country, saying Western leaders understand there is no "quick fix."

Omar Samad said yesterday that weekend visits to Afghan President Hamid Karzai by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and new Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd are "a political signal ... that they consider Afghanistan a very important world issue.

"I hope that the message that this sends to Canadians at this point is that they should look at it as a very critical and strategic world issue that requires long-term commitment," Mr. Samad said.

"Every one of these leaders made it very clear during their visit that Afghanistan matters, that Afghanistan is a long-term engagement and that no one should expect a quick fix."

Defence Minister Peter MacKay, who has been visiting Canadian troops in Kandahar, is expected to meet Mr. Karzai today in Kabul.

Mr. Samad's comments come as Prime Minister Stephen Harper indicated he will hold a spring vote in Parliament on whether to extend the Canadian mission to Afghanistan from February of 2009 to 2011.

In a year-end interview with The Canadian Press, Mr. Harper said he is uncertain whether Canadians understand the importance of remaining involved in Afghanistan.

Asked whether he believes Canadians truly appreciate what is at stake, Mr. Harper replied: "I don't know, the short answer is I don't know.

"The government understands we took on an important international commitment for important reasons of international security that in the long run impact directly on our country.

"So I don't know whether Canadians do - or don't - understand."

"I think Canadians are deeply troubled by the casualties," he added.

The Prime Minister has said repeatedly that the mission should be extended and he recently created a non-partisan commission, headed by former Liberal deputy prime minister John Manley, to report on Canada's role in Afghanistan. The report is expected in late January.

"All we can only hope from the Manley exercise is that it causes parliamentarians, particularly in our Official Opposition - which as you know commenced this mission - to sit back and think about what is in the best interest of the country before a vote is actually held," Mr. Harper said.

"We really have got to avoid - on this one - taking a decision for reasons of short-term politics. We must take a decision that is in the long-run interest of the country, its international reputation and the respect we should all show for the sacrifice our men and women have made to secure it."

Mr. Samad said he would not comment on whether the weekend visits by the French, Italian and Australian leaders indicate their countries are ready to increase their number of troops or fight in the more dangerous southern region, where Canadian troops are stationed.

The issue of so-called "burden sharing" is controversial, as Mr. Harper and others have said Canadians have taken on a disproportionate load. Polls suggest Canadians believe their troops are paying too high a price and want out of the mission; 73 soldiers and one diplomat have been killed in the past two years.

Mr. MacKay said this year that he and the Prime Minister will be pressing other North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries for clear commitments for increased troops and equipment in southern Afghanistan. They want these commitments to be nailed down in time for the alliance's leaders summit in Romania this April.

Experts are warning that the coming vote in Parliament about extending the mission will be messy and one the minority government will not win.

"I don't think the government can get a vote through the House," said historian Jack Granatstein. "I think it's very sad. ... It will really be a test of Canadians, whether we have the stomach to fight, to fight a war."

Dr. Granatstein supports Canadian troops remaining in Afghanistan until 2011. But he said it will be very "tough to get the vote through" the House of Commons, adding that it will become "messy" with splits in the Liberal caucus.

But Liberal defence critic Denis Coderre said the Liberal caucus is "totally solid" on the extension issue. He said there has to be "some rotation" of troops and a refocusing of the mission.

And Peter Harder, former deputy minister of Foreign Affairs, said a May vote is "logical." He sees risks in a vote before then, as he believes the last thing Mr. Harper wants is for "Parliament to reject what Manley recommends ..."

He said the ability for MPs to debate the mission in a non-partisan way will be critical. As well, he added, a vote before the April summit in Romania would be risky, especially if Mr. Harper loses. Mr. Harder said that would "look rather bad for Canada."

Roland Paris, the director of the Centre for International Policy Studies at the University of Ottawa, said Canadian troops have done a professional job under difficult circumstances, given that the entire mission has not been adequately funded by NATO. He said the NATO meeting in April will be key, as announcements will be made by member countries regarding their commitment to the mission.

"I think ultimately Canadians would be open to the idea of a continued combat mission in Afghanistan," he said.

"Is it not possible for us to consider other ways for us to play an important role? Combat and non-combat? ... I think pulling out in 2009 would be a mistake."