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Plans for Canada's Afghan reconstruction base stretch to 2015: insiders

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OTTAWA - The Foreign Affairs Department has developed plans to keep a Canadian provincial reconstruction base in Kandahar until at least 2015, say federal officials.

The department has also started recruiting diplomatic staff to fill posts at the base for one-year assignments that stretch beyond Parliament's self-imposed February 2009 deadline for an end to the military mission.

Sources within the department told The Canadian Press the two diplomatic openings currently being filled run from the summer of next year to the fall of 2009.

The provincial reconstruction base, nestled in an old fruit canning factory in a Kandahar suburb, was set up in 2005. It functions as the headquarters for Canada's reconstruction efforts, giving development officials, the RCMP and correctional officers a secure location from which to help Afghans rebuild their shattered country.

The base, while protected by the Canadian military, is entirely separate from the combat units, located at Kandahar Airfield, NATO's principal base in southern Afghanistan.

Contingency plans for a long-term Canadian diplomatic and development presence in the war-torn city were initially drawn up in the spring of 2006, not long after the Conservatives came to power and at the same time an extension to the military mission was proposed, said diplomatic sources.

The proposal apparently has so-called "off-ramps" that would allow Ottawa to withdraw, or hand over the Kandahar base to another country. But the first opt-out date is not until 2011, the same year an international agreement to rebuild Afghanistan expires, the sources indicated.

Coincidentally, 2011 is the same year the Conservative government chose in their throne speech as an extension for Canada's military commitment.

Late Wednesday the Foreign Affairs Department confirmed it is staffing three positions in Kandahar next year.

The first is a one-year posting, beginning in January. The other two are also one-year assignments, beginning in the summer, but the statement added this qualification: "This is of course dependent on larger decisions about the future of the mission in Kandahar."

This fall, Prime Minister Stephen Harper assembled a panel of eminent Canadians, headed by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley, to study Canada's future role beyond the expiry of the current mission.

Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier, appearing before the Commons foreign affairs committee Tuesday, made a distinction between the military and development efforts.

"The mandate of development and reconstruction is a commitment until 2011 under the (Afghanistan) compact with other countries," Bernier said, responding to a question from Bloc Quebecois defence critic Claude Bachand.

"Mr. Manley's mandate just has to do with the military mission."

Liberal MP Dan McTeague, who was at the committee meeting, said his ears perked up after hearing that statement and wondered whether the Conservatives would use an extended development commitment as a pretext to keeping troops in the country.

"We all know development can't proceed without security, at least that's what they keep telling us," McTeague said Wednesday.

"This is troubling and the government needs to explain to Canadians precisely what its intentions are for the PRT (provincial reconstruction team) in Kandahar. I, like many Canadians, was under the impression Mr. Manley was looking at the whole mission.

"We've all been focused on the combat mission. Since we can't have development without security, I think the government needs to explain clearly to Canadians how long it sees our development commitment running until. Is it 2011, 2015, or some time longer?"

Later in the Tuesday hearing, Bernier emphasized that the Conservatives don't believe that Canada "should simply abandon the Afghans in 2009."

The terms of reference for the Manley review panel suggest Canada's diplomatic and development efforts in Kandahar will continue, regardless of the combat commitment.

One of the options set out by Harper proposes a focus on reconstruction, leaving forces from another country to handle security at the base.

Another proposal - one already deemed unacceptable by the Tories - suggests withdrawal of all Canadian military except a "minimal force to protect aid workers and diplomats."

A third option under consideration by the independent panel is to shift Canadian security and reconstruction efforts elsewhere in Afghanistan.

The final proposal involves what Harper described as the status quo, essentially a continuation of the existing military and development mission with emphasis on training the Afghan army.

Canada is planning to invest a total of \$1.2 billion in aid and development by 2011, 80 per cent of which is being funnelled to national institutions.