

Weakness in mission exposed, critics say

CAMPBELL CLARK

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OTTAWA — The instability in Pakistan after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto underlines the weaknesses of Canada's approach to neighbouring Afghanistan, opposition politicians say.

With Stephen Harper's minority Conservatives expected to hold a spring parliamentary vote on the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan, the Liberals and NDP are suggesting events in Pakistan highlight the need for a different policy.

NDP Leader Jack Layton said the death Sunday of Canadian Forces Gunner Jonathan Dion, 27, renewed concerns about whether success can be achieved by military action.

“The death of a soldier always focuses the minds of Canadians, first on the family and then on the comrades in the field,” Mr. Layton said. “But it also raises once again those questions as to whether there is a military end in sight here.”

The NDP have called for an immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Kandahar, and for expanded diplomatic efforts to try to reach some kind of negotiated end of the insurgency in Afghanistan.

Mr. Layton said that events in Pakistan are closely linked with the Afghan mission, and heighten concerns about military efforts.

He called for Canada to expand diplomatic efforts with Pakistan, too, including offering to help organize elections and supporting calls for a UN inquiry into the death of Ms. Bhutto.

“I think Canadians are starting to understand the inter-relationship between what's going on in Pakistan, particularly along the border with Afghanistan, and what's happening in the south of Afghanistan,” he said.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has mandated a task force headed by former Liberal deputy prime minister John Manley to recommend the future course of Canada's mission in Afghanistan, which is expected to report in January.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Ambassador to Canada, David Wilkins, told the Associated Press he doesn't know how events in Pakistan might shape the Canadian Parliament's vote on Afghanistan, but expressed the hope Canada will stay.

“If the United States and Canada and other NATO countries were not there to bring stability, it would surely fall into chaos,” Mr. Wilkins said after returning from his first trip to Afghanistan last week.

But approval for extending a Canadian military presence in Kandahar would likely require backing from the opposition Liberals, who show no signs of changing their insistence that Canadian troops be withdrawn from that mission in 2009.

Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae noted that the Afghan-Pakistan border is open, and runs along a region of Pakistan not really controlled by the Musharraf government, which is now further destabilized.

“The fact of the matter is, not only is al-Qaeda working on both sides of the border... but the intellectual, the military, the financial support of the Taliban is, if anything, stronger in Pakistan than it is in Afghanistan,” Mr. Rae said.

The instability in Pakistan could mean greater dangers for Canadian troops in Afghanistan, but Mr. Rae also said that developments in Pakistan should offer lessons about the region.

Canada and the United States backed President Pervez Musharraf's government in the hope that it would provide stability even though it responded to tensions inside the country with repressive measures that fuelled resentment, Mr. Rae said.

The lesson for Afghanistan is that Canada and NATO must broaden their approach to build political stability, and the Afghan government must build working institutions, and that cannot be done by military means alone, he said.

“I remain very concerned that we have created a commitment that is almost exclusively military, that is far greater than most of our NATO allies, and that is working in, to put it mildly, the most difficult of circumstances,” he said.

With a report from AP

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