

Taliban urges next Canadian prime minister to pull troops out of Afghanistan

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — The Taliban say they know that an election campaign is underway in Canada and that's why they have stepped up attacks against Canadians in Afghanistan.

Taliban spokesman Qari Muhammad Yusef said Tuesday the insurgent movement wants Canada's next prime minister to pull Canadian troops out of Afghanistan.

"Yes, I know that the election is being held in Canada. That is why our attacks on Canadians are increased," Yusef said through a translator.

"One of the Canadian soldiers, who has won a medal as well, was killed in our recent attacks."

Sgt. Scott Shipway died Sunday when his armoured vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in the volatile Panjwaii district of Kandahar.

The seasoned soldier, who was cited for saving a comrade's life during his previous tour in Afghanistan in 2006, was just days away from the end of his second tour when the blast occurred.

Yusef said he's familiar with Prime Minister Stephen Harper but isn't sure about the other candidates or parties running in the Canadian election.

While he doesn't know which party is most likely to withdraw Canadian troops from Afghanistan, Yusef said such a platform will be "good for that party and for their nation and for the Canadian people."

"My suggestion for the next prime minister is to withdraw Canadians from Afghanistan," he said, adding Canada needs to stop following U.S. foreign policy.

"When any of these party leaders come to power, the first thing they must do is ask the Canadians to come from Afghanistan to Canada."

Liberal Leader Stephane Dion responded: "We will not be intimidated by the Taliban."

Speaking to reporters in Napanee, Ont., Dion said "Canada has a role to play" and is committed to the current mission in Afghanistan.

"We have a strong respect and admiration for our courageous men and women and our civilians. I'm sure that NATO, the government of Canada, the government of Afghanistan will work together to protect the people as much as possible."

"The end date of this mission is 2011," Dion said.

"It's an iron-clad commitment of the Liberal party that if we are the government we will do our best to help the people of Afghanistan until 2011, and after that the mission in Kandahar will be terminated for the government of Canada and for our troops."

"We'll have other missions to do in the world."

Dimitri Soudas, a spokesman for Harper, commented that "the Taliban are a vicious organization that kill innocent people and target Canadian soldiers."

"All party leaders should put partisan politics aside and rally behind our troops and their mission. And Parliament has made a decision on this matter," Soudas said.

NDP Leader Jack Layton said: "The suggestion that there's going to be violence meted out against Canadian soldiers to try and influence the election here is reprehensible."

"We'll decide our own policies right here in Canada with regard to the war in Afghanistan," he said.

Yusef, the Taliban spokesman, also commented on the U.S. election coming this fall.

He said he doesn't care much for American politics. He said he believes the next U.S. president, regardless of who is chosen, will be just as bad as the current one.

"American elections are just a fixed game. Their policies were mad 20 years ago," he said.

"Whoever will be the leader, he will playing the same role - I mean a negative role."

This is not the first time the Taliban have spoken out directly to Canadians in recent weeks.

Days after two Canadian aid workers were shot to death in an ambush south of Kabul last month, the Taliban issued an "open letter" urging Canadians to press their government to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

The Taliban suggested attacks like the one that killed Shirley Case and Jacqueline Kirk, who were working for the New York-based International Rescue Committee, would happen again as long as Canada continued following the "American" agenda.

In the letter, insurgents blamed Canada for injuring and killing many Afghan men, women and children.

The Taliban suggested the attack on the aid workers was revenge, possibly for an incident two weeks earlier when Canadian troops accidentally shot two children to death. The Canadians feared the vehicle they were riding in was going to attack them when it failed to stop as ordered.

Yussef reiterated the Taliban warning to Canadians little more than a week ago after three soldiers were killed in a direct fire ambush in the Zhari district of Kandahar.

Cpl. Andrew Grenon, Cpl. Mike Seggie, and Pte. Chad Horn died when their armoured vehicle was hit in a "direct attack."

"I repeat what I said before, that I warn Canadians again to leave Afghanistan if you don't want to have more casualties here," Yussef said at the time.