

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Bernier gaffe ignites diplomatic fire**Officials racing to salvage plan to quietly replace Kandahar governor after minister undercuts him publicly****GRAEME SMITH**

WITH A REPORT FROM DANIEL LEBLANC IN OTTAWA

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- A quiet campaign by Canadian diplomats, who have been working to ease the governor of Kandahar out of his job, was thrown into chaos yesterday as Canada's Foreign Minister, Maxime Bernier, shattered months of secrecy and spoke out against the governor in public.

Canadian officials initially believed that Mr. Bernier had taken an important step in advancing their agenda over the weekend, when he met privately with President Hamid Karzai and asked him to replace Governor Asadullah Khalid, who has been dogged by accusations of torture and corruption. Calls for the governor's removal have grown louder this year, after The Globe and Mail's Paul Koring reported on Ottawa's attempts to conceal allegations that Mr. Khalid was personally involved in the torture of detainees.

Afghanistan's President told the Canadian delegation that a new governor would be appointed for Kandahar "within weeks," said a senior official who attended the meeting.

That promise is now more difficult for Mr. Karzai to keep, according to Canadian and Afghan sources, because Mr. Bernier's comments yesterday gave the impression of Canadian pressure on a President who is often satirized as a puppet of foreign masters.

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"In light of this, it's much less clear what will happen next," a Canadian official said.

"There's a bit of scrambling now."

In Ottawa yesterday, the opposition parties were quick to jump on Mr. Bernier's comments as a sign that he is not up to the Foreign

Affairs portfolio.

Mr. Bernier made the statement at the end of a three-day visit to Afghanistan, during a relaxed meeting with reporters outside Canadian military headquarters in Kandahar. He told the journalists about his talks on Saturday with Mr. Karzai, saying he pushed the President for action against corruption.

"For example, what can Karzai do on corruption?" a reporter asked.

"What can he do? As you know, there is the question of the governor here," Mr. Bernier said.

"There is the question to maybe have a new governor," he added.

"They're a sovereign state, they're going to have to decide, and it's a decision the President will have to take in the near future. ... Is it the right person at the right place, at the right time? President Karzai will have to answer these questions as soon as possible."

The minister later repeated a similar answer in French, questioning Mr. Khalid's effectiveness as governor.

None of Mr. Bernier's aides indicated misgivings about his statements at the time, and he left to catch his flight. But one of the minister's staffers later ran back from the tarmac to speak with the media and tried to explain that his boss had committed an error by discussing the issue.

The minister later issued a written statement, saying: "Canada ... is not calling for any changes to the Afghan government."

Peter Harder, a former deputy minister at Foreign Affairs, said the government's quick retraction proves the comment was an "unfortunate blunder." Mr. Harder said the comment "goes to the issue of the credibility of Canada's diplomacy."

A senior staffer for the Kandahar governor reacted with shock at the Canadian minister's comments, and suggested Mr. Bernier has overstepped himself. "This is a sovereign nation," the staffer said.

But other Afghan authorities said the long-running talks about changes in Kandahar's provincial leadership are finally reaching a point of decision, regardless of the Canadian minister's comments.

A senior Canadian official said several names have been suggested as successors to Mr. Khalid, and discussions are ongoing.

When asked to name possible contenders for the job, several politicians in Kandahar city volunteered a surprising candidate: a cultural adviser and translator for Canadian Brigadier-General Guy Laroche. Like many of the Afghan staffers who serve with the Canadian Forces, the 28-year-old graduate of Carleton University uses only a pseudonym, "Pasha," to keep his identity secret for security reasons.

Still, he has become well-known in Kandahar city as the face and voice of the Canadian military leadership.

The military declined to make Pasha available for comment. Some observers scoffed at the candidacy of somebody so closely connected with the Canadians, also pointing out that Pasha's only experience with governing was a one-year stint as a transit planner at the City of Ottawa.

"I think it is too crazy to be true," said Turalai Wafa, former chief of staff to the Kandahar governor. "I think that Asad could be replaced, but by someone who has been a translator for the Canadians? That to my mind is totally out of the question."

But several major figures in Kandahar city appeared to take Pasha's bid seriously.

"I'm very happy if Pasha replaces the governor, because he's an experienced person, a very good man," said Haji Mohammed Qassam, a provincial council member.

In Ottawa, the opposition ridiculed Mr. Bernier for his latest mistake and raised questions about his ability to handle the Foreign Affairs portfolio.

"He should not have been appointed at the very beginning. He had no experience. The Prime Minister made a poor choice," said Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper pointed out that Mr. Bernier had set the record straight.

"Minister Bernier very quickly corrected the misimpression that had been left from some earlier comments," Mr. Harper told reporters in Winnipeg.

"We have talked to the government of Afghanistan from time to time about concerns on the performance of that government and we will continue to talk to them from time to time," Mr. Harper said.

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What was said

News spreads quickly in Afghanistan, often by word of mouth. Within hours of the comments by Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier, many residents of Kandahar city - politicians, tribal elders, businessmen and even ordinary people - had renewed their long-simmering discussion about the governor's future. Haji Mohammed Ehsan, provincial council member, Kandahar: "The Canadian Foreign Minister is interfering with our affairs. Canada is a good country, they help with the Kandahar people, they implement good projects, I appreciate it. But this is a decision that belongs to [President Hamid] Karzai." Neamat Arghandabi, head of the National Islamic Society of Afghan Youth: "The Canadians shouldn't give a damn about Karzai's feelings. The Canadians are his partners in Kandahar, and he needs their support. They have the right to give their opinion, and give their opinion loudly. So many Canadian soldiers are dying, you know?" Kalimullah Naqibi, leader of the Alokozai, one of Kandahar's most powerful tribes: "There is no support for the governor. So this is why the Foreign Minister told Karzai he doesn't like the governor. If the government can find a better person, okay, that's good. Asadullah Khalid is a good person, but he can't solve the problems of the people in Kandahar." Farid Ahmed, 25, shopkeeper: "The Afghan President should choose the governor, or maybe choose him by election. That way is better, not the Canadians [deciding]. ... Asadullah Khalid, when he became governor, the security was very bad in all Afghanistan, not only Kandahar. The Taliban became a real force. They became strong. From neighbouring countries, the Taliban were supported, and they're still supported. It's not the fault of Asadullah Khalid." Haji Bashir, 62, retired businessman: "It's important to change the governor, because security is very bad. If they select a new governor it will be a great improvement. But all the administration should help the governor, he cannot work by himself. They should improve the salary of government people, to stop the corruption." *Graeme Smith*