

NATO SUMMIT: THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

NATO will soften appeals for more troops

Emphasis has shifted toward the importance of spending on embattled country's development, Canadian officials say



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DECEMBER 15, 2007

EDINBURGH -- NATO has all but given up asking member countries to provide troops to help Canada and its allies fight the Taliban in the embattled south of Afghanistan, and instead will shift to pressing countries such as Germany and France to provide money, aid workers and supplies to the region, ministers from member nations said yesterday.

At a summit meeting in Edinburgh yesterday, defence and foreign ministers of the eight North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries fighting in the Afghan south urged Canada, which has the third-largest force there, to stay beyond its deadline of February, 2009, because its 2,500 Kandahar-based troops are vital in preventing the Taliban from regaining control of the region.

But even though NATO has acknowledged that it has thousands fewer troops than it needs in the south, mainly because many of the countries participating in the Afghan mission refuse to fight in that region or to engage in direct combat, leaders said that they no longer believe it is fruitful to press for more soldiers.

"We're going to try to look at this more creatively than we have perhaps in the past, where we basically have just been hammering on countries to provide more people," U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates said.

Print Edition - Section Front



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- Go to the World section



Peter MacKay, Canada's Defence Minister, said that other countries could take over Canada's infrastructure-building, aid and provincial reconstruction responsibilities in the south. "There is relief that could be provided that would free up Canada to do other things," he said after the meeting at a British Army base yesterday.

Canadian government officials said yesterday that the emphasis has shifted away from a strict focus on soldiers and toward the importance of

spending on Afghanistan's development. That is in part at the behest of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who has made the economic development of Afghanistan a priority, guided by a belief that the Taliban will not lose support until the country's economy is stable.

This view has even come to be supported by the United States, which had previously said that fighting the Taliban should be NATO's main focus.

Canada is badly in need of military hardware. Its forces have suffered a higher mortality rate than other troops in the south, in part, soldiers believe, because Canada does not have an adequate fleet of helicopters. That forces Canadian troops to rely more heavily on land vehicles, which are subject to attack.

Des Browne, Britain's Defence Secretary, said that the shortage of helicopters is a serious problem, and suggested that this is an area where other countries could provide financial support in the south.

Meanwhile, at a briefing in Ottawa, officials said that the Afghan government has agreed that all detainees transferred by Canadian forces to its jurisdiction will be imprisoned in one of four Afghan-operated prisons as part of a new effort aimed at facilitating the monitoring of detainee conditions.

A senior Canadian official made public the new agreement at a briefing yesterday, insisting that the arrangement will make it easier for Canadian officials to conduct unannounced inspections to check on detainee conditions.

The prison accord was added as a new section of the supplementary agreement between Canada and Afghanistan that was signed in May after The Globe and Mail revealed that the Harper government had no means of follow-up inspections to check on detainees handed over to Afghan authorities.

Officials from NATO countries fighting in the south are also working together to obtain the same assurances from Afghan officials that Afghan human-rights officials and NATO authorities have access to prisoners once they have been transferred.

The Canadian official said that, so far, there have been 20 unannounced visits to Afghan jails to check on the condition of transferred detainees, four of which have taken place since mid-November. Asked whether there had been any new allegations of torture, reporters were told that a possible allegation had emerged but it related to treatment prior to early November.

At yesterday's summit, officials from the other nations urged Canada to find a way to continue fighting in Afghanistan beyond the 2009 deadline imposed by parliament. An Ottawa task force is currently studying the future of Canada's Afghan role.

"Please don't leave," Dutch Defence Minister Eimert van Middelkoop, whose parliament only decided last month to stay indefinitely in Afghanistan, said to the Canadian delegation. "We did realize how important it was that an important NATO partner such as Canada would be in the south of Afghanistan. ... It's very special, because I realize that so many years ago, the Canadians did liberate our country, and now we are fighting together out of necessity in a devastated country like Afghanistan."

"Canada is a member of NATO, and they're a very good ally," the British Defence Secretary said. "I am absolutely convinced that we will be able

to find a way that we can continue that alliance and that Canada will be able to continue to make a contribution to the future of Afghanistan.

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