

CIDA minister says 'PR' Afghan aid project not in the cards

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OTTAWA - Canada does not need a "signature" aid project in Afghanistan, says the federal minister whose department was the subject of scathing criticism by the Manley report.

Commenting publicly for the first time since the criticism, International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda poured cold water on the recommendation for "at least one 'signature' project (a hospital, for example, or a major irrigation project) identified with Canada and led by Canadians."

Oda said the Canadian International Development Agency doesn't do projects "for purely PR purposes."

"Just to do a signature project for the sake of it certainly is not what motivates our decision-making," Oda said, before admitting that CIDA would be looking at ways to increase the visibility of Canada's much-maligned aid delivery in southern Afghanistan.

"When you say signature, you know, do you expect the Canadian flag there? You have to actually try to determine what you mean by signature project?"

Former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley called on CIDA to refocus its delivery of aid in Afghanistan, including picking a "signature" project to show a tangible gain in helping rebuild Afghanistan.

Manley criticized the management of CIDA's few staff on the ground in Afghanistan as a cloistered group, hamstrung by rules and procedures back in Canada. Prime Minister Stephen Harper later said he wanted Canada's aid projects to have a "higher profile."

Manley was critical of how CIDA oversees the distribution of the \$100 million in annual aid spending for Afghanistan. At least half that money flows through international bodies, such as the United Nations or World Bank, while about one-third is given to the Afghan government.

"In clinics and schoolrooms, villages and neighbourhoods, the panel witnessed encouraging examples of development aid having a strong effect," the Manley report said.

"However, the Canadian aid program in Afghanistan has been impeded not only by the dangerous security environment in Kandahar but by CIDA's own administrative constraint . . . Funding allocations aside, CIDA staffers in Kandahar do not often venture beyond their base, in part, we are told, because of restrictive regulations maintained by CIDA's headquarters in Ottawa," says the report.

"It makes little sense to post brave and talented professional staff to Kandahar only to restrict them from making regular contact with the people they are expected to help."

Manley was critical of the fact that Canada has only 47 civilian staff in Afghanistan, including CIDA and Foreign Affairs employees, compared with 2,500 military personnel.

Oda said CIDA was boosting its contingent to 25 people from 10 in Afghanistan, and she suggested they would have greater say in whether they actually got to leave the Kandahar Airfield.

Oda also announced that Canada would contribute an additional \$10 million in food aid through the United Nations World Food Program, which has issued an emergency plea for an extra \$79 million.

Oda also pledged to be more available to answer journalists' questions, and promised weekly briefings.

Manley criticized the government for its communications strategy.

A senior CIDA official, who is prevented by government policy from speaking on the record, said at a briefing that Canada hoped to build 50 to 100 schools in Kandahar over the next two years.

Harper has said he wants to see improvements in Canada's delivery of aid to make it "more visible" in Afghanistan.

"We do a lot of aid as a general rule through multilateral efforts and worthy third party, nonprofit organizations," the prime minister said in response to Manley's remarks.

"But I also think the country's interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere would be served if we had a higher Canadian profile to some of the things we were doing."

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