

Canada keeps troops in Afghanistan under U.S. pressure

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OTTAWA: Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan's Kandahar province will end on schedule in 2011, but about 1,000 Canadian soldiers will remain as Canada supports the efforts of its ally the United States to prop up Hamid Karzai's regime.

Canadian politicians are putting the best face on their decision to keep troops in Afghanistan, despite a parliamentary pledge to remove all combat troops by the summer of 2011. The Canadians are keeping to the letter of the resolution while leaving one third of their troops in the country for another three years.

"Our goal is not merely to do things for Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan. It is also to help them do things for themselves once more after decades of civil war and chaos in government," Minister of Foreign Affairs Lawrence Cannon told reporters at a news conference attended by Canadian Defense Minister Peter MacKay.

Later, Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper, speaking in Parliament, stressed the training will not take place on the battlefield. "It will be a training mission that will occur in classrooms behind the wire on bases," Harper said.

Canada, which has 3,000 combat troops in Afghanistan, has been under pressure from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), especially from the United States and Britain, to keep troops in Afghanistan. The Canadian government is bound by a parliamentary resolution that requires all combat troops to be withdrawn by 2011.

While Canada's contribution is relatively small, observers said London and Washington want support from as many countries as possible to show that the war is not merely a U.S.-British operation but a war being fought by all NATO members. The Netherlands recently pulled its troops out of Afghanistan.

Government sources said Harper has been pressured by U.S. President Barack Obama for more than a year to maintain some kind of military presence in Afghanistan.

Recently, London's Sunday Telegraph reported Obama has called on Britain to send 3,000 more troops to Afghanistan. The same report, citing a "senior aide" to Obama, said similar calls would go out to other NATO allies.

“There won’t be any excuse to be anti-American anymore,” he said. “There will be no free rides. Allies will be expected to pull their weight.” At the same time, the United States sent another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan.

The United States is Canada’s largest trading partner, and Canada’s military has very strong links with the Pentagon.

Canadians who support prolonging their country’s military presence in Afghanistan are afraid of being accused of “cutting and running,” throwing away money and lives that have been spent defending the Kabul regime.

The military, veterans’ groups and many of the governing Conservative Party’s donors and activists support the mission in Afghanistan. It is opposed by left-of-center politicians, media commentators and political activists who do not normally support the Harper government.

Canada has maintained troops in Afghanistan for the past eight years. Polls show the country is split on the question of abandoning Afghanistan or staying in a noncombat capacity to prop up the pro-Western regime installed after the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001 by Afghan rebels backed by the United States.

Canada announced its commitment to the NATO mission just days after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001. Canadian snipers and special forces have operated in Afghanistan since the early winter of 2001.

In the early years, Canada’s troops were relatively safe in Kabul, and casualties were light. In 2006, Canadian troops were redeployed in the dangerous southern part of the country as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

About 2,000 Canadian soldiers [assigned to what was] called Operation Athena were based around Kandahar. Near the end of the year, Canadian troops were part of Operation Medusa, a major offensive against insurgents in Kandahar, and casualties increased markedly.

That is why Cannon stressed Canada is “building on what we’ve already done so well and at such a great cost.”

The controversial question of whether Canadian troops should stay in Afghanistan does not threaten to topple Harper’s Conservative regime. He needs support from at least one other opposition party to pass legislation in Canada’s lower chamber, the House of Commons.

Michael Ignatieff, a former professor who supported the Afghanistan war before entering politics in 2006, leads the Liberal Party, which has the second-largest number of seats in the Canadian parliament. He made it clear on Monday he would support the government’s decision in a rare display of bipartisanship.

The New Democrats, a small leftist party, and the Quebec separatist Bloc Quebecois oppose the plan but do not have enough parliamentary votes to stop it.

The Canadian government made the announcement as Harper is preparing to leave for the NATO summit that starts Friday in Lisbon, Portugal.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen welcomed Harper’s announcement.

“Canada has contributed substantially, over many years, to the operation in Afghanistan. Canadian Forces have made a real difference in the lives of the Afghan people, often at a high cost,” he told Canada’s state-owned CBC network.

“In just a few days, at the Lisbon summit, we will launch the transition process, and early next year Afghan forces will steadily begin taking the lead for security throughout the country,” Rasmussen said.

“This Canadian contribution of hundreds of trainers will help the Afghan security forces to more quickly become capable of securing their own country against terrorism and extremism — a goal we all share,” he said.

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