



Prime Minister Harper Scrum in Kandahar Afghanistan

March 13, 2006 - 3:30 am - Length 21 mins 19 secs

UNIDENTIFIED: Take your positions.

STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister): Okay, good afternoon and we'll take some questions. I don't have any statement.

BOB FYFE (Reporter): Bob Fyfe, CTV. Prime Minister can you, you've had an opportunity to spend some time with the soldiers here today.

HARPER: Yes.

FYFE: Can you tell us just your general impression of, of your discussions with them and did you come away with any single inspiration or thought from them?

HARPER: Well, I mean my biggest impression is how, both how determined they are and how excited they all are. You know they understand this is a challenging and dangerous assignment but that's, you know, that's what, that's what soldiers sign up for and of course they believe strongly in what they're doing. You know I've, I just found

remarkable among the many I've had a chance to talk to, a remarkable, you know, we all talk about the danger, but a remarkable degree of confidence and determination.

FYFE: Was there any, is there any of, did you get any sense from any of the soldiers or speaking to the military brass that they need more equipment to do their job better here?

HARPER: Not, not really, I mean look, if you talk to – I'm not telling any tales out of school – if you talk to military people at any rank long enough, they'll start to tell you the budget isn't big enough, but, that, but that said no, quite the opposite in terms of both the brass on down to the people on the ground. They're all really impressed with, with the quality of equipment they have. As you know a lot of, a lot has gone into this. This is really Canada's most challenging deployment I think since Korea and there's been a sustained effort to make sure that our people have the best, the, the safest or the most effective equipment and that's not just combat, I got a, you know, a really good tour of the hospital and medical facilities and it's amazing what they have there. It's a very small facility and it has, you know, a range of diagnostic and treatment equipment so, it's, you know the stuff they've got here is all pretty, pretty top of the line I would say.

UNIDENTIFIED: Monsieur Harper, vous avez dit dans votre discours il ne fallait pas se sauver, prendre nos jambes à notre cou. Question très simple: Combien de temps, de façon réaliste les militaires canadiens vont passer ici en Afghanistan?

HARPER: Ce n'est pas pour moi de juger aujourd'hui. Évidemment, leur temps, et les États-Unis pensent que c'est une mission à long-terme. Nous sommes déterminés de créer ici en Afghanistan, un pays démocratique, un pays beaucoup plus prospère que maintenant, un pays moderne, et il y a beaucoup de choses à faire, mais on, on veut prendre un état échoué, un état en désastre, et on veut créer un modèle dans cette partie du monde. Et c'est une mission à long-terme mais évidemment à long-terme, les engagements à long-terme du Canada ne sont pas encore déterminés.

UNIDENTIFIED: Vous engagez auprès de la communauté internationale à ne pas laisser tomber tant que la mission ne sera pas quand même rendu à son terme, là. On ne parle pas d'une année ou deux, là. On parle de plusieurs années.

HARPER: Je pense que c'est difficile à ce moment. Nous avons pas encore prit de décisions au long-terme. Je peux dire seulement que nous avons ici un rôle de leadership international. C'est important et c'est important d'avoir succès pas seulement pour l'Afghanistan et pour le Canada, mais pour la sécurité internationale.

UNIDENTIFIED: Hi, it's fairly clear that the overall mission here, put Canada aside, is going to go on for many years and the question then is Canada going to be a part of that and it seemed like your message today, saying we will not cut and run in fact we will lead seems to be preparing Canadians for a longer mission by Canadians?

HARPER: Well you know we've already been here quite a while. 2001 was the invasion. Canada's had a role since then obviously right now we've taken the biggest role we've had yet. You know the government obviously hasn't taken decisions about future involvement. We'll take those at the appropriate fenceposts down the road but, obviously, NATO, the United Nations, the international community's commitment here is for the long term and we want to be successful. We're taking a failed state and the international community is determined to create a democratic, prosperous, modern country that could be a model in this part of the world because we, we never want to repeat the disaster we had in 2001, we want to make sure we have precisely the opposite kind of reality here.

UNIDENTIFIED: Often times for the Canadian troops the numbers will go up and then they'll come down for purposes of, you know, recharging batteries, etc. In a case like that, is it, would it be the case that if next February Canadian troop numbers came down, that wouldn't, you wouldn't necessarily see that as cutting and running?

HARPER: No I wouldn't, I wouldn't put it that way. We're certainly, you know, I think I'm making my comments, you've heard me make them before in terms of some Parliamentarians who with the first, you know, couple of casualties now want to have a vote and question the mission and that's not where the government's going to go. We're going to evaluate things as we move along but our, you know the international community's role here is long term and, and over time it will shift. Over time the more success we have it'll shift from being, you know, a mission dominated by military personnel to one dominated by development and

diplomatic personnel. Obviously those people are here now, but hopefully in the longer term as security enables the governing structures to take hold, our, our efforts will be in other areas.

UNIDENTIFIED: Est-ce que vous pensez que les gouvernements précédents ont dépensé suffisamment d'argent dans cette mission et est-ce que vous êtes en train de préparer les canadiens à des sacrifices, à l'idée de sacrifices financiers plus important pour soutenir la mission?

HARPER: Les, les chefs d'ici et les soldats m'ont dit qu'il y a l'équipement, pas seulement l'équipement suffisant, mais le meilleur équipement possible dans cet environnement. Et évidemment j'ai indiqué pendant la campagne électorale que c'est, c'est l'objectif de mon gouvernement de dépenser plus pour le militaire, d'avoir une dépense national qui peut avoir toutes les capacités nécessaire pour jouer un rôle important chez nous et ailleurs.

UNIDENTIFIED: Dans votre discours, quand vous parlez des gens qui fuient rapidement, de qui parliez-vous exactement?

HARPER: Je peux noter seulement que j'ai fait les mêmes paroles au Canada. Je note seulement certains parlementaires, certains députés qui, avec les premiers morts, qu'ils parlent des votse, qu'ils parlent de l'abandonnement de la mission. Ce n'est pas la politique de mon gouvernement. Nous avons fait un engagement important envers le peuple afghan et la population du Canada et le monde international et nous avons l'intention de poursuivre notre engagement.

UNIDENTIFIED: Hi, you'd mentioned leadership and carping from the side lines in your speech and I'm just wondering if until this point, have you seen evidence that perhaps this country has not been leading or has been carping from the side lines? Is that something that needs to be corrected?

HARPER: Well, you know, I'm, I'm no longer the opposition leader. I've had my say as opposition leader in the past about how I thought previous governments handled the military and their international role. Obviously now I'm leading the government and I'll just repeat what I said, it's our government's determination that we're going to be a player and we're going to be a leader. Canada's had that role in the past. Canada has that role here and I think we should be proud of it and I don't think we should underestimate our capacity to lead on the international stage.

UNIDENTIFIED: Just as a bit of a follow up to Eric's question. If the reconstruction hasn't taken place in the way that you would like to see it by next February, would it be your inclination to stay for another term?

HARPER: As I say we'll take the appropriate steps on the nature of our involvement and our engagement, you know when we hit, hit the appropriate milestones and there's going to be a number of decisions that have to be taken on an ongoing basis over the next few years, just as there have been over the past few years and those decisions haven't been taken yet. I just say once again that we recognize, the international community recognizes that this is a long term project and we're here for the long term. The precise nature of that engagement will be decided, as I

say, as, as time moves on and at the appropriate fencepost.

UNIDENTIFIED: Just a follow up to that. You mention milestones, but, which milestones are you looking at because there really isn't a lot of time between now and when we start to see things scaled back slightly and we're already seeing an escalation in, in activities in this region, so, so what exactly would...

HARPER: Well look all I can say is the government, the government will evaluate the nature of our involvement at all levels, not just our military involvement. We'll want to see what kind of success we're having. What kind of commitments are required, our commitments for the long term, but as I say, we'll make precise decisions on deployments when we need to and I believe that some time in the next few months we've got to make decisions for the next year and we haven't really got there yet.

UNIDENTIFIED: Some of your speech we, we've heard already in Canada that we don't cut and run when things get tough, but why did you feel it was so important to use that strong language when speaking to the troops today?

HARPER: Well, because, I don't want, I don't like the sense that has been conveyed, you know and I'm not blaming anybody, it's just in some of the media coverage the sense you get is that we're, you know, we're somehow worried about the mission here and Canadians don't support it. I don't think that's the case, I think Canadians need to be better informed by their government, that's part of the reason why I'm here, make sure that

Canadians understand the mission, the range of activities we're undertaking. Make sure they understand that having so many troops and having a security operation is so we can create a prosperous, peaceful and modern country. You know it's the security that makes all the other democratic and democratic and social advancements possible so, I, I just want to make sure that I'm doing my bit to make sure that's understood. I don't think it was well communicated, I'll, I'll say I think the previous government, well you know obviously give it credit for undertaking this mission and for providing some good equipment, I don't think really conditioned the population to the risks we're taking and to the extent of our mission and so that's our job and we're pleased to do it.

TOM PARRY (Reporter): Prime Minister obviously there's this business about boosting troop morale and getting the message out to Canadians about what this is about, but how do you think this visit, your visit, benefits you politically?

HARPER: I don't know, like I say, I, Tom, I, you know, you guys ask me these kinds of questions periodically, I, I've, I said when I got back into politics I'm no longer a political analyst and I don't analyze myself. I leave that to you guys, so, you can make those kinds of evaluations.

PARRY: (Inaudible) benefits you to be seen here in Afghanistan? To be seen with Canadian troops?

HARPER: Well, you know, I, I like to hope the Prime Minister benefits whenever he's seen doing his job and this is part of my job. If you're going

to send men and women into harm's way, and that's a decision that was taken, it wasn't actually my decision, but given that we've taken it I think it's important for the Prime Minister to, to show some leadership on such an important mission.

UNIDENTIFIED: Prime Minister you've, you've met these troops now, you've seen them, they're real to you, they're human beings and likely, unfortunately there may be casualties in the future. How are you going to approach telling the country about bad news in the future and how, and inside of yourself, how are you going to be able to keep the country interested in this mission as this starts to happen perhaps?

HARPER: Well I think, I think what we have to do is you know, obviously not just for me to come here and to meet the troops, we have to constantly communicate to Canadians the important role we are playing, how important this is to our own national interests, to our own standing in the world and the positive things we're doing here for, you know, for a country that only a few years ago was probably just about the worst place in the world to live. So you know that's an ongoing task, obviously when you meet people, when you meet real men and women who are in danger you get a better understanding of, of the kind of risk they're taking but I can assure you that these men and women know better than any Canadians the risk they're taking and are more determined than any Canadians to take those risks because that's what they signed up for. They're professionals and they're here to serve the highest calling that a country has and that is to, you know, to go out and patrol the front lines and test the limit and advance our interest.

UNIDENTIFIED: Is this something that, a career you'd like to see your children involved in some day, coming to a place like this a decade or two from now?

HARPER: I, that's a good question. I, you know, if my, I always say if my son can't make the NHL, then you know I think he should consider anything. My son or daughter, look I haven't, they're at the age where I haven't thought much about careers, but look if they wanted, if my children ever wanted to serve their country in any capacity I'd never discourage that.

UNIDENTIFIED: You noted in your speech to the troops that Canada has been named as a terrorist target.

HARPER: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED: Is, do you have any concerns that by fulfilling this mission that Canada would become at greater risk of an attack?

HARPER: Let me assure you that when I say and when previous Prime Minister's said that Canada is a terrorist target, they're not bluffing. This is a fact. Fortunately due to the men and women on the front lines and the security personnel we have in our country, these security threats are constantly monitored and to this point, we've been fortunate that we haven't, we haven't had anything in, in the home base. But we live in a dangerous world, these are real threats, they aren't going to get any less

real. You know people who are going to use violence against you, their threats don't go away if you cut and run. Their threats, they threaten people they think won't stand up to them. So I think it's quite the opposite, I think by taking a strong stand against terror, right in it's home base, I think we do all we can to protect our country.

UNIDENTIFIED: Just following up on an earlier question, when you make those future decisions on extent, possibly extending this mission will the, the casualty count factor in?

HARPER: It will be a factor, but the bigger factor will be, you know, if you look at what you're getting for that, I mean we know that because our troops are increasingly pushing out to the front lines of Taliban resistance, we know there will be casualties as a consequence of that, those casualties don't necessarily mean failure, in fact they may be really the beginning of the end of the military conflict. Obviously all those things will be taken into account but I think what we'll, what we'll keep us most engaged here is seeing the morale and the determination of the troops remain high and seeing success in the mission and the more success we have, I can assure the CDS and others that our commitment will remain just as strong.

SUSAN DELACOURT (Reporter): This is sort of following up on what Bob was asking but, have you seen anything or learned anything here that you wouldn't have known by not coming here and that, that will change the way you govern or lead?

HARPER: You know it's, you can read, you can read about any of this. You can see the pictures on tv but you never really get a feel for something until you go to the ground. Probably the thing that strikes me most is someone who has no, you know military background or particular expertise in military affairs, I'm just astounded, what I've seen and I've seen a bit more than you've been able to see, at the size and complexity of the mission. You know to put a man in the field, to put a soldier up on the front lines you don't realize what an extensive effort that is in terms of you know at the base, in terms of people you have doing things like cooking and cleaning, medical personnel to back them up, communications and logistical support in a chain that extends all the way back to Canada. It's, it's a very complex operation and anybody now, it's, you know it's not like the old days where the vast majority of people were in the field, now anybody who's in the field is supported by a vast and sophisticated operation behind and I suppose that's the thing that I've had the greatest, you know has really hit home to me in my tour around this, this facility which is, you know, I must admit a lot more extensive than I would have guessed.

DELACOURT: When, when this subject does come up around the Cabinet table, will you be able to bring something to the table that you haven't before do you think any of your decisions might change?

HARPER: Well the biggest thing I'd be able to bring to the table would be to say to any doubters that I went to Afghanistan, I went to the people, I talked to the people who are on the front lines and I'm not done this tour by any means, I'm going to be doing some other interesting things

tomorrow, but I'll be able to say I went Afghanistan, I talked to soldiers, I talked to the people taking the risks and they're determined to see a successful mission and you know you can be told that but it's a little different when you look at them eyeball to eyeball and understand that that's where they're coming from.

UNIDENTIFIED: You spoke today sir about not wanting to see our country sit in the bleachers, your government's also promised or your party has promised greater military spending and to increase troop numbers, I'm just wonder whether Canadians should prepare for a more frequent number of military deployments in other troubled spots around the world?

HARPER: Not necessarily. What we want to make sure we have, particularly with the lift capacity that we want to bring in over the next few years, we want to be sure that we have a range and flexibility in our capabilities and that's what we're really aiming for, but you know in terms of whether or where you'll be deployed, that will depend on the international security situation which, you know, is largely beyond our control. Let's obviously hope that we don't have more frequent deployments but we can never be sure.

UNIDENTIFIED: Can you express though, what's in, in the event of future of deployments, what, what sorts of missions will Canada particularly be interested in participating in? Is it governance building? If you could just maybe explain what sort of priority ...

HARPER: Well as I say I want to make sure our country has a range of

capabilities all the way from hard combat to the softest development and, and governance capabilities. We have some of those now but we could do a lot more to fill some of those, some of those capabilities out. We'll make a decision on a case by case basis, my, I think the general guide though will be that Canada being the kind of, you know, middle power that we are, Canada's deployment will always tend to be in a multi-lateral context and so that much I think we can be sure of, beyond that I would be speculating on future events that I have, none, none of us have any knowledge of.

UNIDENTIFIED: Thank you very much.

HARPER: Okay thanks.

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