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PRIME MINISTER'S SCRUM IN SARNIA

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(APPLAUSE)

DIMITRI SOUDAS (Press Secretary to the Prime Minister): We'll start with the first question with Shawn from the Sarnia Observer.

REPORTER: Prime Minister Harper, there's been some talk recently of establishing an ambassador program whereby someone locally would report to you, and someone would report to President Obama on issues that would, I guess, cut down bureaucratic red tape. I'm wondering if you're in favour of such a program?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister of Canada): It's certainly a proposal – more specifically "border envoys" I think it's called – a proposal we are looking at. As you know, I had a good series of meetings with President Obama when he came to Ottawa in February. One of the items we did discuss was our border, and ways we could strengthen our dialogue, interaction on the border, how we can ensure that the border remains and is improved as an important part of both of our security while at the same time not unduly or further hampering trade between our countries. Minister Van Loan will be meeting his counterpart Napolitano, has been meeting, talking with that, with the Homeland Security Office on ways we can further this dialogue, but no decision on that specific proposal's been taken yet.

DIMITRI SOUDAS: Continue with Heather Wright, CBC Radio.

REPORTER: Mr. Prime Minister, there's...in June people will need a passport to get across this bridge. Is Mr. Van Loan, is Minister

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Van Loan talking to the US administration about moving that deadline? Is there any chance that'll change?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: We, as you know, we've made representations before about moving the deadline. As you know, it has been moved back many times. We believe that in Canada we are pretty much ready for that deadline, you know. We now have close to 75 percent of adult Canadians hold passports. It's a huge number. It's been a big change over the past few years due to some exceptional work that's been done by the passport office to, quite frankly, process vast, vastly increase numbers of passports. We're not as sure the Americans are ready for the imposition of their own deadline, but that's obviously something that they're going to have to wrestle with in due course.

DIMITRI SOUDAS: Christina Marshall, CTV.

REPORTER: Could you talk specifically about this funding...you're talking about job creation. This area's been hit very hard, huge unemployment rate. How many jobs are we looking at creating for the construction projects that are going to be taking place on the Blue Water Bridge?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Yeah, I think the specifics of that are probably best asked to the management of the corporation. I can tell you we are accelerating work that was planned. We're bringing it forward two years. This work will begin as early as may. Obviously it does create some much-needed jobs at a critical time. My own...I should say, my own reading of the statistics is that this area has actually not been hit quite as hard as many parts of Southern Ontario because of the relatively small presence of the automobile industry here. Nevertheless there are effects. This

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will help. But as I say, this isn't just about creating jobs. It is also about enhancing critical infrastructure that will actually provide the basis for long-term growth as we move forward.

DIMITRI SOUDAS: We have time for one last question, Kerry Marsden, CBC Television, who's also going to ask, I think, on behalf of the French network.

REPORTER: Hi there. I'm wondering if you can also explain what the...in terms of the border flow, if this is going to create, perhaps while construction is going on here, will traffic be more prone to go to the Windsor side, and if so, is there more of a push to get things moving with the project, to the border crossing project on the Windsor border crossing?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: First of all, I think the management would be better placed than me to speculate on whether the actual construction will impact on traffic here. Look, as you know, this government has also put aside a significant amount of funds for construction of a new cross-border passage in the Detroit-Windsor corridor as well. Our view is that there's going to be, notwithstanding the recession of today, in the years to come, there's going to be vastly expanding traffic and the need for expanded capacity in this entire region of the country, not just here in Sarnia and Detroit-Windsor as well. I don't, you know, I don't anticipate...I don't anticipate there'll be a significant drawdown in the short term. As you know, there has been, has tended to be in the last few years an increase in traffic here, precisely because of the bottlenecks we're experiencing in Detroit-Windsor and the rather, as you know, the rather...as some of you know, the rather long and laborious process that is involved there because of the realities of a private bridge and the local politics in getting that crossing enhanced. So you know,

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as I say, I can't speak to...I don't anticipate the construction will cause much in the way of discomfort, but I don't anticipate any significant drawdown. I anticipate as we go forward, there will continue to be long-term growth at both of these crossings.

DIMITRI SOUDAS: One last question for Radio-Canada.

REPORTER: Yes. A survey by non-profit organizations concludes that Afghan civilians feel less secure than they did four years ago. What can you tell them, and if you could please answer for my colleagues in both English and French?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Sure. Well, this is... this would not be that surprising. As you know, there has been a lot of data indicating that security challenges in parts of Afghanistan, including the part that Canada is in, remain serious. So I'm not surprised we would see those statistics. It, you know, speaks once again to why Canadians are there. We are there as part of an international effort to enhance security, to develop the Afghan security forces themselves, ultimately to bring more security in that region, not just to people who live there, but ultimately more global security so Afghanistan does not become once again a failed state and threaten our country. We also know that the men and women of the Canadian Forces who are serving there are doing so in an environment of extreme danger. You know, we have a volunteer army in this country. People...we don't have a draft. People serve because they believe in what they're doing, because they're willing to, not just serve their country, but protect their fellow human beings around the world, and we are always overwhelmed by their willingness to do this and the sacrifices that they have undertaken for this country, and as I say, for our fellow human beings in Afghanistan.

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La même chose, ce n'est pas une grande surprise. On sait que les difficultés de sécurité sont énormes et restent énormes. Dans certaines régions – ce n'est pas en général, mais en certaines régions de l'Afghanistan, y compris la province de Kandahar où nos troupes sont présentes, ça nous rappelle que leur mission est très dangereuse. Je suis toujours impressionné par le fait que les soldats canadiens sont des volontaires qui sont prêts de sacrifier pour la sécurité pas seulement du monde et de notre pays, mais pour la vie de leurs...des humains, des humains...nos confrères en Afghanistan. Et nous honorons toujours cette sacrifice et nous respectons le fait que c'est nécessaire pour le développement de la sécurité des Afghans, pas seulement des Afghans, mais aussi le monde, pour assurer que l'Afghanistan ne deviendra pas encore un état qui donne au monde la menace du terrorisme.

DIMITRI SOUDAS: Thanks very much everybody.
Merci beaucoup.

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Thanks everyone.
(APPLAUSE)

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