

PMO backtracks on Italy's Afghan plans

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LONDON — The Prime Minister's Office was forced into a diplomatic backtrack Thursday after mistakenly inferring that a meeting between Stephen Harper and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi resulted in a decision to ease combat restrictions on Italy's forces in Afghanistan.

Government officials moved hastily on a flight from Rome to London Thursday morning to correct the record after telling reporters that Mr. Berlusconi had agreed to lift caveats on the Italian role, which prevent initiating combat.

Officials acknowledged misinterpreting a news story out of Rome that actually said Mr. Berlusconi was only considering lifting the restrictions. Mr. Berlusconi and Mr. Harper had met privately for two hours Wednesday night, when Afghanistan was discussed. The Italian government has been considering lifting the caveats for a few days.

Mr. Berlusconi told Mr. Harper he had begun rethinking the rules on Italy's troop deployment "in a spirit of solidarity with its allies," his office said in a statement late Wednesday, according to the AFP report.



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Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, right, gestures as he greets his Canadian counterpart Stephen Harper on Wednesday. (AFP/Getty Images)

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A greater Italian role in Afghanistan would be beneficial to Canadian soldiers, who are fighting in Kandahar, one of the country's war-torn regions. Italian troops are currently in Herat and Kabul.

Reporters who had moved the story rushed to make corrections from the prime ministerial plane.

Opposition MPs jumped on the slip in Question Period, suggesting it was the latest in a series of missteps which have damaged Canada's credibility abroad.

"Are they so isolated in Afghanistan that the Conservatives have to invent allies for their misguided war?" New Democratic Party MP Thomas Mulcair said.

Added Bloc Québécois MP Vivian Barbot, "This is absolute proof to the world that we have incompetence at the top of the foreign affairs file."

But Government House Leader said an Italian move to reconsider the Italian combat role is still a step forward.

"The Prime Minister was able today to encourage our allies to join us in more of a combat role in Afghanistan and we appreciate this type of co-operation," he said.

Italy has about 2,500 troops in Afghanistan.

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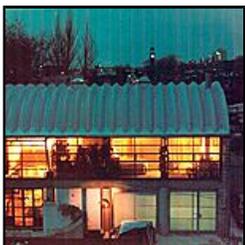
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