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Liberal leader says NATO intervention in Pakistan could be necessary

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QUEBEC - Direct intervention by NATO could be necessary in Pakistan as a way of bringing peace to neighbouring Afghanistan, Liberal Leader Stephane Dion said Wednesday.

Dion said NATO may have to look at other options to flush out Taliban militants who are taking refuge in Pakistan and are undermining reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

"If they (Pakistani leaders) are not able to do it on their own, it is something we could consider with NATO, how to help Pakistan help us bring peace to Afghanistan," Dion said just days after returning from a trip to Afghanistan.

But the solution would not be a military one, stressed fellow MP Denis Coderre, sitting next to the Liberal leader during a news conference in Quebec City on Wednesday.

"It would not come about with a military intervention, it would be a diplomatic solution," Coderre said.

Dion said Pakistan plays an important role because if does not deal effectively with the militants, "everything we do in Afghanistan is cancelled in part by the inaction in Pakistan."

Late Wednesday, Defence Minister Peter MacKay reacted to Dion's comments by saying the Liberal leader can't be serious about calling on NATO intervention in Pakistan while talking about Canada abandoning the mission in Afghanistan.

The Liberal leader reiterated that Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan should end in February 2009.

But Dion stressed that Ottawa should continue to provide humanitarian aid in all sorts of areas, "promoting women's rights, water management, economic development, diplomacy and the training of the Afghan military and police forces.

"The war against terrorism is mainly a police matter," he added.

Dion also said the secretary of state for foreign affairs made a serious error and should resign for publicizing the Liberal leader's itinerary on his recent trip to Afghanistan.

Dion said Wednesday he has written a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper to demand the resignation of Helena Guergis.

But a spokesman for the minister said Guergis did not know Dion's plans beforehand and added that security details are the responsibility of the military.

The Liberal leader complained that Guergis announced last Saturday that he and deputy Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff would be visiting the reconstruction team.

"She revealed where we were going, Mr. Ignatieff and me, putting at risk, not only ourselves, but also all the members of the (Canadian) delegation," Dion told reporters in Quebec City.

Dion added that the action also threatened the safety of the Afghan and Canadian military who were accompanying them.

"It's something that should not have been done . . . I think the prime minister has no other choice but to ask for her resignation," Dion said.

But Jeffrey Kroeker, Guergis's communications director, said Dion was already on the ground in Afghanistan when she issued a statement late Saturday commenting on his visit.

"I think he should apologize to our troops while he is touring the PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) in safety because the same reason he needs bodyguards is why our

troops need to stay to protect democracy, women and children," she said in the statement.

Kroeker said "anyone who's travelled to Afghanistan on a fact-finding mission knows full well that a visit to the PRT is essential.

"We knew Stephane Dion was in Afghanistan when we saw him on television."

He also pointed out that elected officials are not briefed on where or when other officials are coming in and out of Afghanistan.

"That just doesn't happen and to suggest otherwise, which is what he is doing, is ridiculous," Kroeker said.

A spokesman for Harper did not return calls for comment.

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