

Tory MP put lives at risk, Liberals charge

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FROM MONDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JANUARY 14, 2008 AT 4:36 AM EST

OTTAWA and KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — Conservatives and Liberals love getting into wars of words. But until now, no one was worried the Taliban would get involved.

Yet that's what happened during this weekend's visit to Afghanistan by Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and deputy leader Michael Ignatieff.

Conservative MP Helena Guergis put "lives at additional, unnecessary risk in the name of playing petty politics," Liberal spokesman Jean-François del Torchio charged yesterday.

He accused the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of endangering their lives by speaking about the Liberal itinerary in Afghanistan 12 hours ahead of schedule, at a time when a complete news blackout surrounded their visit to Kandahar.

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"She effectively told the Taliban that they would be leaving base to visit the Provincial Reconstruction Team," Mr. del Torchio said.

A spokesman for Ms. Guergis denied she did anything wrong and that the Liberal characterizations of the matter amounted to "much ado about nothing."

It all began on Saturday, when the Liberal Party of Canada put out a statement announcing Mr. Dion had just concluded a successful visit with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Almost immediately that same evening, Ms. Guergis shot back in a message circulated to reporters. "The irony of Dion and Ignatieff being in a war zone and being protected by the same troops who protect Afghan women and children is palpable," she said. "I think he should apologize to our troops while he is touring the PRT in safety."

There was a problem with that statement: At that point, Mr. Dion and Mr. Ignatieff had not yet been to the Provincial Reconstruction Team base, or PRT, as it is known. At the time the statement was circulated, they weren't due to be there until the following morning.

The remarks appeared on news sites, even as journalists embedded with Canadian Forces in Kandahar were barred from making any mention of the fact that the VIPs were in town. This is standard for what the military describes as reasons of "operational security." It is customary for news of such visits to be embargoed until after dignitaries have boarded an outbound plane.

Jeffrey Kroeker, Ms. Guergis's spokesman, said that his boss was only making an educated guess as to where the Liberals might visit. While there is one PRT in Kandahar where the Canadians are based, there are many throughout Afghanistan.

"The comments made were general in nature, referred to no timelines, dates or specific locations," he said. "There are many, many PRTs throughout Afghanistan and no comprehensive visit of anyone to Afghanistan would be complete without a visit to the PRT."

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