

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Tie Canada's future in Kandahar to NATO role, Manley says

Report due today to stop short of setting pullout date

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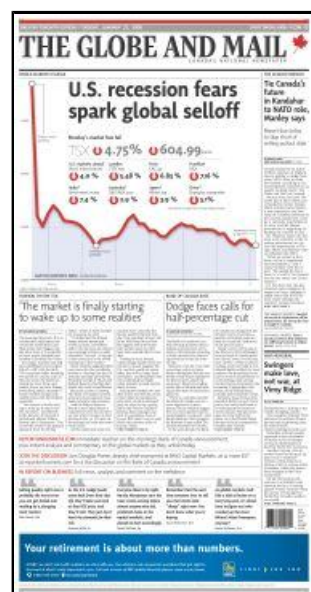
OTTAWA -- Canada should tie its future military presence in Afghanistan to getting a pledge from other NATO allies to share the burden, according to recommendations expected in an eagerly awaited report, The Globe and Mail has learned.

Sources have also told The Globe that a blue-ribbon panel headed by former foreign affairs minister John Manley is not expected to say how long the Canadian presence in the country should last. Canada is currently committed until 2009, and the Harper government is suggesting extending the mission to 2011.

Mr. Manley's panel will also level some criticism at the Canadian government for the way the departments of Foreign Affairs and Defence have co-ordinated the effort.

"What we expect is that there will be a conditional recommendation," said a source familiar with the report. "We should do this if there is 'a' and 'b,' but should not do this under any circumstances."

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It's not clear how the government could configure its request for help, although it might insist that NATO nations rotate through the country's various provinces.

Kandahar, where the 2,500 Canadian troops are located, is considered the most dangerous province in the country. Other nations, such as the Netherlands in Uruzgan province, are located in similarly strife-torn areas. Canada has so far lost 77 soldiers in the conflict.

The report comes as federal officials prepare to attend a meeting of NATO countries in April where the issue of troop commitments is expected to be raised.

"That could be showdown time," the source said.

Mr. Manley was appointed in October to head the panel, which has been asked to examine four options, including the status quo; a complete withdrawal from the country; a transfer to another region; or refocusing efforts on reconstruction to allow for a new military contingent from another country. But Mr. Manley has said the panel would not restrict itself to those four options.

Previously, Mr. Manley has said that Afghanistan has given Canada a significant role in the world and it should not be given up easily.

The panel is also expected not to link the Canadian commitment to a specific date, sources said, and will be critical of the role of the Canadian International Development Agency.

Almas Bawar-Zakhilwal, the Canadian director of the Senlis council, a security and development policy group with representatives on the ground in Afghanistan, said it would be best if there was no timeline for Canada to pull its troops.

"We suggested [to the Manley panel] that there should not be a specific date for withdrawal from Afghanistan," Mr. Bawar-Zakhilwal said, explaining that the decision to pull out should be based on the achievement of an accepted set of goals.

"If the situation is getting better and if the Afghan army and national police and the Afghan government are able to take over, then at that time and at that period the Canadian mission could be shifted from combat to more development."

As for CIDA's work in Afghanistan, Mr. Bawar-Zakhilwal said he doesn't believe the agency is organized to deliver aid in the kind of hostile conditions that exist in Kandahar.

It would be much better if aid was delivered through the military in Kandahar province, he said. It's a great opportunity for the troops to win over hearts and minds "which will help them have a good relationship with the Afghan people, which will again help to fight the insurgency," Mr. Bawar-Zakhilwal said.

Government officials said yesterday that no decision has been made yet as to when Parliament will vote on a potential extension of the mission in Afghanistan - or if that vote will be a matter of confidence.

A NATO official, who did not want to be identified, said yesterday that it would be reasonable for Canada to give at least six to eight months notice of its intentions - much like the Dutch did in December when they announced they would continue to keep their troops in Afghanistan until 2010. The Dutch mandate had been set to expire in August, 2008.

In Kitchener, Ont., at a meeting of the party's caucus of MPs and senators, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion said his party will not change its insistence that the Canadian "combat" mission must end in 2009 - but he said the Liberals want Canadian efforts to continue in other ways.

"Our position, as you know, is that the combat mission must end in 2009. And, after that, we'll help Afghanistan in other ways - for development, for security and for training."

NDP Leader Jack Layton said it is unlikely that Mr. Manley's report will reflect the NDP's position that the NATO mission should end and be replaced by a United Nations mission focused on peacekeeping and development.

"There should be a debate, and I would assume that a debate on engagement and war would be defined in one way or another as a confidence motion," he said. "We should be urging the UN to take charge of a situation that is clearly getting worse, not better."

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