

PM'S THREE-DAY TRIP TO EUROPE

PMO bungles Berlusconi message

Italian PM is only considering lifting restrictions on heavy combat in Afghanistan - not removing them

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LONDON AND OTTAWA -- A gaffe aboard the Prime Minister's plane set the opposition hooting yesterday that Stephen Harper is compounding Maxime Bernier's bumbling of foreign affairs.

The Prime Minister's Office was forced to backtrack after mistakenly heralding Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi for removing the restrictions that keep his country's troops out of heavy combat in Afghanistan.

In a week in which Mr. Harper announced Mr. Bernier's resignation as foreign affairs minister for leaving classified documents at the apartment of an ex-girlfriend with past biker ties, the opposition seized the gaffe as more evidence of Conservative fumbling on the international stage.

"That's more than embarrassing: That's really stupid," said deputy Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff. "I don't want a Prime Minister who goes in to talk to an Italian Prime Minister and doesn't understand what the Italian Prime Minister tells him on an important matter of state, right? Not just embarrassing. Real stupid."

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As Mr. Harper's plane prepared to take off from Rome for London, his aides told reporters that Mr. Berlusconi had lifted the so-called caveats that restrict Italian troops from taking part in nighttime operations and initiating military actions.

A number of reporters had already filed brief news items and the plane was in the air before Mr. Harper's aides realized it was a mistake - and quickly sought to correct the record.

"Blame me. It's my fault," a spokeswoman for Mr. Harper, Carolyn Stewart-Olsen, said after acknowledging the error.

Ms. Stewart-Olsen said the Prime Minister's Office had misinterpreted a wire service story out of Rome. In a statement to the Italian media, Mr. Berlusconi said he was considering lifting the restrictions - not that he had removed them.

Reporters who had filed stories were ushered to the front of the plane to use a satellite phone to call in corrections.

Mr. Harper and Mr. Berlusconi met for two hours Wednesday night, 40 minutes of which took place without aides.

The issue of caveats has been a major one for Canada and other allies involved in the heaviest fighting in southern Afghanistan, such as the United States, Britain and the Netherlands, which have asked countries such as Italy to share more of the combat burden.

On a day when Liberal MPs in the House of Commons were gleefully reading out the newspaper headlines that greeted Mr. Harper on his stops in Rome and London - "NATO Plans in the Lover's Room" and "Minister Resigns After Leaving Files with Biker Chick" - the Berlusconi gaffe expanded the attacks.

"Mr. Harper is showing us he's up to Mr. Bernier's standards in foreign affairs," said Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe.

In a noisy Question Period, deputy NDP leader Thomas Mulcair said Mr. Bernier "may be gone, but the gaffes and diplomatic faux pas keep on coming."

Government House Leader Peter Van Loan, who fielded all questions about Mr. Bernier and the gaffe regarding Mr. Berlusconi for 25 minutes while acting foreign affairs minister, David Emerson, sat silent, rejected opposition assertions that the Prime Minister had acted incompetently.

"Not at all. We are proud that the Prime Minister promotes Canadian values and the mission in Afghanistan with our allies. We intend to continue to encourage our allies to lift restrictions on our troops," he said.

After Mr. Harper's meeting with Mr. Berlusconi, the Prime Minister's communications director, Sandra Buckler, did not mention any discussion of the Afghan mission in her statement to reporters. She said the meeting "spanned a variety [of] issues" and mentioned only one specific issue, the upcoming G8 summit.

The Italian government has said recently that it is reconsidering its position on troops in Afghanistan. In his statement, Mr. Berlusconi said he told Mr. Harper he had started rethinking the rules on Italy's troop deployment "in a spirit of solidarity with its allies," according to Agence-France-Presse.

Italy's 2,500 troops in Afghanistan are located in relatively low-conflict zones in Kabul and Herat. They are kept out of nighttime operations and can take no preventive military actions to forestall attacks, aside from passing on information.

Ms. Olsen said the government believes Mr. Berlusconi's statement is a significant step forward.