

CANADIAN MILITARY

Canadian advisers are still needed, Afghan envoy says

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OTTAWA -- The Afghan ambassador to Canada says a small group of Canadian military personnel working alongside members of his government to rebuild state institutions in Afghanistan would be missed if their team were disbanded.

"For the past three years or so, the Afghan government has benefited from the diverse set of skills and experiences that SAT [strategic advisory team] members have provided and we are thankful for their contributions," Ambassador Omar Samad said yesterday.

"We are in such a situation in Afghanistan where any help goes a long way as long as it's well co-ordinated with all of the different parties involved - whether Afghan or other Canadian parties - and its aims and objectives are well defined."

The Globe and Mail reported yesterday that the work of the SAT, a group of about 20 military planners embedded in the Afghan government, will end this year, largely because of "bureaucratic jealousy" on the part of Foreign Affairs staff.

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Sources say the move is coming at the instigation of Arif Lalani, Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan.

They also say there is a push to get a decision from the Conservative government before the release of a report by a commission headed by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley that is looking into Canada's role in the war-torn country. That report is expected to reflect favourably upon the SAT.

General Rick Hillier put the team in place in 2005 after Afghan President Hamid Karzai mentioned that he had appreciated the work of a small group of senior Canadian military officers who performed similar tasks.

Doug Goold, president of the Canadian International Council, a Toronto-based think tank on international affairs, said he has been told

by people working closely with the SAT that the team is performing an important role in reconstruction.

"There has been a lot of criticism [that] we're putting most of our money and most of our eggs in the military basket, and to the extent that we can move forward on either development or diplomacy, that's a good thing. The SAT is part of that initiative," Mr. Goold said.

Experts suggest that only a handful of Afghan cabinet ministers are truly effective and corruption is still a problem, he said. "I would think that, to the extent that you can provide outside help from a country like Canada, that's a good thing."

But Paul Heinbecker, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations and now the director of the Centre for Global Relations, Governance and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., disagrees.

Mr. Heinbecker said he was annoyed by the suggestion that any move to disband the SAT would be the result of departmental jealousies.

The senior Canadian representative in any foreign country is the ambassador, he said, and it could be quite confusing to have officials working directly with the foreign government that might undermine that structure.

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