

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Officials reviewing future of Kabul team

DANIEL LEBLANC
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OTTAWA -- A team of Canadian military advisers in Kabul will be a victim of their success if they are disbanded, senior Canadian officials said yesterday as they refused to guarantee the survival of the lauded Strategic Advisory Team.

Sources have said that SAT, a group of about 20 high-level military planners embedded in the capital with Afghanistan's fledgling government, is facing the axe.

At a briefing yesterday, senior officials insisted that no decision has been made regarding the future of SAT, adding that its existence is being reviewed.

A senior government official, who has seen SAT in action in recent days, said the team works effectively and in a collegial manner alongside Afghan officials. However, the official said, it's time to take a deep look at the structure of the three-year-old group of military officials.

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The senior official said that DND, the RCMP, Foreign Affairs and Correctional Service Canada are trying to find "the best formula to be able to continue having the impact that we have.

"For the Afghan government, a major problem is the human capacity to co-ordinate its activities and its progress. That team helps them, and now we have to find the formula to continue, either through a team or through another means."

Another official insisted that SAT will survive - for now."At this time, there has been no decision, either by Foreign Affairs or anyone else, to put an end to the activities of the SAT," the official said.

Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier put the team in place in 2005 after Afghan President Hamid Karzai mentioned he had appreciated the work of a small group of senior Canadian military officers who performed similar tasks. The Afghan ambassador to Canada said this week that SAT will be missed if the team is disbanded.

But Paul Heinbecker, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, said that SAT produces a confusing power structure in Afghanistan.

He added it's time to bring the advisory role back under the authority of Canada's diplomats.

"The problem I have is with making it permanent. It leads to confusion, and sooner or later, it becomes a problem about who is speaking for Canada," Mr. Heinbecker said.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher