

Harper backs Manley report push to extend Afghan mission

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper has accepted the recommendation made in last week's Manley commission report to extend Canada's mission in Afghanistan if NATO allies help reinforce the effort.

The comments came as Mr. Harper made his first official remarks on the report issued last week by the blue-ribbon panel headed by the former foreign affairs minister.

The report said the Canadian mission in Afghanistan should not arbitrarily end in February of 2009, but the conditions for the continued presence of Canadian troops in the dangerous southern part of the country must be clearly dictated to NATO allies.

"The government accepts the panel's specific recommendation of extending Canada's mission in Afghanistan if, and I must emphasize if, certain conditions are met," Mr. Harper said.



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Prime Minister Stephen Harper waves to members of the federal Conservative Caucus prior to their meeting, in Ottawa on Saturday. (*The Canadian Press*)

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper responds to last week's Manley report on Canada's mission in Afghanistan

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“That is, the securing of partners in Kandahar province with additional combat troops and equipment capabilities. In other words, while the case for the Afghan mission is clearly compelling, the decision to allow our young men and women in uniform to continue to be in harm's way demands the responsibility to give them a strong chance of success.”

The report said at least 1,000 more soldiers from some other NATO country are needed to reinforce Canada's efforts. The panel rejected all four options proposed by the Conservative government for Canadian Forces in Afghanistan because each entailed a pull-out of Canadian troops starting in February, 2009. It instead argued for an indefinite extension that would see the Canadian Forces gradually refocus on reconstruction and then withdraw as Afghans are able to do their jobs.

The report also recommended a more “disciplined diplomatic position” regarding Afghanistan, including: the appointment of a UN representative; the adoption by NATO of a comprehensive military and political plan; forceful representations with Afghanistan's neighbours to improve security; and concerted efforts to tackle Afghan corruption.

As well, the panel argued that successive governments have failed to adequately explain to Canadians why Canada is in Afghanistan – or what the troops are doing there – and calls for the government to have a more balanced communications strategy.

Mr. Harper himself should take a lead on the file, the panel said.

“The Prime Minister must step up and make this mission a top priority with a cabinet committee to ensure co-ordination of Canada's efforts and even more important, he must personally lead our diplomatic initiative, making our voice heard to a degree commensurate with our contribution,” Mr. Manley explained.

Jake Epp, a former Progressive Conservative cabinet minister, Paul Tellier, a former Privy Council clerk, Derek Burney, a former Canadian ambassador to the U.S. and Pamela Wallin, a former Canadian consul-general in New York, sat on the panel with Mr. Manley.

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