

Military heroics overshadowed by political wrangling over prisoners: Harper

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PETAWAWA, Ont. (CP) - Prime Minister Stephen Harper told an audience of military families that his political opponents are drowning out soldiers' accomplishments in Afghanistan.

Their military heroism, Harper said Friday, has been overshadowed by attacks over the handling of prisoners.

Attending a weekly Support the Troops rally at a military community north of Ottawa, Harper rebuked political foes who have been hammering the government for weeks on the detainee issue.

"Nine soldiers from Petawawa were honoured (last month) for their work in Afghanistan - but sadly the attention has not been on them," he said.

"Those soldiers did not receive the attention they deserved because their story has been eclipsed by quarrels in the House of Commons with respect to allegations about detainees."

"I sincerely hope their story will come to light when the Governor General officially gives them their decorations."

But critics said if the soldiers are being overshadowed, it is by the Conservative government's repeated contradictions and misrepresentations on how the detainees are being monitored once the Canadian military hands them to Afghan authorities.

"The government of Canada wears this, not the men and women of the Canadian Forces," NDP critic Dawn Black said Friday outside the Commons.

The soldiers, said Black, are simply "doing what the federal government demands of them."

About 1,000 people stood under a light drizzle to take in the rally in a parking lot by the local Royal Canadian Legion.

There were military spouses and children in strollers, hundreds of soldiers in their olive fatigue uniforms, and hundreds more family members dressed in red.

An 11-year-old boy whose father is stationed in Kandahar held up a sign with his friends that said, "Support



Prime Minister Stephen Harper sings O Canada along with Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor (right) during the Petawawa Red Friday Rally and March in support of troops serving in Afghanistan, in Petawawa, Ont., Friday. (CP/Fred Chartrand)

the troops."

For the last three months, his only means of contacting his dad has been by daily emails or webcam chats.

But Sgt. Robert Young will be home in two days.

"Yeah, I'm excited," said Alex Young, decked out in red, right up to the bright baseball cap sitting backwards on his head. "The first thing I want to do is hug him."

Alex has already seen his dad ship out before. But he says it doesn't get any easier.

Robert Young is one of 500 Petawawa soldiers stationed in Afghanistan, a contingent representing 10 per cent of those on the local base.

The prime minister paid tribute to Petawawa's military community, which in the last 12 months has suffered more losses in Afghanistan than any other base.

He also took aim at political foes who have demanded a firm timetable for withdrawal from the NATO mission.

"You also know that our work has not ended," Harper told the crowd.

"We cannot just put down our weapons and hope for peace, (and) we can't set arbitrary deadlines and hope for the best."

The NDP wants an immediate withdrawal from Kandahar. The Liberals want Canadian troops pulled out after the current mission expires in 2009.

The debate over the Afghan mission might seem abstract to millions of Canadians whose only touchstone to the distant conflict is the occasional newspaper article or television clip.

It seems far less remote here.

A group of soldiers training for the mission marched down to the Legion from their base to hear the politicians speak.

Their silent footsteps left only one audible noise as they approached the old aluminum building: the swooshing sound of four-dozen legs slicing the air in synchronicity.

Canada's top soldier reminded the audience that on the other end of the world, their fellow soldiers were braving 50-degree heat, carrying 45-kilogram backpacks, and fighting elusive enemies while simultaneously battling endless clouds of desert dust and dirt.

But Gen. Rick Hillier told them that the weekly Red Friday rallies make a difference.

"You sometimes can be forgiven for feeling alone (in Afghanistan)," he said.

"But when they hear about what you are doing, when they see video and pictures of it - and they will - you can actually watch their eyes grow big."

"They understand that at the end of that 12,000-kilometre trail, they're supported by you from back home, and they're remembered."

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