

Harper asks UN assembly for Security Council seat

CTV News (featuring Colin Robertson)
September 23, 2010

Prime Minister Stephen Harper asked the United Nations general assembly for a seat on the Security Council, in a speech Thursday afternoon that touched on Canada's work in Afghanistan and Haiti, as well as its hosting of the recent G20 meeting in Toronto.

"Let me say one thing: this assembly should know that Canada is eligible for the Security Council," Harper said in New York. "If we are elected, we are ready to serve."

Canada, Germany and Portugal are vying for two temporary, two-year seats on the Security Council, considered the UN's most powerful decision-making body.

Harper's speech was designed to drive home the country's bid.

However, he spoke before a relatively small group of UN delegates, CTV Ottawa Bureau Chief Robert Fife reported from New York. The session ran longer than expected after a number of leaders spoke for longer than their allotted time. When Harper took the podium, U.S. President Barack Obama and many other world leaders had left for lunch, Fife said.

The prime minister touted Canada's long history of service to the UN, as a founding member of the organization. He also touched on the federal government's work in African countries such as Sudan and Sierra Leone.

"We are committed to doubling aid to Africa, so that Canada is a leader in the G8 in terms of fulfilling that commitment," Harper charged.

Canadians are also paying "a heavy price" for participating in the war in Afghanistan, he said.

"We pay it in both the resources of Canadian taxpayers, but also with profound sorrow, in the priceless lives of our young men and women who serve there in the Canadian Armed Forces, as well as, sadly, civilians who have also given their sweat and their lives in the service of both our country, and of the people of Afghanistan."

The prime minister returned to New York earlier on Thursday to make the speech, after voting on the long-gun registry in Ottawa.

Since the United Nations was founded in the late 1940s, Canada has traditionally held a Security Council seat once every 10 years. If it fails to win a seat next month, it will represent the country's longest time away from the influential body.

Paul Henbecker, a former Canadian ambassador to the UN, said Canada has an uphill battle to beat Germany in the first ballot, on Oct. 12. But it has a chance to win the second available seat from Portugal.

"Germany's biggest advantage is that they are the third-largest budget donor at the UN. We come in eighth, well ahead of Portugal," Henbecker said.

The UN's 192 members will hold a secret vote and a country will need two-thirds support, or 128 votes, to be voted onto the council.

Canada was last voted onto the Security Council in 2000, following a pattern of holding a position for one term every decade since the late 1940s. If Canada does not win the vote, it would be the country's longest absence.

Henbecker said Canada has several challenges to overcome surrounding some policies the government currently follows, including supporting Israel in the Middle East, a perceived focus on supporting Latin America at the expense of Africa, and its reaction to climate change.

Considering there are 57 Arab and Muslim countries, 51 African countries and 27 European countries, rounding up enough votes may be a challenge.

Working to Canada's advantage is the country's legacy, beginning with its UN peacekeeping experience, dedication to work on the Ethiopian famine and the decision not to follow the U.S. into Iraq.

Colin Robertson, a former Canadian diplomat, said that Canada will be well-served by its strong history with the United Nations. Robertson said Canada has the "best little army" in the world, and once the Canadian Forces are clear of Afghanistan there will be a laundry list of missions they can assist with.

Thursday marked Harper's second time addressing the UN General Assembly in five years.

His comments about Canada as a worthy candidate for a Security Council seat add to what has become "a full fledged lobbying campaign" by Canadian officials, Fife said.

"All of our ministers are here lobbying," Fife reported. "Canadian officials are wearing Canadian pins, they have their badges with Canadian logos. As one official said, they are trying to create some buzz around Canada."

With the ballot being held in secret, there is a concern that some delegations are telling all three countries they will vote for them, as to not jeopardize foreign aid.

Colin Robertson's first assignment in the Foreign Service was to the Canadian Mission to the United Nations. He is vice-president of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and president of the National Capital Branch of the Canadian International Council.