

Harper assailed by opposition as RCMP brings Canadian vehicles to India for official visit

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By Mark Kennedy, Postmedia News



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Stephen Harper and Ed Fast

NEW DELHI — Prime Minister Stephen Harper's trip to India took an unexpected twist Monday when his security guards brought their own armoured vehicles to drive him through the streets, sparking objections from opposition MPs back in Ottawa.

The unusual development raised questions such as whether Harper faced a security threat in any of the four cities he is visiting, why the RCMP did not trust the Indian government to provide suitably protective vehicles, and how much it will cost Canadian taxpayers to ship the cars to India for the trip.

Harper's office declined to answer questions on the matter and referred all queries to the RCMP, which operates the security detail that protects the prime minister.

"The RCMP makes the operational decisions on the prime minister's security," said Andrew MacDougall, Harper's director of communications.

Cpl. Lucy Shorey, the RCMP's media relations officer, released a brief written statement in response to questions.

"The deployment of RCMP resources are dictated by operational requirements, including public and officer safety considerations, and a threat assessment of the events/environments," said in her statement. "For security reasons, details on the security plans will not be discussed."

NDP finance critic Peggy Nash assailed the government for spending taxpayer dollars to ship the vehicles to India. She said that taking the prime minister's limousines overseas has only ever been done in Haiti or war-torn countries, not the world's largest democracy, India.

"Austerity doesn't seem to apply to the prime minister," she said, demanding the government identify the costs to ship the vehicles overseas. "This isn't about security ... How much is it costing to send the prime minister's personal limos to the Taj Mahal?"

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said the deployment of RCMP assets is based on operational

considerations, including the safety of officers and the prime minister, and that the decision was indeed based on security.

“I rely on the RCMP and I trust their judgement,” Toews said. “Frankly, the RCMP, in fact, have made that decision. They’ve made it related to the prime minister’s security.”

Interim Liberal leader Bob Rae was unimpressed. “The RCMP can ask for what they want to ask for but it’s up to the prime minister to make a decision as to how it’s going to go forward or whatever.

“I think flying the cars over seemed quite unnecessary. They do have cars in India. They do have protected vehicles in India. They do have all that stuff there. I don’t know why it would be necessary for us to add that additional expense,” he said.

Harper flew in to the Indian city of Agra on Sunday evening and visited the nearby Taj Mahal mausoleum on Monday morning.

Security was tight for the visit. Thousands of tourists were told by whistle-blowing Indian security guards to leave prior to his arrival.

Harper received a private tour, without any tourists present, and rifle-toting soldiers were stationed in some towers nearby.

On Monday afternoon, he flew to New Delhi to meet business people at a hotel. His trip will bring him later in the week to the Indian cities of Chandigarh, home to a large population of Sikhs, and to Bangalore, where the country’s major high-tech firms are located.

Normally, when Harper travels abroad, he is driven in vehicles provided by the host country — apparently with the exception of highly dangerous nations such as Afghanistan.

But in Agra, he was driven in a black SUV with Ontario licence plates. Later, upon arriving at the airport in New Delhi Monday afternoon, he was guided by his security guards into a black Cadillac with Ontario plates.

MacDougall said he didn’t know how much it cost to ship the vehicles.

“The RCMP evaluates these . . . I don’t have the costs in front of me. We won’t know that for a while. These costs will all be disclosed in due course.”

Harper is in India to promote political and business ties. His aim is to triple annual bilateral trade to \$15 billion by 2015, reach a free-trade agreement next year, negotiate an accord to protect Canadian investors’ legal rights in India, and resolve a long-standing nuclear dispute over how much detail Canada should get once it sells uranium to India to ensure it is used for peaceful purposes.

On Tuesday, he will take his case directly to India’s senior political leaders. Among those he will meet is Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whose coalition government is on shaky ground and could be defeated before the next election in 2014.

In an exclusive interview before the trip with Postmedia News, Harper spoke of why it is important that Canada negotiate a Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (FIPA) with India.

“You know, many of these developing countries are not easy to crack in terms of investment,” he said.

“Developing countries often by their nature are based on the economic models a lot of them had coming out of independence. Tended to be very protective, very protectionist, often very state-directed

economies.

Historically, somewhat resistant to foreign investment.”

Harper said Canada is looking for an agreement that would spell out the legal protections Canadian companies would have if they come to India.

“Having those legal frameworks is pretty critical to us,” he said.

“It helps in emerging markets that often have very different pasts for investors to know that there is that kind of legal framework.”

That’s a message that was echoed Monday by International Trade Minister Ed Fast, who was in India with the prime minister.

Fast said that in recent days, Canadian and Indian firms have announced a range of investment deals in both countries.

“Canada is engaged here in a very significant way but there is so much more that we can do,” said Fast.

The two countries have spent the past eight years negotiating an investment protection deal, and the Indian government is reviewing all its trade pacts before it makes its move with Canada.

“Right now, we have a relatively opaque investment environment here in India. Our businesses understand that, which is why we’re driving home the point to our Indian counterparts that this agreement should be put into force sooner rather than later.”

Bob Dhillon, a Canadian with Indian ancestry who is CEO of Mainstreet Equity Corp. (which buys and rents apartments), was among the business people accompanying Harper on his trade mission.

He said India is a growing market with huge potential for Canadian businesses. The country has a population of 1.2 billion people, with half under the age of 25.

“You don’t have these kind of metrics anywhere else in the world,” he said.

“Because of demographics, it’s going to be the biggest consumer market in the world. You’ve got simply a developer’s dream.”

Dhillon acknowledged that investors are frustrated by the slow pace in India and the inability to break through layers of bureaucratic red tape in government.

“Corruption is a reality, bureaucracy is a reality. But one thing it has got to offer is a market.... You can go into other countries that don’t have corruption and the cost of capital is low. But if there is no market, there is nothing.”

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