

Dispute with UAE proved expensive for Canada: Liberal critic

We need to get ties back on track with strategic ally, Ignatieff says

- By Mick O' Reilly, Deputy Managing Editor
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Ottawa: Canada's main opposition party is calling on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to mend relations with the UAE immediately.

In a press release issued by Michael Ignatieff, the Leader of the Official Opposition, Harper is taken to task for a "vitriolic" attack on the UAE. "We need to get relations with this strategic ally in the Middle East back on track," Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff said."

Harper made the wrong choice to escalate this dispute when Canada's economic and security interests are involved, and made it even more difficult to reverse the damage."

The Opposition call is the latest in a bitter and simmering dispute between Ottawa and the UAE over airline landing rights at Toronto. At present, both Etihad and Emirates are limited to three flights each a week.

Soft on terror

Harper seemed to write off relations with the UAE last week when he said: "That's just not how you treat allies, and I think tells us you better pick your friends pretty carefully in the future."

His outburst only serves to further endanger Canada's trade relationship with the UAE. Observers in both countries were surprised at the tone of Harper's comments which were published in national publications last weekend. The Canadian Prime Minister also hinted that the UAE was soft on terrorism.

The biting attack stung the UAE, which has assisted Canadian efforts in fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan by providing free logistical support. Wounded soldiers were treated for free at UAE medical facilities before being airlifted home to their families in Canada. The UAE government gave Canada four months to vacate the Camp Mirage military base near Dubai, and the lease ended in October. Since then, Canadian taxpayers have been on the hook for \$300 million (Dh 1.1 billion) in expenses as its armed forces must service the Afghanistan mission from a British military base in Cyprus.

"It's time to get rid of the megaphone and begin diplomatic discussions again," said Liberal Foreign Affairs Critic Bob Rae.

"This dispute has already proven very expensive for Canada, and it's surprising, given our nation's long history of effective diplomacy. We've lost the base at Camp Mirage, at huge expense. Canadian travellers face the inconvenience of visas and high fees. We're losing opportunities for a positive, constructive relationship."

Liberal Consular Affairs Critic Dan McTeague said the Prime Minister's incendiary comments have dismissed and discounted the deep friendship and mutual respect that had built up between the UAE and Canada over a 40-year period.

"The Conservatives forget that the UAE treated hundreds of injured Canadian troops for free at their military medical facilities and flew them home to their families," said McTeague.

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