

Dion assails Harper over Khadr

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Byline: OMAR EL AKKAD

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Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion kicked off Question Period yesterday by asking Prime Minister Stephen Harper why he is refusing to demand the return of Canadian citizen Omar Khadr from Guantanamo Bay – part of an effort by the opposition to paint the Conservatives as a government that picks and chooses which Canadians to assist overseas.

Mr. Khadr's case had come up numerous times in Question Period during the past few months, but this marked the first time the opposition Liberals led the session with a question about the detained Canadian, who faces numerous charges before a U.S. military tribunal.

In response, Mr. Harper reiterated several of the Conservative government's talking points on Mr. Khadr – that he faces serious charges and that the government has received assurances he is being treated humanely – and added that the previous Liberal government did not act to bring Mr. Khadr home.

“The only thing that really changed is that in 2006 the people of Canada changed governments,” Mr. Harper said. “That's the only reason the Liberal Party has changed its opinion.”

Immediately after Mr. Dion's question, Liberal MP Michael Ignatieff brought up the case of Abousfian Abdelrazik, a Canadian who has been stuck in Sudan for nearly five years because he is on a “no-fly” list and suspected of having ties to al-Qaeda. The Canadian government has so far refused to issue him a new passport or arrange for him to be flown home.

“Canadians want to know that when they're in difficulty overseas they'll have a government that stands up for them,” Mr. Ignatieff said.

The Liberals' offensive comes after the Conservative government put much effort into bringing Canadian Brenda Martin home from Mexico. Ms. Martin was accused by Mexican authorities of participating in a fraud scheme, an accusation she denies. The government repeatedly acted on her behalf in recent months, and she was finally brought home earlier this month on a chartered jet.

But the Liberals' move also represents a growing turnaround on the Khadr file, which for years was – and may still prove to be – politically unpopular because of Mr. Khadr's family and its well-documented ties to al-Qaeda.

Mr. Khadr is accused of throwing a grenade during a 2002 Afghan gun battle that killed a U.S. soldier. He was 15 at the time. If convicted, he could spend the rest of his life in prison. He is expected to make an appearance in a Guantanamo Bay courtroom today.