

PM travels to Europe for trade, war memorial

BY MEAGAN FITZPATRICK, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

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OTTAWA — The global economy and ongoing negotiations to reach a trade agreement with the European Union will highlight Prime Minister Stephen Harper's visit to Europe this week where he will also attend ceremonies to mark the 65th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Harper leaves Ottawa Tuesday for Belgium and begins his brief European tour in earnest on Wednesday with the Canada-EU summit in Brussels.

"The Canada-EU summit will provide an opportunity to strengthen Canada's collaboration with the EU and help entrench economic recovery, strengthen financial and regulatory reform, and to resist protectionism and also to liberalize trade," Dimitri Soudas, Harper's director of communications, told reporters Monday.

He said the meetings will also highlight the ongoing talks over the proposed Canada-EU trade pact called the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement and will "underline Canada's fundamental commitment to the fight against protectionism."

The EU, made up of 27 countries, is already Canada's second largest trading partner after the United States and it is Canada's second largest source of foreign direct investment. In 2009, \$75-billion worth of goods were traded and direct foreign investment from the EU was

\$162 billion.

The deal now being worked on will deepen economic ties even further and is expected to be even more far-reaching than the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"Provinces and territories have been involved at an unprecedented level in Canada's negotiations with the EU and a future agreement has the potential to significantly stimulate trade, investment, innovation and job creation in Canada," Soudas said.

"The ongoing involvement of Canadian ministers, the prime minister himself and officials on moving the yardsticks forward indicate how important this agreement is to Canada," he added.

Climate change and international development assistance, including co-operation on assisting in Haiti's recovery, will also be on the agenda when Harper meets with European Council president Herman Van Rompuy and other EU officials.

On Thursday, Harper will be in the Netherlands where he will join hundreds of Canada's veterans, students from across Canada, and dignitaries at a ceremony marking the 65th anniversary of the country's liberation from Nazi rule. Harper will also have a meeting with Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende where he will discuss the EU trade deal, Soudas said.

From the Netherlands, Harper travels to Zagreb to meet with Croatia's prime minister and president. It is the first time a Canadian prime minister has made an official visit to Croatia and Soudas said Canada-Croatia relations have "never been better."

Harper then wraps up his whirlwind European tour in Berlin on Saturday with a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The focus of that meeting will be on the upcoming G8 and G20 summits Harper is hosting in late June.

The economic stability of Europe, given Greece's financial crisis and the potential for it to spill over and influence into global markets, will likely also figure into Harper's talks with European leaders this week. Finance Minister Jim Flaherty issued a joint statement on Monday with his counterparts from Korea, the United States, the United Kingdom and France on the bailout deal reached over the weekend on debt-ridden Greece. The group said they welcome the agreement signed by European leaders and the International Monetary Fund.

"This program merits the support of the international community," the statement read.