

BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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1. Introduction: Debating Afghanistan

As you know, Canadians are deeply ambivalent about Canada's role in Afghanistan. It is not the first time Canadians have questioned the decisions and political priorities that send soldiers abroad and into harm's way. The criticism sometimes extends to the military leadership that commands and directs these operations, but we understand that criticism to be in the context of deep respect for and honouring of the extraordinary service, commitment, and sacrifice of the soldiers who serve in our name. The same respect is due and is paid to civilian workers – government diplomats and non-governmental – who share in the risks and the courage that are central to these complex operations.

Our organization has joined this public debate over Afghanistan on that same basis, and I have to add that we do it from our vantage point in Canada. None of us has visited Afghanistan; thus, like most Canadians, we must rely on the reporting of others -- news media, the UN, NGOs, and research groups with people on the ground there, and, of course, our own government.

That introduces the first of three points I want to make.

2. Assessing Effectiveness: The Nature of Reporting

We Canadians depend on thorough and extensive reporting by the Government. It is especially welcome that the Minister of Defence and Chief of Defence Staff have recently visited both the Defence Committee and this Committee. Such visits need to be much more frequent. I would also say that it would be helpful to have a much clearer and more forthright Canadian perspective on the effectiveness and status of the mission. Reports on Canadian activities and roles and logistics are obviously important, but we also need assessments that confirm that those at the highest level directing the mission are keenly aware of what is or is not working, and that their decision-making is guided by that awareness and by a specifically Canadian assessment of what the situation requires.

In looking at the testimony of the Minister of Defence and Chief of Defence Staff, I am struck by two things: it involves relatively little in the way of assessing the overall Afghanistan situation, and when such assessment is offered, it is sometimes sharply out of step with the reporting from other sources.

On the strength of the insurgency, Minister O'Connor told the Defence Committee that "of [Afghanistan's] 34 provinces, the insurgency is a great challenge in maybe six or seven. In the remaining provinces you have, in Afghan terms, relative stability." At this Committee, the figure was increased to nine or ten (24 or 25 relatively stable), but at the end of September the report of the UN Secretary-General [A/61/326-S/2006/727] describes an upsurge in violence and claims that the insurgency is covering "a broad arc of mostly Pashtun-dominated territory, extending from Kunar province in the east to Farah province in the west; it also increasingly affects the southern fringe of the central highlands." If you look at a map, that swath of insurgency seems to

be closer to including 15 to 20 provinces. “At no time since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001,” he says, “has the threat of Afghanistan’s transition been so severe.”

The International Crisis Group’s new November 2 report and the Council on Foreign Relations paint an even bleaker picture. My point is not that the Minister is wrong, and all the others are right – rather the point is that we are in need of a serious Canadian assessment, and if we come to different conclusions than those of others, then there should be an explanation for the difference.

There is a sense of urgency in many of the reports one sees, not only on the insurgency but also on the Afghan economy and reconstruction effort, both with huge implications for the insurgency. Perhaps my reading of the testimony misses a sense of urgency and concern, but I think part of Canadian ambivalence can be attributed to a fear that we’re not really getting the full picture – or worse, a suspicion that the Canadian leadership isn’t letting us in on the full picture.

Something as simple as bi-weekly or monthly reports and assessments presented to this committee would go a long way.

3. Considering a Change of Course

The second point comes as a question about the switch from Operation Enduring Freedom to the International Security Assistance Force. I put it as a question because, while I am not a military planner or strategist, I still need a clear accounting of the objective and impact of the shift.

The two military forces, after all, are based on two very different rationales. OEF was formed for the defence of the United States. Based on Article 51 of the UN Charter, there has been no UN mandate involved and the objective was to seek out and attack those that were thought to have aided the attack on North America. The ISAF operation, on the other hand, depends on another paradigm entirely: namely, the security and safety of the people of Afghanistan, not North America.

The switch from the defence of the interveners to the security of the host population suggests a switch in military focus away from the effort to drive insurgents from their strongholds (in the south) and toward supporting Afghan security forces in areas where the government already has a foothold and is demonstrating the advantages of extending governmental authority (the north).

So here are the main elements of an emerging third option: pull out of the south; redeploy to the north in support of training and provincial reconstruction teams; substantially increase non-military aid; review the strategy, objectives, and tactics used by the NATO-led ISAF; and re-open the political process in pursuit of a more inclusive and representative political order for the entire country.

4. A New Political/Security Dialogue

Finally, many commentators and experts are increasingly clear and insistent that the counter-insurgency war is headed for certain defeat. None of us wants that outcome, but history is

probably on the side of the insurgents, and the country and those helping it need another approach.

According to the ICG report, “factors that were repeatedly pointed to as driving people to oppose the government” included:

- **Political disenfranchisement:** In “favouring one group or tribe” others have been left “out of decision-making and power structures.”
- **Resource quarrels:** “These are particularly over land and water and have been exacerbated by the return of millions of refugees and internally displaced people as well as a long drought.”
- **Corruption:** “This includes large-scale ransacking of state and donor resources by officials who regard state property as their own.”
- **Lack of opportunities and development:** “Having been oversold the benefits that democracy would bring, there is growing public discontent and a backlash at the lack of change in everyday life.”
- **Abuse by local and international security forces:** “This mainly involves mistreatment by local police or army, but also includes mistreatment by international forces in rough-house raids and illegal detentions” (pp. 11-12).

In other words, the challenge of what we call “the Taliban” does not seem to be focused on irrational fanaticism, but rather very basic and familiar grievances – the kind you find in any conflict. These are all grievances that are amenable to negotiation. And in the meantime, as the counter-insurgency war continues, many Afghans are transferring their allegiance from a Government that has not lived up to expectations to the very groups the international forces are fighting.

That in turn means that restoring legitimacy to the central government and its backers is not a matter of improved military performance or even accelerated reconstruction, but depends also on a commitment to political inclusiveness that reaches out to those now in opposition to the government.

The call for more talking is recognition that political stability depends on Afghans being persuaded that their government has the interests of all Afghans at heart. That means dealing with those political-military entities outside of government that represent the genuine grievances of Afghans – a group that, by all accounts, includes elements that are routinely lumped under the term, “the Taliban.”

It is true that conditions need to be right for successful talks, and it is not for observers in distant Canada to name the people, places, and times for such talks. But it is entirely appropriate to insist on the principle that the Afghan government and its backers talk to their declared adversaries in search of accommodations that respect the needs of Afghans and international standards of human rights. That certainly does not include prevailing on Afghan women to welcome misogynists and gross and systematic human rights violators back into their lives.

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