

August 16, 2007

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Re: Canada's Role in Afghanistan

Dear Prime Minister Harper,

We write as Christian leaders from many churches in Canada to encourage our Government in the pursuit of peace in Afghanistan.

We share with you and all Canadians of good will the desire for peace and stability in Afghanistan. As churches, we are committed to protecting human life, promoting human dignity, working for justice, practicing forgiveness, and building peace and reconciliation. These commitments are part of our vision of living out the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

Like many Canadians we hope the people of Afghanistan will be able to enjoy peace, justice, and security, an open government based on accountability and the rule of law, an economy that offers honest and humane opportunities to provide for their families and educational and social services that are available to all.

We are aware of the heavy price that some have paid to advance these goals. This is brought home by members of our churches who serve in The Canadian Forces and by chaplains who, through the Canadian Forces Chaplaincy Branch, are an organic part of The Canadian Council of Churches. We join them and their families and friends in their sorrow and grief at lives lost, bodies broken, and spirits shattered. The peoples of Afghanistan have suffered through the long years of violence, conflict and war. We pray for the healing and reconciliation of people and communities torn apart, lament the lives lost, and renew our pledge to work for peace.

In this context, we humbly offer our contribution to the dialogue in Canada on moving forward to a long-lasting peace, while respectfully acknowledging our limited understanding of Afghanistan and its peoples.

1. Reconciliation

How can Canada support reconciliation within Afghanistan? With all that has happened in Afghanistan since 2001, but also in the decades preceding Canada's direct military role there, the internal wounds are deep and the prospects for reconciliation are uncertain. We are encouraged that the Afghanistan Compact of 2004, endorsed by Canada, includes a *Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation Action Plan*. The principles of this action plan outline a profound way of peace. We encourage Canadian and international support for the measures described in this action plan and affirm a strong "truth and reconciliation" approach. A culturally appropriate process for reconciliation, embraced by Afghan civil society, is a firm foundation for peace and security for the citizens of Afghanistan.

2. Diplomacy

How can Canada support negotiations leading to peace in Afghanistan? We urge that every possible effort be made to seek negotiated solutions. This should include discussions with Taliban insurgents willing to participate in peaceful negotiations. We encourage Canada to dedicate more of its efforts and financial resources to diplomacy in Afghanistan and the surrounding region (such as Pakistan). We are encouraged by the recent announcement of increased Canadian diplomatic representation in Afghanistan and urge your Government to continue support for and expansion of Canada's diplomatic capacity.

3. Human Rights

How can Canada foster greater respect for human rights in Afghanistan? Human rights resonate with the Christian belief that all people are made in God's image and, therefore, deserve respect and protection. We encourage deeper Canadian assistance for human rights initiatives in Afghanistan. Indeed, human rights are a primary building block in the creation of a just and participatory society if peace is to be sustained. It also is incumbent on Canada to demonstrate in its own conduct in Afghanistan, including its handling of detainees, strict adherence to international human rights standards and the obligations in the Geneva Conventions.

4. Just Governance

How can Canada support Afghanistan, a fragile state, and promote human rights? Canada has stated the longer term imperative is to strengthen the fragile state apparatus in Afghanistan so that it can better provide security and public services and meaningful democratic representation. Still, significant problems have been identified with the current government, including participation at high levels by officials accused of

corruption and war crimes. Also a lack of representation by significant groups has been cited, particularly the Pashtuns who are primarily located in the east and south of the country where the insurgency is strongest. Canada ought to seek new opportunities for good and inclusive governance in partnership with Afghan civil society.

5. Development

How can Canada best support reconstruction and development in Afghanistan?

There are many faith-based and secular Canadian humanitarian organizations working to improve conditions in Afghanistan. We commend these organizations. The Canadian Government, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), is assisting Afghanistan's reconstruction. Afghanistan will require economic and other forms of support well into the future. Government reports have drawn our attention to the high cost of outfitting The Canadian Forces for continued counter-insurgency operations into the undetermined future. To be more effective in building peace, we believe a significant shift in Canada's concentration of financial resources toward long-term human development is necessary.

We are aware of the difficulties experienced by development and humanitarian agencies about what they refer to as the militarization of aid in Afghanistan – that is the close identification of military operations and basic assistance. Aid must be delivered without compromising internationally recognized principles of development and humanitarian assistance.

6. Security

How can The Canadian Forces best be deployed in Afghanistan to advance the safety and well being of people wherever they are threatened? In the wake of 9/11, The Canadian Council of Churches expressed the view that terrorism should be confronted, and that those who commit terrorist acts should be held accountable. In a letter dated September 21, 2001, leaders of The Canadian Council of Churches urged that the campaign against terrorism be guided by due process and actions that honour the laws, values and freedoms that terrorism threatens.

Canada has an obligation not to abandon the people of Afghanistan. The vulnerable must be protected. As Scripture instructs us, we are to care for and respect our neighbours, especially the poor, the voiceless and the defenceless.

We believe that The Canadian Forces should focus on enhancing protection of vulnerable Afghans rather than on aggressive engagement with insurgents in areas where the local population is suspicious or alienated from the central government. Such a shift in The Canadian Forces' operational mandate would be an important consideration in the ongoing public dialogue regarding Canada's role in Afghanistan.

We acknowledge the grave responsibility that you carry as Prime Minister in cooperation with members of your cabinet in making difficult decisions regarding reconciliation,

diplomatic and development efforts in Afghanistan as well as the deployment of military forces. At a recent prayer service (see attachment), members of The Canadian Council of Churches re-committed themselves, and called on the people in all our churches, to pray for you and all who are in positions of authority. We pray for the people of Afghanistan, regardless of the groups with which they identify, believing they are loved by God, and that God desires peace in their land as well as in ours.

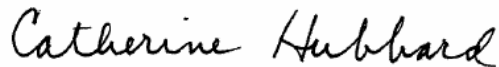
We look forward to receiving your response to our questions and concerns. May the word of God be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path [Psalm 119:105].



His Grace Bishop Bagrat Galstianian
Primate
Armenian Holy Apostolic Church, Canadian Diocese



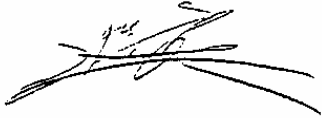
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The Rev. Dr. Hans Kouwenberg,
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The Presbyterian Church in Canada



The Rev. John Kapteyn
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Regional Synod of Canada, Reformed Church in America



His Eminence JOHN
Primate
The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada



The Right Rev. David Guiliano
Moderator
The United Church of Canada

Cc: The Honourable Maxime Bernier, Minister of Foreign Affairs
The Honourable Peter MacKay, Minister of National Defense
Brigadier-General Stanley Johnstone, Chaplain General of the Canadian Forces

The Honourable Stéphane Dion, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada
The Honourable Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
The Honourable Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party