

Canada 's Guantanamo

Canadian military's role in torture coverup in Afghanistan

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A scandal erupted last week in sleepy Ottawa with the revelations of Canada's chief diplomat in Kandahar in 2006-07, Richard Colvin, who told a House of Commons committee on Afghanistan that Afghans arrested by Canadian military and handed over to Afghan authorities were knowingly tortured. His and others' attempts to raise the alarm had been quashed by the ruling Conservative government and he felt a moral obligation to make public what was happening.

The startling allegations — the first of their kind from a senior official — have caused extreme embarrassment to the government, which has more than once stated categorically detainees were not passed to Afghan control if there was any danger of torture. Canada has 2,700 soldiers in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, the hotbed of the insurgency, on a mission that is due to end in 2011.

Warnings to Colvin to keep quiet were not enough to cow him and he calmly told shocked MPs that he started sending reports soon after he arrived in Kandahar in early 2006 to top officials indicating the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) was abusing detainees. "For a year and half after they knew about the very high risk of torture, they continued to order military police in the field to hand our detainees to the NDS."

Colvin's comments come at a sensitive time for the minority government, which was almost ousted by the opposition a year ago. So far 133 Canadian soldiers have died in Afghanistan and recent polls indicate most Canadians oppose the mission. Colvin said Canadian military leaders in Afghanistan "cloaked our detainee practices in extreme secrecy," refused to hand over details of prisoners to the Red Cross in a timely fashion and kept "hopeless" records. "As I learned more about our detainee practices, I came to the conclusion that they were un-Canadian, counterproductive, and probably illegal." Officials in Ottawa initially ignored his reports. "By April 2007 we were receiving written messages from the senior Canadian government coordinator for Afghanistan to the effect that we should be quiet and do what we were told," he said.

Canadian troops first began transferring detainees to Afghan authorities in late 2005. Eventually, faced with persistent allegations of abuse, Ottawa signed a deal with Kabul in May 2007 to boost protection for detainees. Colvin said Canadian troops regularly detain six times as many Afghans as the British, who are also operating in southern Afghanistan. Although some may have been Taliban members, many were "random human beings in the

wrong place at the wrong time". He added: "We detained and handed over for severe torture a lot of innocent people. Complicity in torture is a war crime." In the face of accusations of this complicity, Prime Minister Stephen Harper publically insisted Canadian military officials did not send individuals off to be tortured. "Behind the military's wall of secrecy that unfortunately was exactly what we were doing," Colvin told his captive audience.

Now, instead of launching an inquiry, the Conservatives are pursuing their usual practice of smearing critics. "We frankly just found his evidence lacked credibility. All his information was, he admits, at best second hand," said Lawrie Hawn, parliamentary secretary to Defense Minister Peter MacKay. MacKay angrily dismissed the charges, while former Canadian military chief-in-command in Afghanistan Rick Hillier can't "remember reading a single one of those cables", and depicted the fuss as mere "howling at the moon". "Even in our own prisons somebody can get beaten up," he cracked to reporters.

But then this is standard operating procedure for Harper's Conservatives. They called New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton "Taliban Jack" for his suggestion that NATO should negotiate with elements of the Taliban. That is now the policy not only of Canada in Afghanistan, but of the Karzai government in Kabul.

In *The Unexpected War*, Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang report that the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International, and Canadian Louise Arbour, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights "had concluded that abuse, torture, and extrajudicial killing were routinely inflicted on people in Afghan custody." University of Ottawa Law Professor Amir Attaran documented how Afghan detainees have been beaten not only by the NDS, but while detained and interrogated by Canadian soldiers. Attaran called for an investigation into the treatment of the detainees by the Military Police Complaints Commission, a civilian body established to investigate complaints against the Canadian military. In February 2007, the Canadian military launched an investigation and heard testimony concerning three Afghans beaten by Canadian soldiers, handed over to the Afghans, who subsequently disappeared. The *Globe and Mail* managed to interview thirty former detainees who said they had been transferred from Canadian to Afghan jurisdiction and then had been tortured.

Then defence minister Gordon O'Connor told the House of Commons that a new agreement struck with the Karzai government stipulated that "If there is something wrong with their treatment, the Red Cross or Red Crescent would inform us and we would take action." This was exposed as a lie when Red Cross spokesman Simon Schorno told the *Globe and Mail* that "we were informed of the agreement, but we are not a party to it and we are not monitoring the implementation of it."

Colvin immediately warned that the new agreement was full of holes. It can only be concluded that the government condoned the torture, ignoring and now pooh-poohing complaints about it. Attempts to feign innocence don't hold water. According to a senior NATO official, Harper used a "6,000-mile screwdriver" to make sure "that every single statement that went out [was] cleared by him personally".

Michael Semple, Colvin's EU colleague in Kabul, said he was "totally flabbergasted" by insinuations that Colvin's reports were not credible, that he was a closet Taliban sympathiser "soft on terrorists". Colvin was an "absolutely rock solid" diplomat who

volunteered to go in as a civilian representative with Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar after a close friend of Semple's was killed by a suicide car bomber outside Kandahar.

But to anyone who knows anything at all about US — and now, alas, Canadian — politics this is hardly new. Colin Powell's rise to the heights of US politics was due to his burying the initial reports of the My Lai massacre in 1968 where US troops gunned down 500 mostly women, children and seniors in an act of revenge. Charged with investigating the incident, then major Powell reported, "In direct refutation of this portrayal is the fact that relations between American soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent." Powell was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in 1970, served a White House fellowship under president Richard Nixon from 1972-73, and continued up the ladder, becoming a general in 1989 and finally secretary of state in 2001.

Current Canadian politics occasionally provides a touch of humour to the inanities of Western moral hypocrisy. Remember the travel ban imposed by the Conservative government on UK MP George Galloway this spring, apparently because he is a terrorist. The Conservative government denied it had anything to do with the decision, that it was entirely up to the Canada Border Services Agency. Or the current furore over US lesbian soldier Bethany Lanae Smith, whom a Canadian judge insists be granted refugee status, overturning an Immigration and Refugee Board ruling. Not because she rejects the illegal US wars and occupations, but because she was harassed by male US soldiers and resented their taunts and/or untoward advances.

The recent haemorrhage of US war resisters coming to Canada has been resolutely staunchly by the pro-war government, in line with its fervent support of US/ NATO wars. But in the interests of political correctness the government may well allow Smith to stay, unlike her more principled fellow soldiers, male and female, who defected to Canada out of conviction, and who were sent back to the US to face jail terms.

Will there be any consequences to Colvin for his embarrassing revelations? Word has it that the hitherto promising career of the former second-in-command in Afghanistan and current high-level diplomat in Washington is over. Remember the fate of UK ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray from 2002-2004 whom the Foreign Office tried to declare noncompis mentis, and who resigned, supposedly in disgrace. His altercation with the empire sobered him and made him a committed anti-imperialist. At his site, he even posts an update of US-caused deaths in Iraq, now at 1,339,771.

If Colvin's career as a diplomat is over, he can still take a page from Murray's post-FO career book. His expose of Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov as one of the world's most eminent torturers, *Murder in Samarkand*, is now being made into a feature film. He has been awarded multiple prizes for promoting world peace, ran for parliament against his former boss foreign minister Jack Straw, and is a witty and incisive commentator on the internet, PressTV and elsewhere. He is currently rector of his alma mater the University of Dundee. There is life after the death of diplomatic service. Murray quips, "Being a dissident is quite fun."

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