

# Canada's Military Involvement in Afghanistan

Why aren't we having a national debate?

By [Paul Weinberg](#)

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In a season of extreme heat and parliamentary vacations, there's barely a murmur among the political classes about Canadian soldiers hooking up with a failed American-led coalition of counter-insurgents in the volatile Kandahar region of southwest Afghanistan.

But those closely following on-the-ground developments in Afghanistan are astonished that Canadians have sent their military into a stepped-up mission the aims of which have not been debated. They also worry that our military doesn't truly understand the nature of the conflagration.

The latter issue is the concern of Dr Seddiq Weera, a Canadian peace educator who was born in Afghanistan and is currently stationed in Kabul advising the Afghan Ministry of Education and the National Independent Commission on Strengthening Peace (INCSP) in Afghanistan.

Many Afghans, not just the Taliban, have been infuriated by outside forces occupying their country.

He finds General Rick Hillier's comment that Canadian troops will be targeting "detestable murderers" and "scumbags" a dangerous simplification of Afghanistan's political situation. It's not just the Taliban who are opposing foreign troops, Weera argues. Locals in the country's south and east have been infuriated by the performance of outside forces in their areas.

"Some people have stories of unjustified bombings, harsh treatment during house searches, wrongful imprisonment, mislabeling as al Qaeda, and so on. Also, lately, many members of the former Northern Alliance who have lost power express dissatisfaction or act in such a way that threatens security," he notes in a May 2005 discussion for INCSP.

There are many reasons why members of the above groups openly oppose the presence of US and international forces, he writes. "Many Afghans, especially villagers, are confused about the role and aims of these foreign troops."

Peggy Mason, former UN disarmament ambassador, thinks Canada should maintain some distance from the US-led sorties.

Speaking from Kabul by phone, Weera, who is affiliated with McMaster's Centre for Peace Studies, says "[Hillier] focuses on a good-guy, bad-guy approach that does not reflect the realities. There's a large number of discontented people, and many groups have at least some legitimate concerns, and there is a very small number of spoilers who exploit these

unhappy people. One needs to isolate the spoilers by addressing the discontent of these people and groups through dialogue and reconciliation.”

But Peggy Mason, Canada’s former ambassador for disarmament and arms control affairs at the United Nations, wonders if there is any chance of actually defeating Taliban forces through search-and-destroy missions. More terrorists, she says, have been found internationally through “the hard slog of information-sharing and policing efforts” than by the US-led forces, who have failed to root out remnants of the former Taliban government and their al Qaeda allies.

“If you look at where the big arrests have been made, the military has not been particularly successful. I think there is a tacit recognition of that by the Americans,” she says.

Mason also argues that Canada, with its peacekeeping experience, should maintain “some distance” from the American-dominated sortie. The US strategy of overwhelming force, insensitivity to civilian casualties and deal-making with local warlords has not contributed to an improved security situation.

And she can’t understand why Canada was so willing to jump onboard Operation Enduring Freedom rather than wait until later next year when a NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) peacemaking force in Kabul, of which Canadians have been a part, will be charged with providing stability for all of Afghanistan.

“There is a serious possibility that we will actually end up capturing people, so we have to be concerned about complicity in torture,” says Michael Byers.

“The war fighting has to end, period. And you have to get into this other mode [assisting peacemaking]. Canada is playing both roles, which is not helpful,” says Mason.

One critic of the Canadian Kandahar mission from academe, Michael Byers, a lawyer and a Canada research chair in the political science department at the University of British Columbia, notes that the Canadian military is essentially returning to the combat role it played in January 2002, when it sent the Joint Task Force 2 commandos to Afghanistan.

At that time, human rights advocates like Byers raised concerns about Canadian soldiers handing over prisoners of war to American soldiers after US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated that the Geneva Convention would not apply to alleged perpetrators and sympathizers of the September 11 terrorist actions.

“Since then, the justification of torture in some cases by US government lawyers, as well as horrific revelations from US-run prisons at Abu Ghraib and Bagram should have given Canadian officials pause when considering new requests to send Canadian soldiers into the US-led coalition,” says Byers.

“There is a serious possibility that we will actually end up capturing people, so we have to be concerned about complicity in torture,” he says.

“Canadian soldiers anywhere in the world are legally obligated to follow both the Canadian Charter of Rights And Freedoms and the international 1984 Convention Against Torture,” Byers explains.

These requirements may be put to the test when Canadian soldiers in Kandahar hand over prisoners to the fledgling Afghan forces, whose members have been cited for abusing civilians, extorting from businesses and kidnapping locals for ransom and even sexual purposes, says a Human Rights Watch official. Thousands of Afghans have been arrested and detained during the insurgency. "We have been saying that the coalition forces have to work harder at actually monitoring the behaviour of the people they are working with," says John Sifton at the New-York-based HRW.

The Department of National Defence has stated that the rules of engagement for the Kandahar mission must be kept secret for security purposes.

Major Darren Steele of the Department of National Defence says he has difficulty commenting on reports associating the US-led coalition with abuse of civilians or torture. "I can't speak to that. How much of that is simply impressions and what people are reading into it?"

Steele says he expects Canadian soldiers to be engaged in reconstruction and peace-building work in Kandahar, as they have been under NATO in Kabul. "Once ISAF merges with the US-led Enduring Freedom coalition force next year," he says, "Canadian troops will be part of a multinational brigade."

"There is a continuity between the two missions," Steele says. "We are aware that the situation will be different in Kandahar and is going to be dangerous for many reasons. I would suggest that you take a look at the drug trade. That is a very significant risk and danger."

However, Steele also says that only about 250 Canadian soldiers will be part of a provincial reconstruction team (development work) and at least another 1000 members of the Canadian Forces will join US counterparts in patrols and security work.

Peace activists might have been shocked to hear NDP leader Jack Layton defend General Hillier's aggressive statements, but Layton says he was merely attempting to explain the general's remarks about "scumbags" in light of the London bombing, rather than supporting them. "I certainly never made any high praise of General Hillier when he referred to killing people. I was never asked about that quote."

In fact, he and his party are keen on having a national debate about the mission's altered mandate when MPs return to Parliament. NDP MP and defence critic Bill Blaikie adds that he does not agree with a DND statement that the rules of engagement for the Kandahar mission must be kept secret for security purposes. "I don't think that's a decision for the minister of defence to make, and if he wants to say it's something we can't know about, then he has to make that case."

Meanwhile, Sifton is skeptical that proposed dialogues with the disgruntled will succeed until the government of Hamid Karzai and its NATO backers come to grips with who is backing the attacks by the Taliban and other forces. "The solution would be a combination of pressuring leaders who take part in the violence as well as the Pakistani and even potentially the Iranian agents who fund the insurgents," Sifton says.

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