

Military in Canada to be used for threats to 'domestic front'

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Editor's Note

This report published in Toronto's National Post suggests that Canada is replicating the national security initiatives already launched in the US, which consist in using the military in the case of a domestic emergency.

In the US, there has been much discussion on the use of the military to curb social protest and civil unrest resulting from a deepening economic crisis.

Military readies reservists for threats to 'domestic front'

Adrian Humphreys, National Post, March 04, 2009

Reserve units across Canada are being trained in securing perimeters in case of an emergency. The Canadian military has embarked on a wide-ranging plan to turn its reserve soldiers into focused units trained and equipped to respond to a nightmarish array of domestic threats, including terrorist "dirty bomb" attacks, biological agent containment, Arctic catastrophes and natural disasters.

The creation of seven units within each region of the country — including unusual all-terrain vehicle (ATV) squadrons and perimeter security teams to cordon areas of potential devastation — prepares reserve soldiers for operations on the "domestic front" while freeing regular force soldiers to concentrate on foreign battlefields.

"There is a recognition, certainly within the military and we have heard the government say, that domestic security is the number one priority. A number of these conclusions come from the post-9/11 world we live in," said Brigadier-General Jean Collin, commander of the army in Ontario, during an exclusive interview with the National Post.

"The reality is an army needs to train, an army needs to equip itself and an army needs to be ready."

The remodeling of the reserves will see the development of specialist units in four of the military's regional divisions — Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario and the West. The units will include perimeter security teams prepared to cordon off an area if there was an atomic detonation, nuclear accident or similar source of wide contamination and "Arctic response" groups that are trained and equipped to live and operate in the far north.

The changes highlight both a renewed focus on domestic security and the increased role of reservists, who are part-time volunteer soldiers augmenting the ranks of full-time soldiers, who are referred to as the “regular” forces. The place of reserves in the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan was shown yesterday when one of three soldiers killed by a roadside bomb was a reservist from Ontario.

“Some of the stuff we are now asking the reservists to do is because we need them; because the regular force simply does not have sufficient people, sufficient resources, to do it on their own,” said Brig-Gen. Collin.

“And the reservists have certainly demonstrated that they have the capability to do all this and more.”

Brig-Gen. Collin, who has served in Bosnia and Afghanistan, has also been a special advisor to the Chief of the Defence Staff on homeland security issues.

The military divides operations into two broad divisions: away missions, such as the action in Afghanistan, called “expeditionary operations,” and home missions, such as helping with floods in Winnipeg, called “domestic operations.”

“The lead — the main contributor — for expeditionary operation is the regular force. They form the core for expeditionary operations and are augmented by reservists,” said Brig-Gen. Collin.

“What we have now said is that for domestic operations, the core will actually be provided by the reserve force, augmented by the regular force.

The reserves take a dominant role in domestic operations in the future, once they are properly equipped and trained to do so.”

The remodeling of the reserves, ordered at the start of 2009, is expected to take two to three years to complete.

The remodeling will also likely see the reserves play a larger role in domestic security situations, including the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver and the G8 summit of world leaders that has been announced for 2010 at a resort in Huntsville, 220 kilometres north of Toronto, he said.

The national plan places the reserves at the forefront of grim scenarios that are the stuff of apocalyptic Hollywood movies.

“We all know the threat from dirty bombs, chemical contaminants. This is certainly one of the more dangerous situations that can arise,” said Brig.-Gen. Collin.

“You can certainly get it from a terrorist act. You can also get it from a man-made disaster. You can get nuclear contamination from a nuclear power plant — Three Mile Island, Chernobyl.

“We are training to establish a perimeter. Do I see a scenario when we might be obliged to keep people in? Probably. You need to be trained to be able to make sure that you don’t become a casualty in the process of doing that security.”

The Arctic units — companies of about 120 people in each region, that can come together as a single force if needed — poses a challenge of a different sort, primarily training for the harsh conditions of the far north.

“We are going to have up to an entire battalion of soldiers who are prepared to go live and operate in the north and that entire battalion will come from the reserves. We are having them trained now, as we speak, to operate in the north,” said Brig.-Gen. Collin, who himself just returned from a visit to several remote aboriginal communities where he suffered though the deep cold in a military-issue tent.

“It was bloody cold... But you can dress, equip and operate up there if you know what you’re doing,” he said.

Currently, about 120 reservists from southern Ontario are involved in Exercise Polar Warrior, a week of training in Arctic warfare and survival in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, a First Nations community on Big Trout Lake. To equip the ATV Squadron, the first commercial vehicles are arriving in the coming months. They will not be armed or painted in camouflage and are not intended for combat use. They could be deployed in rural and remote areas to traverse wooded ravines or in an urban setting that has suffered devastation, such as an earthquake or massive explosion.

The plans also call for turning over responsibility for the force’s Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Units — mobile, high-capacity machines for cleaning water to drinkable standards — to the reserves. The machines have been used abroad, in Sri Lanka helping victims of the 2004 tsunami, and also domestically in Kashechewan, Ont., when the community’s water supply was tainted by E. coli bacteria in 2005.

David Bercuson, director of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, said the changes make sense given the current global security situation.

“Reserves are all local and spread out across the country. It seems to me the people best situated to help the first responders would be the reservists. It makes a lot of sense. Also, the regular force is so stretched and stressed right now,” said Mr. Bercuson.

Mr. Bercuson was surprised to hear, however, of envisioned scenarios that might require a form of constabulary or policing function for reserves in civilian containment and security.

“People in Ottawa sometimes forget that the reserves are volunteers. If you try to change the reserves in ways they don’t want to change, they just might not show up.”

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