

Rough Waters for Canada's War in Afghanistan

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On August 19-21, demonstrators across Canada will protest the conference of prime minister Stephen Harper, U.S. president George Bush, and Mexican president Felipe Calderon in Montebello, Quebec. The conference aims to promote the three countries' integration in a world-wide drive for profiteering, repression, and war, in which Canada's special assignment is to wage war on the people of Afghanistan. For information on the protests, contact the Canadian Peace Alliance at www.acp-cpa.ca.

Canada's political and military rulers are scrambling to salvage their part in the NATO-led war in Afghanistan. The stated goal of NATO and Canada — to destroy the resistance of Afghan fighters to foreign occupation — is proving very difficult to achieve. Popular support in Afghanistan for the resistance is on the rise, and the resistance is proving capable of shifting its battle tactics while remaining an effective fighting force.

Meanwhile, unease is growing at home as more and more media reports detail terrible suffering of the Afghan people under the regime of foreign occupation, and as the number of dead Canadian soldiers rises.

A slim but stubborn majority of Canadians refuses to support the war. Opposition is even higher in Quebec. There is mounting pressure on the federal government to stick to the previous government's vague promise to "end the mission" by February 2009. On June 22 hundreds of protesters marched in Quebec City to the site of a public sendoff of a new contingent of 2,500 Canadian soldiers to the war theatre. Protesters appealed to soldiers to refuse to serve. One brother of a female soldier went public with his appeals to her.

News all bad

Not much is going well for the Canadian warmakers on the ground. Sixty-six Canadian soldiers have died in Afghanistan since 2002; 22 since the beginning of 2007. Contrary to repeated boasts that Afghan resistance fighters are being killed in large numbers and driven out of action, resistance attacks are on the rise. Canadian troops are increasingly restricted to fortified compounds, able to travel only in heavily-armed convoys.

Even convoys are at risk. On July 26, the vehicle of the head of the Canadian armed forces in Afghanistan, Brigadier-General Tim Grant, narrowly missed being hit by a roadside bomb only a short distance from the main Canadian base in Kandahar city. The vehicle in front of him was blown off the road.

In most of Panjwai, a region where Canadian forces claimed an overwhelming military victory last year, resistance forces are again operating freely. A July 6 article in the *Globe and Mail* was headlined, "How Panjwai slipped out of control."

The most stalwart ally in the region of the foreign occupation of Afghanistan is the military dictatorship that rules Pakistan. But that regime is facing widespread and growing internal opposition, and it has proven utterly incapable of suppressing the use of Pakistan territory by Afghan resistance forces. In fact, to the embarrassment of NATO forces that refuse any and all negotiations, it signed a truce agreement with the “Taliban” earlier this year.

Torture and abuse

In late 2005, at the outset of its offensive in Kandahar, Canada announced that, like its U.S. ally, it does not consider itself bound to the Geneva Conventions governing the treatment of prisoners of war.

In April of this year, revelations of torture and abuse of Afghans detained by Canadian soldiers appeared once again in news reports across Canada. But this time the reports did not go away — they ignited several months of public debate on the issue. Canadian policy is to turn detained Afghans over to “Afghan authorities” when torture is required to extract information.

The government’s first claim was that it had arranged with the International Red Cross to guarantee the proper treatment of prisoners. “Not true”, said the Red Cross in an extraordinary statement denying the Canadian claim.

Then the government said it had received new guarantees from “Afghan authorities” for proper treatment in the future. That, too, was a lie. News reports quickly showed that few facilities and resources exist to verify such guarantees. Abuse of prisoners continues.

Finally the government and military authorities resorted to the tried and true method of occupation forces in a foreign land — they cut off the supply of information. Journalists no longer have access to the reports of prisoner treatment that the government and military receive.

Canadian soldiers themselves are targets of abuse by their own military. For example, the family of killed soldier Mathew Dinning went public in order to shame military authorities into paying the full cost of their son’s funeral. Other reports have detailed inadequate medical services for injured and returned soldiers, and enormous stresses on spouses and children of soldiers sent to the war theatre.

(Mistreatment of Canadian soldiers by the Canadian government is nothing new: 1,700 former military personnel or families have launched a class action lawsuit because they were deliberately sprayed with Agent Orange during chemical weapons testing on Canadian military bases during the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970’s. The military refuses to accept responsibility for its actions.)

Anti-women policies

Canadian and NATO claims to be fighting to liberate women in Afghanistan have also received a rough ride as reports have detailed the anti-women policies of the Afghan governing regime.

One of the few public voices for women’s rights in Afghanistan is elected member of parliament Malalai Joya. She was expelled from the parliament in May, in part for criticizing

the anti-women policies of the regime.

Humanitarian disaster continues

While Canada, the U.S., Britain and other NATO countries press on with a cruel and destructive war, millions of Afghan people suffer horrific conditions. Several million continue to live in refugee camps along Afghanistan's borders. According to the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees, Afghans are the second largest group of refugees in the world, second only to Palestinians.

A glimpse of life in the rural areas of the country was given to readers of the CanWest newspaper chain in Canada on July 28 by correspondent Don Martin. Headlined, "Children starving in Kandahar area," the article describes a daylong tour by Martin and a hired guide on the outskirts of Kandahar city.

"Kids are starving in Kandahar and the surrounding refugee camps," wrote Martin. "And the allegation leveled by the Senlis Council, an international think tank now branching into humanitarian relief, is that the Canadian government won't help and doesn't care." He says he set out on his trip in order to prove or disprove the Senlis accusation.

His conclusion? He saw starving children everywhere he went and witnessed very little medical care and no public education. "The whole day was an unsettling experience."

"Could Canada make a difference? Absolutely. Should it do more? Seems obvious to me."

Martin's report echoes what the Senlis Council has been reporting for several years throughout Afghanistan. Its reports are ignored by mainstream news outlets in Canada and elsewhere.

Indifference to shocking conditions

Former Vancouver paramedic Edward McCormick gave a similarly disturbing report to CanWest on February 17. In January, in a mission sponsored by the Senlis Council, he spent one month examining conditions in hospitals in Kandahar and British-occupied Hellman province. Conditions in the hospitals shocked him.

Kandahar city's main hospital, he reported, "is filthy and there is absolutely no medical equipment to be found anywhere." Patients, including children, are dying needlessly from war wounds.

In a particularly damning comment on the Canadian military, McCormick says, "There is no sign of foreign aid in those hospitals."

"The foreign army doctors have never bothered to go over and say hello." Canada's lavish home base in Kandahar is only a few kilometers up the road from the hospital that McCormick examined.

"There is a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan," he concludes, "and the neglect that continues to be demonstrated in Ottawa is fueling support for the insurgency."

Civilians are regularly killed in large numbers by aerial and artillery bombardments. NATO forces no longer call these "mistakes" —they are now regarded as just an unfortunate price

of war.

Reports such as these parallel reports of the ugly reality of Iraq under U.S. and British occupation. A new report by the aid agency OXFAM at the end of July finds eight million people in Iraq in urgent need of food and medical aid. The lack of clean water and reliable electricity for much of the country is having devastating consequences for the population.

Government campaign

The Conservative government of Stephen Harper is undeterred. It says the war will go on until “victory” is achieved, however long that may take. Harper underlined his commitment by visiting the war zone in May. “Terrorism will come home if we don’t confront it,” in Afghanistan, he told assembled journalists.

But there is growing unease even among the war’s supporters. The government and military now say they have a plan to turn fighting over to an “Afghan National Army” under construction. Faced with growing concern over Canadian casualties, they propose to eliminate that problem by putting more Afghans in the line of fire.

“The way to essentially reduce the risk is to have more Afghans doing the work,” said the new head of the Canadian forces in Afghanistan, Brigadier-General Guy Laroche, on July 27.

But the foreign overseers of this “army” do not trust it enough to provide vehicles, advanced weapons, or personal armour. Afghan police and soldiers regularly abuse and steal from the very civilian population whose “hearts and minds” they are supposed to win.

The government’s minister of defense, Gordon O’Connor, has so often lied and contradicted military officials that many war advocates including the country’s leading daily newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, have called for his resignation

Meanwhile, important voices are speaking out against the war. James Clancy, national president of the National Union of Public and General Employees, issued a statement in late July saying, “The proud and independent Afghani people oppose the occupation of their land by foreign troops. The insurgency is gaining ground by uniting people around the goal of forcing the foreign soldiers out. The simple fact is that things are not improving in Afghanistan – they are getting worse. It is doubtful that the presence of foreign troops can ever bring the peace and stability the people so desperately desire.”

Even the timid New Democratic Party has stepped up its voice in opposition to the war. Last year, it and the Bloc Québécois party voted in the Canadian parliament to oppose a two-year extension, to 2009, of the Canadian mission.

War will go on

Criticism of the war will continue to mount, but so will the government’s stubborn pursuit of it, because the aims of this war go beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Canada has committed to spending billions of dollars on new military equipment and new fighting capacity — new tanks and helicopters; Canada’s first mobile fighter jet squadron ready for deployment anywhere in the world; new ships; and countless other items.

Why all this new hardware? Earlier this year, the army’s head, Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie, explained that the resources there are not for Afghanistan alone. “Let’s not kid

ourselves," he said. Too much has been invested.

"It is logical to expect that we will go somewhere fairly similar to Afghanistan and do much the same activity."

Iran? The oil fields of central Asia? Venezuela's troublesome revolution? The list of potential targets is long, but the government and military's hand is not as free as they would have us believe. Determined antiwar campaigning can play a decisive role in blocking Canada's imperial ambitions, and is needed more than ever today.

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