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The sword or the pen? Future of Canada's mission in Afghanistan will be hotly debated in coming months

By **MURRAY BREWSTER**, The Canadian Press

As Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan enters its third full year, there's increasing pressure on Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government to do more talking than fighting.

The opposition parties are adamant the mission end on schedule in January 2009 or even earlier. The Canadian public, meanwhile, has grown weary of — or resigned to — the steady procession of casualties since early 2006.

Mounting calls for dialogue rather than war become harder to ignore when key allies, such as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, encourage President Hamid Karzai to give moderate elements of the Taliban places in Afghanistan's new government.

A former diplomat who knows the region intimately says the Conservatives have done little to encourage negotiation and it's time they started.

"I see very little diplomacy going on," said Louis Delvoie, Canada's former high commissioner to Pakistan in the early 1990s.

"Much of the diplomacy seems to be focused on developing relations with other NATO countries as opposed to bringing the Afghan government along in certain directions, which might make it more congenial to its own population and might make it more congenial to neighbouring Pakistan, among others."

The criticism comes as an independent panel, headed by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley, reviews the future of Canada's military commitment and prepares recommendations early in the new year. The Conservatives made it clear in their fall throne speech they'd like to see Canada's mission extended until 2011.

But to succeed in Afghanistan, and honour the loss of 73 soldiers and one diplomat, Harper will need to emphasize discourse rather than defence, Delvoie said.

Pakistan is key to Afghanistan's future — and not just because it houses Taliban training camps, said Delvoie. Canada needs to prod the Afghan government to make Pakistan feel more secure.

A good start would be to persuade the Karzai government to accept the Durand Line, Afghanistan's 2,640-km southern border with Pakistan drawn by the British, which the Afghans declared invalid in 1949, he said.

"This would go a long way towards meeting Pakistan's long-standing concerns about its territorial integrity," he said.

Delvoie says encouraging Karzai to portray himself as head of a multi-ethnic government would ease Pakistani concerns about restive Pashtun tribes that straddle the border of both countries and make up the bulk of insurgent fighters. It would also take internal pressure off the embattled Pakistani government.

Mastering the complexities and rivalries of the war-torn region was a major preoccupation of the Canadian Forces throughout 2007, says Canada's top military commander.

"We have tried to put in place (a system) where the (military) leaders get a PhD in tribal structures and the tribal culture of southern Afghanistan," said Gen. Rick Hillier, chief of defence staff.

Deployment training, straight from generals all the way down to foot soldiers, now places a special emphasis on culture, local politics and development. There's a growing realization that a guerrilla war cannot be won through force of arms alone.

It is a lesson that has been drilled into both the government and the army through months of bloody, frustrating combat in 2007 where Canadians have been forced to retake the same ground again and again.

"We have learned we really have to take a comprehensive approach. This is not just a gunfight," said Col. Dennis Thompson, who will take over command of Joint Task Force Afghanistan early in the new year.

Just as Canadians have grudgingly recognized this could be a long war, Thompson tempers his own expectations. He describes his job as "advancing the yardsticks."

If he can return to Canada next year and leave his counterpart, an Afghan brigadier-general, "confident that he can perform his function" by providing more security, then it will be mission accomplished, Thompson said.

Throughout 2007, the Canadian International Development Agency has faced criticism for not being seen to move aid and development along more quickly. Conventional wisdom holds that the faster you put unemployed Afghans, particularly young men of fighting age, to work, the less likely they'll be to join the Taliban.

The European-based Senlis Council has called for CIDA to be removed from managing some \$1.2 billion being poured into the country in favour of a special envoy. It has also demanded the military deliver immediate reconstruction and humanitarian aid in Kandahar, where organizations such as the United Nations and others face threats and intimidation.

"Bullshit," thundered Graham Lowe, former head of the UN Habitat program in Afghanistan. By cleaning irrigation canals and sponsoring entrepreneurs, Canada encourages stable, long-term development.

"You go in and do something quickly," he said, "it's visible. The only reason you want something visible is you want people to say how wonderful Canada is. If we're not noticed, then we're probably doing a better job."

But Lowe said there can be a paternalistic bias in Western countries.

"We go into development thinking we have all the answers," said Lowe, who spent the better part of two years in Afghanistan.

"There is expertise in how to get things done and that expertise comes from the locals. If you're smart, you tap into it. We're so busy showing the 'darkies' what to do, whoever they are, they could be Ukrainians, instead of listening to what their problems are and reaching out to create that marriage of (our) experience and their expertise."

CIDA argues its current approach, which involves consulting local elders, hiring local contractors and paying Afghans for make-work projects, constitutes tapping into Kandahar expertise.

But none of it is happening fast enough for Canadians or Afghans, who are impatient to see improvements in their lives.

