



## Military plans to spam Afghans this summer

**Canadian military propagandists plan to bombard Afghans' cellphones with texts and contest offers**

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OTTAWA – Canada plans to boost its propaganda reach by tapping into mobile phones in Afghanistan to send text messages, run contests and drive listeners to its military-run, Pashto-language radio station.

It's a fairly crude, transparent tactic in the high science of counter-insurgency, but the military sees it as a way to better connect with local Afghans in a war-torn land where the cellphone is one of the fastest growing, and only reliable, means of communication.

The capability, to be set up this summer, will encourage Afghans to sign up for text-message alerts from defence officials and to enter military-run contests awarding prizes to lucky locals, according to public tendering documents.

It will also let Afghans send text messages to Rana-FM, a radio station set up by the military in 2006, and have them read on the air, half a world away at the broadcast centre in Kingston, Ont. The station, whose name means "light" in Pashto, is staffed by Afghan-Canadians, and mixes messages from Canadian and coalition officials with news programming and popular music aimed at teenage and young adult listeners in Kandahar.

Rana-FM manager David Bailey described the station in 2007 as key to "winning the information war" against the Taliban and demystifying Canada and Canadians for Afghan listeners. Defence department officials were unable yesterday to comment on the new text-message initiative.

The hearts-and-minds effort could serve a double purpose by allowing Canada's secretive intelligence arm, the Communications Security Establishment, to gain a foothold in the Kandahar community, track cellphone signals and listen in on conversations, experts say.

"There are other capabilities that come with cellphone information, certainly," said John Thompson, an intelligence expert with the Mackenzie Institute in Toronto. "But I think one of the problems is that southern Afghanistan is not one of the most well-served markets in the world for that sort of thing."

The number of mobile phone users in Afghanistan has grown to about 5 million from virtually none at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, according to reports and estimates. One estimate suggested 150,000 new users were buying the phones each

month in the country.

John Adams, head of the CSE, revealed in 2007 that his agency is heavily involved in the Afghan mission, which accounts for about a quarter of its work. Though he wouldn't elaborate on the nature of that work, intelligence experts say Canadian agents in Ottawa would be tracking emails, cellphone calls and signals and various other scraps of information soldiers pick up from insurgent groups.

The Taliban's use of mobile phones for both operational and propaganda purposes is well-documented. A report last year by the respected International Crisis Group noted insurgent leaders are adept at communicating with their counterparts by phone and text message to co-ordinate movements and that they use cellphone signals to detonate roadside bombs. They also use the phones to keep in touch with foreign journalists and threaten locals suspected of collaborating with western military forces.

But the Taliban are also aware that NATO forces are watching and able to track their communications. They take great steps to try to fly under the intelligence radar, said Wesley Wark, an intelligence expert at the University of Toronto.

As a result, he said, establishing a fairly basic text-messaging system likely won't do much to help Canadian soldiers capture bomb makers and Taliban commanders, though it could help gauge the mood of the population as Ottawa's new strategy of development work and intensified aid efforts catches on.

"You could see it in an auxiliary fashion as a kind of soft-edged tool that might be useful for intelligence purposes, but more to keep your finger on the pulse of Afghan opinion," Wark said.

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