

Table of Contents

<u>Explain Afghan mission better; Peter MacKay sees selling mission to public as big part of job.....</u>	1
<u>Rejuvenating our Canadian Armed Forces.....</u>	3
<u>Lives are saved, but a country is lost.....</u>	6
<u>Leaving Afghanistan is no answer.....</u>	8
<u>Leaving Afghanistan is no answer.....</u>	9
<u>Leaving Afghanistan is no answer.....</u>	10
<u>Canadian gains retaken by Taliban in Kandahar; Lack of troops leaves captured land unsecured.....</u>	11
<u>Leaving Afghanistan is no answer.....</u>	13
<u>Troops braced for more action.....</u>	14
<u>25 SUSPECTED MILITANTS KILLED IN U.S.-LED ATTACK.....</u>	15
<u>Leaving Afghanistan is no answer.....</u>	17
<u>Killed Canuck soldier back on Canadian soil.....</u>	18
<u>Leaving Afghanistan is no answer.....</u>	20
<u>Hostages return to South Korea; Seoul criticized for negotiating with Taliban to end Christian volunteers' 6-week ordeal.....</u>	21
<u>Key areas reportedly lost to Taliban; Afghan police cite lack of Canadian support as insurgents regain control.....</u>	23
<u>All eyes on Kandahar.....</u>	25
<u>Insurgent base destroyed in overnight battle.....</u>	26
<u>Taliban retake key Kandahar sites: report; Afghan forces can't hold ground after Canadian troops move on.....</u>	27
<u>A desert oasis they call the Maple Leaf.....</u>	29
<u>Sombre return for freed hostages; Apologize for putting S. Korea through ordeal.....</u>	31
<u>Canadians left Afghan cops without backup: report; Insurgency retakes ground. Lack of NATO troops leaves 'ineffective' local forces to defend against Taliban.....</u>	33

Table of Contents

<u>Maple offers hint of home in Kabul.....</u>	35
<u>Emails offer slice of life at Kandahar Air Field.....</u>	36
<u>INSIDE.....</u>	41
<u>THE AFGHAN MISSION Latest developments.....</u>	42
<u>THE AFGHAN MISSION 'Boomer's Legacy' honours fallen soldier's memory Grieving mother creates 'grassroots' fund to support Afghan families, allowing soldiers on the ground to decide where money goes.....</u>	43
<u>THE AFGHAN MISSION We're out by February '09, MacKay says Harper government tells NATO Canada's military mission to Kandahar has an 'expiration date' in 20 months.....</u>	45
<u>'Go to your Gawd like a soldier'.....</u>	48
<u>'Go to your Gawd like a soldier'.....</u>	49
<u>'Go to your Gawd like a soldier'.....</u>	50
<u>Afghan swap: illegal for legal.....</u>	51
<u>THE AFGHAN MISSION Stay, Canada: There are real fixes to the opium glut Poppy eradication is a bad idea. But what about limited credit to farmers, new irrigation methods and a return to fabled fruits?.....</u>	52
<u>Taliban retake ground lost to Canadians.....</u>	55

Explain Afghan mission better; Peter MacKay sees selling mission to public as big part of job

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Peter MacKay, the newly minted defence minister, says the government has to do a better job of telling Canadians about the progress being made in Afghanistan.

MacKay, who swapped foreign affairs for defence in the cabinet shuffle two weeks ago, is still boning up on the details of his new ministry. But he clearly sees that selling Afghanistan to a skeptical public is a big part of the job.

"We have to articulate, perhaps a bit more forcefully, just what we've been able to accomplish," he said in an interview with The Canadian Press.

His predecessor, Gordon O'Connor, who was moved to the Canada Revenue Agency in the shuffle, was perceived as a stiff, even uncomfortable speaker when it came to offering a vision of the Afghan mission.

Public opinion polls have shown growing opposition to Canada's combat role in the country. Pollsters suggest the growing casualty lists — 70 dead and counting since 2002 — seem to be fuelling that opposition.

MacKay said the emotion surrounding the casualties can overshadow what's been accomplished.

"That's not to in any way diminish the sacrifice, but people have to translate that. These are sacrifices that have paid enormous dividends."

He said he wants Canadians to understand that there has been progress and that progress is directly linked to the military presence which helps provide the stability needed for development.

"In my opinion, there's a lot of important, tangible evidence and information that has to be relayed to the public more effectively."

Canada and its NATO allies are helping "to bring peace and security and stability to that country that for decades has been war-torn," he said.

Canadians need to hear about "the millions of Afghans who have returned, the six million children who are now in schools — who were not there previously — that fact that girls can attend school where they couldn't previously, the fact that women can not only work and contribute and access micro finance to help feed and clothe their families, but they can even sit in the government."

"These are landmark changes that have occurred during the last five and six years."

He spoke of infrastructure improvements, from wells and roads to schools, hospitals and clinics.

Rejuvenating our Canadian Armed Forces

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BYLINE: Colin Kenny The Canadian Senate
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If there were a national contest to determine the most active, robust, blood-stirring institution in Canada, the Canadian Forces would probably win — and deservedly so. While citizens are divided over the value of the current mission to Afghanistan, the image of Canadian soldiers hasn't glowed more brightly for a long time.

On the other hand, if there were a contest for the most passive, drowsy, turgid institution in Canada, the Canadian Senate would probably win. I firmly believe that senators often produce more useful work than those elected folks over in the Commons. But I can't deny that we have an image problem.

Let's get back to the Canadian Forces. Which institution has a more useful vision of Canada's military — the Commons, or the Senate?

Our national government rules the country from the Commons. The primary role of that national government should be the physical protection of its citizens, plus the advancement of their interests at home and abroad. To do this effectively a country needs a military with a little muscle on its bones.

Not everybody agrees. There are many Canadians who decry the use of military force generally. But anyone who lives in the real world knows that tyrants don't bend to diplomatic pressure unless there is the threat of force behind that pressure. We're simply not going to help contribute to a better world by eviscerating our military.

I believe that the people who have been running our country for the past couple of decades, Liberals or Conservatives, have declined to invest reasonable amounts of public money into Canada's military. I also think that this is likely to leave the physical, economic and cultural protection of future Canadians largely to chance.

How can I lump the Conservative government currently ruling the country with the preceding Liberal governments that allowed our military to slip into such steep decline? Aren't the Conservatives out announcing that they intend to buy all kinds of expensive weaponry? Didn't they extend the Canadian mission in Afghanistan?

I acknowledge that "yes" is the honest response.

But the greater truth is that Canada currently spends about half of what reasonable (and peace-loving) countries spend on defence, and the Conservative government's announced budgetary planning would do almost nothing to change that.

Countries like the Netherlands spend about two per cent of Gross National Product on their armed forces. That's pretty well the norm for mid-sized industrialized countries that use their military judiciously, rather than aggressively.

Back in 1991 Canada spent 1.6 per cent of GNP on defence. We're now down to about 1.1 per cent. Although the long-overdue "Canada First Defence Strategy" has yet to be released, spending options have been leaked and none of them would change that percentage by more than a hair.

Yes, the "new" government has set aside money for military equipment, but nearly all of these are purchases that even the frugal Liberals would have to have made.

Meanwhile, the transformation and growth of the Canadian Forces promised under the stewardship of Gen. Rick Hillier is in disarray. Transformation can only take place if a lot of experienced, insightful officers are giving it their full attention. With Afghanistan at the centre of everything, this can't happen.

Growth and transformation will require a lot more personnel, more equipment, and most importantly, more money. If Prime Minister Steven Harper doesn't come through with the money, he is going to leave Gen. Hillier and his hamstrung plans for Canada's military out to dry.

Of course the Afghanistan mission is sucking vital funds away from the rebuilding initiative. The price tag for Afghanistan — without salaries — will undoubtedly be well over \$4 billion by February 2009.

But while Afghanistan certainly contributes to the problem of rebuilding Canada's military, the crux of the problem is lack of political will. This lack of will is based on what various national parties think they can get away during election campaigns.

One minority party, the NDP, is naïve, bordering on pacifist. The other, the Bloc Québécois, would undoubtedly be willing to spend plenty on creating viable armed forces for Quebec, but not for Canada.

The Liberals are not pacifists. But Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin spent a decade fighting debt on the back of the Canadian Forces, and Stéphane Dion has shown no sign that he considers military reconstruction a national priority.

The Conservatives have been clever.

By default, they have already won the votes of most people who pay attention to military issues; people who believe that sovereign states need a reasonable military capacity to protect citizens against foreign and domestic threats.

These people may well understand that there isn't much of a chance that this government intends to spend the money required to bring Canada's military capacity up to respectable, Dutch-like standards.

But what other party are they going to vote for? At least the Conservatives make the occasional gesture.

But the Conservatives have no intention of alienating that vast array of Canadian voters who believe that our nation should be peaceful, and friendly, and very unlike those war-mongering Americans.

So the government refuses to commit to more than token increases in military expenditures.

It will honour its election commitment to spending approximately \$1 billion a year over and above what its Liberal predecessors were spending.

Most of that money will be eaten up by Afghanistan.

Which brings us back to my mention of the Senate, which I claimed sometimes does things better than the Commons does.

One thing the Senate does better is not playing these sleight-of-hand political games. Being unelected, it doesn't have to.

So the Senate can be honest. The Senate, through our Committee on National Security and Defence, can tell you that if this government's military spending plans continue on course until 2011–12, Canada's defence budget will be about \$21 billion in that budgetary year.

It can also add up the basic needs of the military by then, without any frills, and inform you that a more realistic budget for a reasonably-funded Armed Forces would be more than \$30 billion in 2011–12.

And I can tell you that our Committee came to that conclusion (a in a bipartisan, unanimous way, and b) without taking the cost of the extended Afghanistan mission into consideration.

Nobody likes this kind of ugly honesty.

But, like it or not, Canadians deserve to know what no Canadian political party seems brave enough to tell them: that if Canada is going to be prepared for the foreign and domestic crises that are likely to come at us, that preparedness is going to cost quite a bit more money than the politicians are pretending it is.

That's the message from the Senate. Just trying to earn our keep.

n Senator Colin Kenny is Chair of the Senate Committee on National Security and Defence.

Lives are saved, but a country is lost

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Foreign governments might as well open up a concession stand in Afghanistan.

For sale: Good intentions.

Trade-ins accepted.

The Taliban will give us hostages; we'll give them authenticity. Crisis resolved on our side, specious legitimacy accrued on theirs.

There is rejoicing among the insurgent cadres in Afghanistan, their leaders afforded the unspeakable privilege of marching unmolested into Kabul, under a white flag of diplomatic immunity, then conducting a news conference to bask in their blood-soaked triumphalism.

A duly elected central government, straining for authority and assailed on all sides, could do nothing but watch, reduced to impotent bystanders in their own country.

Everyone understands the implications of South Korea's successful "negotiations" last week for the return of 19 Christian missionaries, two others executed, the Taliban making their point early in the game: They can abduct and murder at will.

And they intend, as clearly stated, to do a lot more of that, because seizing on the defenceless – aid workers, humanitarian staff, idealists and naifs – is even more effective than attacking military convoys and blowing up soldiers.

So many new fronts opening up all the time, for the Taliban, and foreigners so much more high-value as abductees than Afghan civilians – teachers, district representatives, civil servants, interpreters – whose mutilated bodies are dumped unceremoniously alongside the road.

In South Korea, initial relief over the freed captives – their return secured by government officials sent from Seoul to mediate with Taliban representatives – has quickly been superseded by outrage and something approaching shame. It's unclear what the negotiators promised – allegedly \$20 million, which Seoul denies. South Korea had, even before these dreadful events, announced it would be pulling out its modest troop contribution (200 soldiers) by year's end.

In case there was any doubt how this money will be used, a Taliban spokesperson made it crystal clear to Reuters: Treasure for even more suicide bombers, more weaponry, more improvised explosive devices, more mayhem.

Well done, South Korea.

Of course, they haven't been alone in striking deals with the Taliban. Italy also paid through the nose, it's believed, for the release of an abducted journalist, but not his Afghan interpreter, who was decapitated. And no one's too sure what conniving is afoot as other governments seek release of their nationals, including private contractors, still held.

Only the most witless – or pathologically appeasing – would argue that deal– making on the side indicates the Taliban are open to civilized detente, willing to sit down around the negotiating table when properly bribed.

Such private arrangements foster a perverse patina of reasonableness, investing the Taliban with phony credentials as a parallel regime. It rewards tyranny, intimidation and crimes against humanity.

The missionary aspect of these Korean Christians is beside the point. No evidence has surfaced that they were proselytizing. Presumably they were following their philanthropic conscience – an element of all faiths – in helping to better the lives of the poor and disenfranchised.

But it's not just the religiously active who will be further scared off Afghanistan, a shattered nation that needs all the humanitarian help it can get. Targeted murder of staff drove away Medecins Sans Frontieres three years ago. Reconstruction, as sluggish as it is, will grind to a complete halt as contributing countries and independent contractors flee so perilous an environment.

Which is precisely the point. The Taliban don't want an even marginally functional Afghanistan because stability threatens their oppressive imperative: Troops out, aid agencies out, reconstruction crews out, educators and civil administrators out.

It's the Taliban that kills to convert and fledgling rule of law the "cult" that can't be countenanced.

In negotiating with them, sense and sanity are ransomed.

Rosie DiManno usually appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

Leaving Afghanistan is no answer

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As opposition politicians scramble to score political points on Afghanistan, Stephane Dion's position bears the most scrutiny because his party has the only chance of replacing the government.

On the Liberal party website, we read: "In the face of a mounting insurgency in Afghanistan, and with fading support from our NATO partners, our troops are facing an increasingly difficult mission. We owe it to our soldiers to develop a strategy that will achieve real results in establishing a lasting peace."

But last week Dion said: "I want the prime minister to say right away that we are out of the combat mission in February 2009."

If the Liberals think that'll bring "real results," they really should update their website.

Dion says Canadians could do development and humanitarian work or help train Afghan soldiers and "provide security in certain provinces" -- in other words like what some European NATO countries do in the so-far safer zones.

While that line might work with focus groups, there is no development without security. Australian counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen, now an adviser to U.S. Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq, hit the nail on the head.

A Dec. 18, 2006, New Yorker article says Kilcullen met senior European officers with the NATO force in Afghanistan applying "a development model to counterinsurgency," hoping that gratitude for good work would do the trick. "The gratitude effect," Kilcullen said, "will last until the sun goes down and the insurgents show up and say, 'You're on our side, aren't you? Otherwise, we're going to kill you.'"

That harsh reality is why Retired Maj.-Gen. Lewis Mackenzie recently called for at least another 10,000 NATO combat troops in the south.

Dion doesn't answer the tough question -- who will replace the Canadians? As with the Europeans, the unstated answer is Let George Do it. The sorry pattern is familiar: The Europeans won't do their share of the heavy lifting, but are then quick to accuse the Americans of unilateralism.

Meanwhile, can we expect to see Dion touring Europe, encouraging NATO allies to step up to the plate?

Don't hold your breath.

Leaving Afghanistan is no answer

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Canadian gains retaken by Taliban in Kandahar; Lack of troops leaves captured land unsecured

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ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Reuters, File / In July, Canadian Pte. Mark Amos looks for Taliban insurgents moments after shots rang out near a lookout post in southern Afghanistan. ;
KEYWORDS: CANADIANS; WAR; WORLD WAR I; TERRORISM
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
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OTTAWA – The Taliban has reoccupied strategically important areas around the city of Kandahar, including ground won by Canadian forces in deadly battles last year, says a report published Sunday.

"The setback is part of a bloody stalemate that has occurred between NATO troops and Taliban fighters across southern Afghanistan this summer," says the front-page report in the New York Times.

After Canadian troops gained control of Panjwai district last fall, they withdrew from parts of the area, leaving them in the hands of largely ineffectual Afghan government forces.

This summer, however, insurgents returned and overran police-held bases or checkpoints. In one such attack on Aug. 7, police called for help from Canadian forces, but 16 police officers were dead by the time soldiers arrived several hours later, says the report.

"Syed Aqa Saqib, Kandahar's provincial police chief, said Canadian and Afghan forces began withdrawing from four checkpoints and two small bases in Panjwai in early July," says the report.

Those withdrawals coincided with the August rotation of soldiers from the Royal Canadian Regiment, with fresh troops from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment.

Saqib told the newspaper the pullback left two police posts relatively unprotected.

The account highlights one of the biggest problems facing the NATO mission in southern Afghanistan -- a lack of troops. With only a single infantry battalion to secure all of Kandahar province, and fewer than 1,000 fighting soldiers, Canadian forces can capture ground in battle, but like their coalition allies, they lack the numbers needed to hold it.

At least 30 Canadian soldiers were killed, and dozens more wounded, during operations last year to kill and root out insurgents from the districts around Kandahar.

Canada and its allies therefore rely on Afghan police to hold strategic areas. But the Afghan police are notoriously unreliable, underpaid, and poorly trained and equipped.

The New York Times quotes the Panjwai police chief as saying he has only 64 novice police officers to defend the district against hundreds of Taliban.

Despite such challenges, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Sunday that the increasing reliance on Afghan government forces is one of the success stories of the war. Canadian sacrifices in Kandahar "have paved the way for incredible progress," he said in a CTV television interview.

MacKay's comments signalled the start of a new public relations campaign by the Conservative government this weekend to highlight the successes of the mission and sell the war to Canadians.

"I think you're going to see a more concerted effort to make those statements and demonstrate the progress that has come about because of the work of our military," MacKay said.

An internal United Nations report paints a different picture.

The report says violence has spiked across southern Afghanistan over the past year. The number of "reported security incidents" -- from bombings and firefights to cases of Taliban intimidation -- is up to about 500 a month this year from roughly 400 a month last year, the Times says.

Meanwhile the UN report says about 2,500 to 3,000 people -- a quarter of them civilians -- have died from insurgency-related violence this year, a 20-per-cent increase over 2006.

MacKay's office and the Defence Department were not available Sunday to respond to the New York Times story.

Leaving Afghanistan is no answer

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Don't hold your breath.

Troops braced for more action

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ILLUSTRATION: photo of MICHEL GAUTHIER
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: OTTAWA
WORD COUNT: 238

Despite successful targeted raids over the last month, Canadian soldiers in southern Afghanistan can expect some "tough slogging" before this year's fighting season ends, says a senior military commander.

But any military action in the Kandahar region over the coming months will likely pale in comparison to Operation Medusa, a NATO-led offensive that one year ago ultimately cost a dozen Canadian soldiers their lives, says Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, the commander of Canadian troops overseas.

"Challenges lay ahead. It's going to be tough slogging without question," Gauthier said in an interview in advance of the anniversary of Medusa.

"With the prospect of some light at the end of the tunnel, I have difficulty imagining the need to conduct another Medusa-like operation."

Canadian forces have recently focused efforts on smaller combat operations, capturing or taking out specific people, including Taliban leaders and bomb builders.

"We have conducted some targeted operations over the course of the last month which have seen . . . a number of known bomb-makers and commanders . . . apprehended, detained or otherwise taken off the streets," Gauthier said.

But there have been no large-scale operations of the magnitude of Operation Medusa, which began over the Labour Day weekend of 2006 and involved nearly all of Canada's combat forces on the ground in Kandahar, as well as British, American and Afghan troops.

Operation Medusa came at a time when Taliban forces were grouping for a fight, and waging a propaganda battle against the residents of Kandahar City, distributing DVDs depicting the killing of foreign "sympathizers," and warning of a similar fate for anyone who opposed them. **KEYWORDS=WORLD**

25 SUSPECTED MILITANTS KILLED IN U.S.-LED ATTACK

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2. photo by J.P. Moczulski, CP 1. Defence Minister Peter MacKay greets a group of veterans outside the gates of CFB Trenton to pay their respects before a repatriation ceremony for Maj. Raymond Ruckpaul yesterday. 2. Relatives of Ruckpaul embrace during the repatriation ceremony. The 42-year-old father of two was found in his barracks in Afghanistan on Aug. 29 after being "significantly injured" by a gunshot wound. He died about an hour later. Since then, family members have reported that the military has offered no explanation as to how Ruckpaul died. MacKay and Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier were similarly tight-lipped at yesterday's ceremony, offering no comment on the soldier's death. Both men addressed the dozens of civilians who had gathered to show their support and shook hands with them through a chain-link fence. Four unidentified family members gathered on the tarmac as the plane bearing Ruckpaul's body arrived. They walked slowly behind the casket as it was carried to a waiting hearse. Ruckpaul, the 70th soldier to die in Afghanistan since 2002, lived in Germany with his wife and two children. The Hamilton native joined the armed forces prior to studying geology at McMaster University. photo by AP TEARFUL REUNION: Lee Sung-eun, one of the 19 released South Korean hostages, meets with her mother on her arrival at a hospital in Anyang, west of Seoul, South Korea, yesterday.

BYLINE: SUN MEDIA NEWS SERVICES
WORD COUNT: 381

– U.S.-led coalition troops, aided by air strikes, killed 25 suspected militants during raids on a Taliban command centre in southern Afghanistan, the coalition said yesterday. The force targeted two compounds southwest of Kandahar city late Saturday after weeks of observing the area, it said. "Local residents had been seen leaving the area for the last few weeks and intelligence has suggested insurgent commanders were attempting to re-establish their control in the area," it said. The clashes left 25 suspected militants dead, the coalition said. No coalition or Afghan soldiers were injured, it added. More than 4,200 people — most of them insurgents — have been killed so far this year, according to an Associated Press count. This year the southern and eastern provinces have seen the worst bout of violence since the Taliban were ousted from power by a U.S.-led invasion in 2001. The surge in violence comes despite the presence of more than 50,000 foreign troops and 110,000 Afghan police and military officers.

– Nineteen South Koreans freed by Taliban insurgents after six weeks in captivity returned home to tearful embraces from loved ones yesterday, expressing sorrow for two in their group who were killed in Afghanistan and apologizing to the country. The former hostages, let go in stages last week under a deal between the insurgents and the South Korean government, arrived on a flight from Dubai. After undergoing medical checks at a hospital in Anyang, just south of Seoul, they were reunited with their family members. After the hugs and tears, some got a strict tongue-lashing. "I thought you would be killed," Cheon Kwang-sil, 77, told her granddaughter Lee Young-kyung, who at 22 was the youngest of the hostages. "I told you not to go there." Lee, who looked thin and pale with hands marked by insect bites, said she spent 20 days of captivity in a cellar. "I was really scared the whole time," she said, adding she wasn't able to eat well. "I drank water from

a stream." KEYWORDS=WORLD

Leaving Afghanistan is no answer

SOURCETAG 0709030298
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: 10
BYLINE: ED FEUER
COLUMN: Editorial
WORD COUNT: 303

As opposition politicians scramble to score political points on Afghanistan, Stephane Dion's position bears the most scrutiny because his party has the only chance of replacing the government.

On the Liberal party website, we read: "In the face of a mounting insurgency in Afghanistan, and with fading support from our NATO partners, our troops are facing an increasingly difficult mission. We owe it to our soldiers to develop a strategy that will achieve real results in establishing a lasting peace."

But last week Dion said: "I want the prime minister to say right away that we are out of the combat mission in February 2009."

If the Liberals think that'll bring "real results," they really should update their website.

Dion says Canadians could do development and humanitarian work or help train Afghan soldiers and "provide security in certain provinces" -- in other words like what some European NATO countries do in the so-far safer zones.

While that line might work with focus groups, there is no development without security. Australian counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen, now an adviser to U.S. Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq, hit the nail on the head.

A Dec. 18, 2006, New Yorker article says Kilcullen met senior European officers with the NATO force in Afghanistan applying "a development model to counterinsurgency," hoping that gratitude for good work would do the trick. "The gratitude effect," Kilcullen said, "will last until the sun goes down and the insurgents show up and say, 'You're on our side, aren't you? Otherwise, we're going to kill you.'"

That harsh reality is why Retired Maj.-Gen. Lewis Mackenzie recently called for at least another 10,000 NATO combat troops in the south.

Dion doesn't answer the tough question -- who will replace the Canadians? As with the Europeans, the unstated answer is Let George Do it. The sorry pattern is familiar: The Europeans won't do their share of the heavy lifting, but are then quick to accuse the Americans of unilateralism.

Meanwhile, can we expect to see Dion touring Europe, encouraging NATO allies to step up to the plate?

Don't hold your breath.

Killed Canuck soldier back on Canadian soil

SOURCETAG 0709030389
PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 16
ILLUSTRATION: 2 photos 1. photo by J.P. Moczulski, CP Unidentified relatives of Maj. Raymond Ruckpaul embrace during a repatriation ceremony yesterday in Trenton, Ont. 2. MAJ. RAYMOND RUCKPAUL death remains mystery
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: CFB TRENTON, Ont.
WORD COUNT: 224

The shroud of mystery surrounding the death of a Canadian soldier found shot in a secure compound in Afghanistan persisted yesterday as his remains were returned to Canadian soil.

No further details concerning Maj. Raymond Ruckpaul's death were offered as a casket bearing his remains was returned to his family at Canadian Forces Base Trenton in eastern Ontario.

The 42-year-old father of two was found in his barracks Aug. 29 after being "significantly injured" by a gunshot wound. He died about an hour later.

Since then, family members have reported the military has offered no explanation as to how Ruckpaul died.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay and Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier were similarly tight-lipped at yesterday's ceremony, offering no comment on the soldier's death.

Both men addressed the dozens of civilians who had gathered to show their support and shook hands with them through a chain-link fence.

Four unidentified family members gathered on the tarmac as the plane baring Ruckpaul's body arrived. They walked slowly behind the casket as it was carried to a waiting hearse.

Ruckpaul, the 70th soldier to die in Afghanistan since 2002, lived in Germany with his wife and two children.

The Hamilton native joined the Armed Forces prior to studying geology at McMaster University.

At the time of his death, he was serving at the headquarters of NATO's International Security Assistance Force.

In earlier media reports, Ruckpaul was described by friends and neighbours as a man with heartfelt dedication both to his job and his family.

"He was such a loving person, especially with his kids," said Valerie Bianchetto, a 40-year neighbour of the Ruckpaul family.

"He was so happy about his family. He loved everything in his life."

Ruckpaul's cousin Leona said the family's struggle to come to terms with the soldier's death is exacerbated by the military's silence.

"Everyone's in a state of shock," she said.

"Nobody knows what happened. It will be a very long time before we really know the truth."

KEYWORDS=NATIONAL

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SOURCETAG 0709030386
PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun
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Hostages return to South Korea; Seoul criticized for negotiating with Taliban to end Christian volunteers' 6-week ordeal

IDNUMBER 200709030014
PUBLICATION: Vancouver Sun
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A9
KEYWORDS: WAR; FOREIGN RELATIONS; FOREIGN AID; AFGHANISTAN
DATELINE: ANYANG, South Korea
SOURCE: Agence France-Presse, with files from Reuters
WORD COUNT: 428

ANYANG, South Korea — Nineteen South Korean Christian volunteers held hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan for six weeks returned home to an uncomfortable welcome on Sunday, thanking their government for saving them from death.

The South Korean hostage drama in Afghanistan undermined Kabul's fight against the Taliban by creating the impression that the extremists have a degree of political legitimacy, analysts say.

A senior Taliban leader said that Seoul had paid \$20 million US for the hostages' release, but the South Korean government denies paying any ransom — although it has been criticized internationally for striking a deal through direct negotiations.

"We went to spread God's love and carry out his wishes," freed hostage Lyu Kyung-sik said after arriving. "All of us returned from being on verge of death and have been given our lives back."

The hostages — heads bowed, looking sombre and some fighting back tears — stood behind Lyu as he made a brief statement at Incheon airport outside Seoul. He stood between framed pictures of the two hostages shot dead by the Taliban.

The six-week standoff gripped the country, leading thousands to join candlelight vigils.

But many criticized the suburban Seoul Saemmul Church that dispatched the group as being naive and for putting Korea's government in a bind.

Websites of the country's main Protestant groups and largest Internet portals have been flooded with messages saying the group and church were to blame for ignoring government warnings and for making an ill-advised mission to an obvious danger spot.

Seoul has been criticized for negotiating with terrorists, and the Afghan government says it only allowed the talks to save the lives of the Koreans.

But analysts say Kabul ceded a critical advantage to its enemy, in a battle which is as much about public perception as military action.

"This was a game that ended in the favour of the Taliban, from the very beginning to its end," said Afghan lawmaker and editor Shukria Barakzai.

"In short, this deal gives the Taliban legitimacy, publicity and identity."

The saga saw representatives of the al-Qaida-linked militia guaranteed safe passage to talks with a South Korean team in the small town of Ghazni, about 140 kilometres south of Kabul.

They held what was effectively the Taliban's first press conference since their government was toppled in late 2001, and were also able to frequently shuttle their hostages from hideout to hideout before agreeing to free them.

"The whole process was a blow to the government," said Afghan writer and analyst Waheed Mujda, who was a civil servant in the Taliban's 1996–2001 government.

"After this, anyone in the outside world is thinking if one wants to deal with Afghanistan, one must understand that the Taliban are also there as a reality and an existing power," he said.

The Taliban's "smart" handling of the hostage crisis risked increasing opposition in European countries that are supplying troops to Afghanistan's anti-Taliban efforts, Mujda said.

Key areas reportedly lost to Taliban; Afghan police cite lack of Canadian support as insurgents regain control

IDNUMBER 200709030003
PUBLICATION: Vancouver Sun
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1 / FRONT
KEYWORDS: CANADIANS; WAR; TERRORISM; WORLD WAR I
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 572

OTTAWA — Taliban insurgents have re-occupied strategically important areas around the city of Kandahar, including ground won by Canadian forces in deadly, hard-fought battles last year, according to a report published Sunday in The New York Times.

"The setback is part of a bloody stalemate that has occurred between NATO troops and Taliban fighters across southern Afghanistan this summer," says the report on the front page of the newspaper.

After Canadian troops gained control of Panjwai district last fall, they withdrew from parts of the area and left largely ineffectual Afghan government forces in their place.

This summer, however, insurgents have re-infiltrated the district and overrun police-held bases or checkpoints.

In one such attack on Aug. 7, police called for help from Canadian forces but none came for several hours, until after 16 policemen were dead, says the report.

"Syed Aqa Saqib, Kandahar's provincial police chief, said Canadian and Afghan forces began withdrawing from four checkpoints and two small bases in Panjwai in early July [2007]," says the report.

Those withdrawals coincided with the August replacement of soldiers from the Royal Canadian Regiment, with fresh troops from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment.

Saqib told the newspaper that the pullback left two police posts relatively unprotected.

"On Aug. 7, the Taliban attacked the posts simultaneously. For several hours, the police held them off and called for help from Canadian forces, (Saqib) said, but none arrived. Sixteen policemen were killed," the report says.

"The Canadians didn't support them," Saqib said. "Then, we went to collect our dead."

The report says when police issued their plea for help, an Afghan army unit was dispatched to assist them, but it returned to its base and issued its own calls for Canadian help. Canadian troops were then sent to the scene.

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The episode highlights one of the biggest problems facing the NATO mission in southern Afghanistan — a lack of troops.

With only a single infantry battalion to secure all of Kandahar province, and less than 1,000 actual fighting soldiers, Canadian forces can capture ground and defeat the Taliban in battle, but they, like their coalition allies, do not have enough soldiers to hold an area once it has been seized.

At least 30 Canadian soldiers were killed, and dozens more wounded, during operations last year to kill and root out insurgents from the districts around Kandahar.

Canada and its allies therefore rely on Afghan police to hold strategic areas. But the Afghan police are notoriously unreliable, underpaid and poorly trained and equipped.

The New York Times quotes the Panjwai police chief as saying he has only 64 novice policemen to defend the district against hundreds of Taliban.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay seemed unaware of such challenges on Sunday when he said in a CTV television interview that the increasing reliance on Afghan government forces is one of the success stories of the war.

Canadian sacrifices in Kandahar "have paved the way for incredible progress," he said. "We're seeing an Afghan army and Afghan police force able to participate in a more fulsome way in the defence and security of their own country."

CanWest News Service made requests to MacKay's office, and to the Department of National Defence, for a response to the New York Times story. No response was provided.

Data from an internal United Nations report, revealed by The New York Times, paints a different picture.

The UN report says violence has spiked across southern Afghanistan over the past year. The number of "reported security incidents" — which include everything from bombings and firefights to cases of Taliban intimidation — is up to about 500 a month this year from roughly 400 a month last year, according to the Times. Meanwhile the UN report says about 2,500–3,000 people — a quarter of them civilians — have died from insurgency-related violence this year, a 20 per cent increase over 2006.

All eyes on Kandahar

IDNUMBER 200709030036
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A8
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 307

The Senlis Council is doing Canadians a favour by keeping an eye on the government's aid activities in Afghanistan. It's a difficult and complex mission, far from the people who fund it. The more witnesses, the better.

Of course, even to eye-witnesses, the same reality can appear quite different. One observer from Senlis, an international think tank, and one from the Canadian International Development Agency can look at the same hospital in Kandahar, and one can see failure and the other success. Everything's relative and a lot depends on context. The Senlis report, in places, appears to blame CIDA for the fact that there is still suffering in Afghanistan. But if we'll only be satisfied with the Canadian mission when there is no more suffering in Afghanistan, we'll be waiting a long time.

Still, the report is worrying, because it shows just how difficult it is to obtain and verify information about Canada's work overseas. The Senlis observers were unable to match all of CIDA's claims to actual results in the Kandahar area. They couldn't determine whether distributed food ever made it to hungry people. When they went looking for a temporary obstetrics unit CIDA has funded, it wasn't there.

No one should expect the aid work in Afghanistan to be flawless, and no one should expect that Canadian humanitarian work will turn the place into a wealthy industrialized country. It is fair to expect detailed, up-to-date information that can be independently verified. There is a new minister in charge of CIDA, Bev Oda. She shouldn't take anyone's word for what's going on in Kandahar, and she shouldn't expect Canadians to just take her word for it either.

Views of Ottawa

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ottawacitizen.com

Insurgent base destroyed in overnight battle

IDNUMBER 200709030020
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A5
DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan
SOURCE: Agence France–Presse
WORD COUNT: 170

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan – Afghan and international soldiers destroyed a Taliban base in an operation just outside Kandahar city yesterday that killed an estimated 25 insurgents, the NATO–led coalition said.

The overnight swoop on the complex about 17 kilometres southwest of Kandahar was based on intelligence that insurgents were attempting to re–establish control after being defeated there last year, it said.

Soldiers moved through the compounds, coming under heavy fire. One man blew himself up in an apparent suicide attack that did not cause casualties to the security forces, it said in a statement. Coalition warplanes struck the area, causing many of the deaths, it said.

The complex of seven buildings was believed to be the base for several attacks on the nearby Highway One, an often–targeted road linking Kandahar and Herat, the statement said.

Meanwhile, a bombing on Saturday killed three patrolling Afghan army soldiers in Kandahar's Zahri district, the defence ministry said. Two other soldiers were injured.

And about 10 Afghan civilians were meanwhile injured in a bombing in the normally calm northern city of Mazar–i–Sharif late Saturday, police said.

Taliban retake key Kandahar sites: report; Afghan forces can't hold ground after Canadian troops move on

IDNUMBER 200709030019
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A5
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 601

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"The setback is part of a bloody stalemate that has occurred between NATO troops and Taliban fighters across southern Afghanistan this summer," says the report on the front page of the influential newspaper.

After Canadian troops gained control of Panjwaii district last fall, they withdrew from parts of the area and left largely ineffectual Afghan government forces in their place. This summer, however, insurgents have re-infiltrated the district and overrun police-held bases or checkpoints. In one such attack on Aug. 7, police called for help from Canadian forces, but none came for several hours, until after 16 police officers were dead, says the report.

"Syed Aqa Saqib, Kandahar's provincial police chief, said Canadian and Afghan forces began withdrawing from four checkpoints and two small bases in Panjwaii in early July (2007)," says the report.

Those withdrawals coincided with the August rotation of soldiers from the Royal Canadian Regiment, with fresh troops from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment.

Chief Saqib told the paper that the pullback left two police posts relatively unprotected.

"On Aug. 7, the Taliban attacked the posts simultaneously. For several hours, the police held them off and called for help from Canadian forces, (Chief Saqib) said, but none arrived. Sixteen policemen were killed," the report says. "The Canadians didn't support them'," Chief Saqib said. "Then, we went to collect our dead."

The report says when police issued their plea for help, an Afghan army unit was dispatched to assist them, but it returned to its base and issued its own calls for Canadian help. Canadian troops were then sent to the scene.

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Meanwhile, the UN report says 2,500 to 3,000 people -- a quarter of them civilians -- have died from insurgency-related violence this year, a 20-per-cent increase over 2006.

CanWest News Service made requests yesterday to Mr. MacKay's office, and to the Department of National Defence, for a reaction to the New York Times story. No response was provided.

A desert oasis they call the Maple Leaf

IDNUMBER 200709030003
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1 / FRONT

ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: David Pugliese, The Ottawa Citizen / Afghanhotelier Habib Yaqoobi opened the full-service, Ottawa-themed Maple Leaf Inn in Kabul two years ago. The resort boasts 16 rooms, two conference centres, a restaurant, coffee shop and tennis courts. The pool — which is under construction, above — is on the way. Mr. Yaqoobi says doing business there is difficult, but worthwhile. ;

BYLINE: David Pugliese in Kabul, Afghanistan
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 555

When you walk into a hotel in Afghanistan's capital, the last thing you expect to see is a framed photo of skaters on the Rideau Canal.

Particularly, when it's 40C outside.

But at Habib Yaqoobi's Maple Leaf Inn, any visitor from Canada's capital would feel at home. Drinks are served in the Barrhaven Bar. A photo of the brilliant fall colours of the leaves in Gatineau Park hangs on the wall in the lobby, right near a picture of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Mr. Yaqoobi opened the hotel two years ago and named it Ottawa Resorts. He later changed the name after his relatives in Canada tactfully pointed out that there's more to the country than just the capital city.

"Business is good but it is also very difficult," acknowledges the 29-year-old who used to run a truck-tire company in Pakistan before he took a chance and opened a business in his native country.

"I have to be here on a 24-hour basis, so I don't get a break too often."

Mr. Yaqoobi's cousins live in Ottawa, while his fiancée is in Pakistan. He hopes to move to Ottawa later in the year and make trips back to Afghanistan to oversee the hotel's operation.

The Maple Leaf Inn has 16 rooms, two conference centres, a restaurant and a coffee shop. There are also three tennis courts and work is under way on a swimming pool, a rarity in Kabul.

Security guards armed with AK-47 assault rifles mill about outside the inn, a typical sight in this Afghan city at any location frequented by foreigners.

Mr. Yaqoobi's gunmen came in handy last year when a riotous mob torched several nearby establishments run by foreigners: The inn was spared because of the guards' display of firepower.

Aid agencies and the United Nations carry out meetings in the Maple Leaf's conference centres, and officials from the Canadian Embassy are frequent visitors. About 99 per cent of his clientele are foreigners, Mr.

Yaqoobi says.

Although business is flourishing today, it hasn't always been that way. When the inn first opened in September 2005, the rooms went empty for several months. But through word of mouth, the Maple Leaf slowly started gaining a good reputation and now Mr. Yaqoobi often turns away guests.

"There are a lot of guest houses in Kabul, but not many are maintained properly," he explains. "A lot don't have heat in the winter or water in the summer."

Running a business in a country still dealing with a guerrilla war is a feat in itself. Frozen meat is shipped in from overseas and the water supply is sometimes disrupted.

But the main problem is a lack of electricity, an issue that still dogs Kabul five years after the fall of the Taliban.

Frequent power outages mean that the hotel's generator is Mr. Yaqoobi's lifeline. He estimates that power outages account for about 80 per cent of the problems he comes across while running the inn.

"Right now the man who controls the electrical power is more important to me than Hamid Karzai," Mr. Yaqoobi says.

Another aspect of doing business in Afghanistan is dealing with corruption.

Mr. Yaqoobi acknowledges that he has had to pay bribes on a daily basis to get things done. He says while the practice does not cost a lot, it is persistent.

"I thought Pakistan was the most corrupt country in the world, but working here I realize that Afghanistan holds that title," he says.

Still, Mr. Yaqoobi is hopeful for the future of the country, although he believes the situation in Kandahar, where Canadian troops are, and the other southern provinces will continue to get worse.

"Everyone sees the situation from their own point of view," he explains.

Mr. Yaqoobi also bemoans the fact that many of Afghanistan's millionaires aren't investing in their own country, instead choosing to operate businesses in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

"It's time for them to come home and start investing here if this nation is going to succeed," he says.

Sombre return for freed hostages; Apologize for putting S. Korea through ordeal

IDNUMBER 200709030035
PUBLICATION: Montreal Gazette
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A12
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: REUTERS / Freed South Korean hostage (right)is reunited with her mother yesterday. ;
KEYWORDS: FOREIGN RELATIONS; NUCLEAR WEAPONS; FAMILY REUNIONS; KOREANWAR; SUMMIT CONFERENCES; CRIME
DATELINE: SEOUL
BYLINE: CHOE SANG-HUN
SOURCE: New York Times
WORD COUNT: 431

The last 19 South Korean Christians freed by the Taliban after six weeks in captivity arrived here yesterday, carrying the portraits of two fellow church volunteers killed by their kidnappers and apologizing for putting their country through a wrenching, highly divisive hostage ordeal.

"We owe a big debt to the nation and people," Yoo Kyung-shik, who at 55 was the oldest of the freed hostages, said at the Incheon Airport outside Seoul, reading a prepared statement addressed to the South Korean people.

While the other freed hostages stood behind him, many glancing downward and fighting back tears, Yoo likened his group's contrition to an ancient Korean practice in which criminals were forced to kneel down in public until the king punished or pardoned them.

They face a nation relieved that the volunteers were freed, but also increasingly angry at their decision to travel to Afghanistan despite government warnings, and at what many here consider overzealous proselytizing by South Korean churches.

As Yoo read the statement before journalists, a few sign-carrying Christian supporters shouted: "Brothers and sisters, you did nothing wrong. Keep your chin up."

The group was then taken to a hospital south of Seoul, where they met their loved ones. Both Saemmul Presbyterian Church, to which the volunteers belong, and the government insisted that the 23 South Koreans in the group – two were freed earlier – had not been proselytizing, just providing aid. But many religious experts here consider such a distinction meaningless, since South Korean churches provide aid to gain converts.

Now that the volunteers are free, some people are demanding an accounting of who is to blame for the crisis they say damaged South Korea's reputation.

"I expect cannonballs of criticism flying at churches for causing such a disturbance, for squandering national energy and money," said the Reverend Kim Myung-hyuk, president of the Korea Evangelical Fellowship.

"This is a good opportunity for Christian-bashing."

The criticism of the volunteers, and of missionary work in Islamic countries, has been especially vitriolic on the Internet.

"Do they know what a tremendous humiliation and damage to our national credibility we suffered, as well as a monetary cost, just because they went to a place where they should not have gone?" said one posting yesterday on Naver.com, the largest Web portal in South Korea.

Critics seem especially outraged that their government was put in what they called a no-win situation, forced to enter talks with a terrorist group despite international criticism. Debate on that issue is likely to intensify now that the Taliban say that South Korea paid them more than \$20 million, which they said would be used for more suicide attacks, according to a Reuters report.

Canadians left Afghan cops without backup: report; Insurgency retakes ground. Lack of NATO troops leaves 'ineffective' local forces to defend against Taliban

IDNUMBER: 200709030033
PUBLICATION: Montreal Gazette
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A10
KEYWORDS: CANADIANS; WAR; TERRORISM; WORLD WAR I
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: RICHARD FOOT
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 494

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Canadians left Afghan cops without backup: report; Insurgency retakes ground. Lack of NATO troops leaves

The episode highlights one of biggest problems facing the

NATO mission in southern Afghanistan: Lack of troops.

With only a single infantry battalion to secure all of Kandahar province, and fewer than 1,000 actual fighting soldiers, Canadian forces can capture ground and defeat the Taliban in battle, but they, like their coalition allies, do not have enough soldiers to hold an area once it has been seized.

At least 30 Canadian soldiers were killed, and dozens more wounded, during operations last year to kill and root out insurgents from the districts around Kandahar.

Canada and its allies therefore rely on Afghan police to hold strategic areas. But the Afghan police are notoriously unreliable, underpaid and poorly trained and equipped.

The New York Times quotes the Panjwai police chief as saying he has only 64 novice policemen to defend the district against hundreds of Taliban.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay seemed unaware of such challenges yesterday when he said in a CTV interview that the increasing reliance on Afghan government forces is one of the success stories of the war.

Canadian sacrifices in Kandahar "have paved the way for incredible progress," he said.

MacKay's comments signalled the start of a new public relations campaign by the Conservative government on the home front this weekend, designed to highlight the successes of the mission and sell the war to Canadians.

"I think you're going to see a more concerted effort to make those statements and demonstrate the progress that has come about because of the work of our military," MacKay said yesterday.

"I hearken back to where that country was just five or six years ago – an incubator of terrorism.

"We are now starting to see tangible progress."

Maple offers hint of home in Kabul

IDNUMBER 200709030032
PUBLICATION: Montreal Gazette
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A10
KEYWORDS: FOOD INDUSTRY
DATELINE: KABUL
BYLINE: DAVID PUGLIESE
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 356

When you walk into a hotel in Afghanistan's capital, the last thing you'd expect to see is a framed photo of skaters on the Rideau Canal.

But at Habib Yaqoobi's Maple Leaf Inn, Canadian visitors would feel at home. Drinks are served in a bar called the Barrhaven after an Ottawa suburb. A photo of fall leaves in Gatineau hangs on the wall in the lobby, near a picture of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Yaqoobi opened the hotel in September 2005, naming it Ottawa Resorts. But he later changed the name after his relatives in Canada tactfully pointed out that there's more to the country than just the capital city.

"Business is good but also very difficult," acknowledges the 29-year-old who ran a tire company in Pakistan before deciding to take a chance on opening a business in his native country.

The Maple Leaf Inn has 16 rooms, two conference centres, a restaurant and a coffee shop. There are also three tennis courts and work is under way on a swimming pool – a rarity in Kabul.

Security guards armed with assault rifles mill about outside the inn, a typical sight at any location in Kabul frequented by foreigners. Yaqoobi's gunmen came in handy last year when a rioting mob torched several nearby establishments run by foreigners; the inn was spared because of the guards' display of firepower.

Although business is flourishing, it hasn't always been that way. When the inn first opened, the rooms went empty for several months. But Yaqoobi says through word of mouth the Maple Leaf slowly started gaining a good reputation and now he often turns away guests.

Running a business in a country still dealing with a guerrilla war is a feat in itself. Frozen meats are shipped in from overseas and the water supply is often disrupted.

But the main problem is a lack of electricity, an issue that still dogs Kabul five years after the fall of the Taliban. Frequent power outages means that the hotel's generator is Yaqoobi's lifeline.

Another aspect of business in Afghanistan is dealing with corruption. Yaqoobi acknowledges he has had to pay bribes on a daily basis to get things done. He says while the practice does not cost large amounts of money it is persistent.

Emails offer slice of life at Kandahar Air Field

IDNUMBER 200709030005
PUBLICATION: Montreal Gazette
DATE: 2007.09.03
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1 / FRONT
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: COURTESY OF LT. DERRICK FARNHAM / Lt. DerrickFarnham of Montreal is a member of the Black Watch regiment serving in Afghanistan as Provincial Reconstruction Team representative at Kandahar Air Field. He is scheduled to be there until spring. ;
SOURCE: The Gazette
WORD COUNT: 1813

Not in bed yet, in fact may not be able to sleep for awhile. I am, as our British friends would say, over the moon. Sometimes the army is just good.

And this is probably my best day in Kandahar yet.

After I left you, I went back to the office to catch up on my readings and emails. There were three things that I was dreading and I got notes saying that these have practically been sorted, and for no other reason than that people are doing their jobs. Inspires me to do mine.

So I left the office a few minutes past 8 and started walking back to my tent, taking a slight detour by the boardwalk. It forms a square, and there is an area in the centre for baseball, beach volleyball and a floor hockey rink (not surprisingly beside the Tim Hortons).

My plan was to walk down one side of it and onto the dining hall, but there is country music coming from the other side.

There are quite a number of people on the other side, too, and a long line. So I head over, and swagger up to one of the American soldiers at the end of the line, asking for information on what is going on. His reply, with enthusiasm: "It's the Buffalo Bills cheerleaders, so you better get in line, boy!"

And there, seated behind a long table, were a dozen young women all wearing the same red, white and blue short shorts and halter tops, autographing pictures of themselves while the line passed and the onlookers took pictures.

How could the evening get any better, you ask? Steak with cheese broccoli and corn, enjoyed with my buddy Phil, and now I am back communicating with you.

Love you,

Derrick

I made my first positive contribution yesterday. I caught an Afghan trying to make two claims for the same

damages: one from the Canadians, one from the Americans. No doubt I saved the Canadian taxpayer close to \$1,000. Typically, he is not a poor Afghan but an enterprising one who has made quite a nice sum in this type of activity, taking advantage of two nations giving out money in his country.

This is a centuries–old tradition in Afghanistan. He will not get in trouble; he just won't get the Canadian money, so he will continue in the future because sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

I certainly don't blame him for trying.

Derrick

— — —

Moving my laundry from the washer to the dryer was relatively painless.

It is only a short walk from the computers to the laundry area. There are five trailers with washer/dryers. Trailers are about 100 metres apart, all along one "street." There is almost always at least one washer or dryer, whatever you need, available. The trick is to find it. Usually one walks the length of the street to find it, which is OK if you start at one end, not so good if you start in the middle and the first three trailers you check are all full.

This time, there was a free washer in the second trailer I checked and, just now, a free dryer to move my clean clothes into in the same trailer.

How much better can life be?

D

— — —

One–hundred and thirty–seven steps, past 12 tents, and at least two of the crushed stones pushing their pointy side up through my flip–flops each time I walk up the lane for a shower or in the middle of the night. Tonight there is dust in the air, almost so much that I felt dirty again after my shower.

Yet the day was very successful.

I put in a good day of reading, catching up on many of the things I need to know. Even dealt with some cases, and, joy of all joys, got a note saying that a job I was to do is all but completed by someone else. How much better can life be?

— — —

Something neat seems to happen every evening at twilight. All the birds, swallows I think, rustle into the few trees, eucalyptus, I think, and squawk at each other as they do it.

The trees are alive with branches shaking and dark little bodies moving around. It is a dull sound but loud enough to be heard over the generators and air conditioners.

Ah ... the sounds of Kandahar.

They are fixing up the Taliban Last Stand, patching the cracks and painting it. It is an impressive building, because it is so simple. I am glad I was here to see it when it was pockmarked.

I bought a shawl the other day and hung it over my zip-up door. I leave the zipper undone and just push past the shawl to get out. Much quieter in the middle of the night.

I looked at vases, too. Some are inlaid, some were silver. The vendor assured me they were both made of brass. I asked for an explanation, how can brass not look like brass? His answer had more to do with geography than mineralogy, so I let it go.

Might just end up buying things that I like, whether they are junk or not.

The road hockey rink is next to the Tim Hortons. I haven't played yet.

Have driven around the camp in a right-hand drive on the right side of the road. But have only been out once, by helicopter. Turns out the right-hand rear seat is where the down draft from the rotor blades hits hardest, causing the facial skin to vibrate uncontrollably and any excess liquid from the eyes, nose and mouth to fly inside and hit the guy sitting two in.

I did not sit in this seat on the way back but was able to watch the effects on a Dutch colonel. (I think I handled it better.)

How's Anne?

Derrick

PS: Beck's non-alcoholized beer is now available on camp.

We got the plan for our new accommodations.

It looks to me that I will be moving four tent rows over and living with exactly the same people, in exactly the same type of tent. Does not seem practical to me to move 200 metres while everything remains the same, but there you go. One has to believe that someone knows what they are doing.

Well hello girls, thank you again for the note.

The cottage and summer fun sounds exciting.

Here are some pictures so you can see where I work. Outside is a big dirty sandbox. I can see a mountain past the airport fence. I will be moving to a new tent soon. It is exactly the same as the old tent and I will be living with the same people. I do not know why I must move, but someone thinks it is a good idea so I have to believe it is.

If you can send me something, that would be wonderful; a picture frame would be very nice. I have a bedside table. You must be patient though, the mail takes a loooooooong time to get here (three plane rides!).

I had a good day today. I went to a conference on health. Afghanistan has enough doctors in Kandahar and has

money to build hospitals, but they will not do this because it is not safe enough yet outside of the city. So there is only one hospital in the province. Improving security is our job here.

We are working hard to make it safer and it is going well (but as slow as the mail).

Hope you have fun and get to swim.

It is cloudy today for the first time, but I still need to wear my sunglasses.

Love you all,

Derrick

My health is excellent and I am getting lots of sleep. Almost every night I have had a block of 10 hours in which to sleep and relax. I feel very good. I do need to be exercising more, though. Just have not found an enjoyable way to do it yet. I hate the idea of going to a gym. I try to walk as much as I can, although if we get a vehicle for our shop and it is a right-hand drive, there might be a temptation not to walk so much.

Steak and lobster with the Americans tonight. I am seeing the beginnings of a weekend routine. This, tomorrow is meeting at airport (enjoyable with local treats), then off to the bazaar. There is hockey Friday nights, too; sticks and gloves provided.

I think I am starting to enjoy this. PLEASE LET IT CONTINUE!

(As it turned out, the steak was a poor cut of beef and the lobster was pasta with some shrimp in it. Damn Americans!)

I am constantly impressed with the way the Brits are able to speak French.

This woman from the Royal Air Force came into our shop today looking for the major and asked for him in French. She is quite fun and so he closed the door to his office and pretended to hide. She (my age) then went on to explain to two of the other guys that if he was going to be so childish, she had no desire to talk to him.

She did this all in French, struggling for words but when not knowing asked for the needed word in French without recourse to the English word. The young guys love her and both said how impressed they were that she could communicate so well.

As I left my work for the last time today, in the dark, I looked down the dirt road I was walking to see a quarter moon hung above the end of it; also a few bright stars in a cloudless sky, just the outline of Three Mile mountain to my right, just past the mass of electrical wires.

The tranquillity of this pleasant moment was broken only by a small white Japanese pickup, which backed across my path and only stopped when it pushed up against the sandbag wall on the other side.

Fortunately, the wall was reinforced with heavy wire; this allowed the driver to be alerted to his careless driving, not only by the vehicle ceasing to move but by the grating sound of metal against wire. The driver, by the look of the truck, knew the drill well and shifted to a forward gear, leaving me behind to re-enjoy the pleasant surroundings while his trail of dust settled on me.

Still happy, I took the scenic route home past the plastic recycling Dumpster, by the yellow chapel with its white picket, knee-high fence and onto the boardwalk to walk the length of one side to the dining hall. Along this stretch, 97 steps, I looked into the square and was amused to see that while the Europeans played soccer, in the dust, in the dark, with orange pylons for goal posts, just past them the Canadians had a game of floor hockey going, under the lights, inside the boards, on a concrete surface (over on the other side by the Tim Hortons). Kandahar is the Canadians' area! I am told, however, that a soccer field is being built, and to keep the dust down, a typical camp solution, a thick layer of gravel will be dumped (not spread). Should be lovely when it is finished.

Black Watch Lt. Derrick Farnham of Montreal has been in Kandahar, Afghanistan, for a month and has agreed to share excerpts of his emails home to his wife, Leigh Bennett, and other family and friends with Gazette readers from time to time.

Farnham, who is 44, joined the Black Watch regiment four years ago and transferred to Civil-Military Co-operation last year so he could go overseas. In Afghanistan, he serves as the Provincial Reconstruction Team representative at the Kandahar Air Field. He is scheduled to be there until spring.

This is a collection of excerpts of recent emails. This and subsequent collections or emails will be posted on The Gazette's website, www.montrealgazette.com

montrealgazette.com

LETTERS FROM KANDAHAR: Lt. Derrick Farnham will continue to send updates from Kandahar. You can read them at montrealgazette.com

INSIDE

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072460151

DATE: 2007.09.03

PAGE: A1 (ILLUS)

BYLINE:

SECTION: News Index

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 272

WORD COUNT: 326

On script If Venetian audiences are any kind of bellwether, things are looking good for Canadian director Paul Haggis for his new film, In the Valley of Elah , starring Charlize Theron. **GLOBE REVIEW** Powerful opportunity Ontario's \$60-billion plan to rebuild its electricity system poses a vast new market for private sector companies. **REPORT ON BUSINESS** HIGH SCHOOL STAKES LOOKING FORWARD TO LIFE IN HIGH SCHOOL Back-to-school special Entering secondary school can be one of the most stressful, challenging periods in a young person's life.

The paths students take in high school usually foreshadow the rest of their lives. If they manage and do well, they have a better chance of going to university and getting good jobs. If they falter, they are at higher risk of dropping out. Education reporter Jill Mahoney reports. **NEWS, PAGE A7** Banking on students More than four million Canadians are between the ages of 15 and 24, a big opportunity for banks.

REPORT ON BUSINESS, PAGE B1 SCIENTIFIC REASONING Why do so many kids go through the school system and their entire lives as scientific illiterates? **GYWN MORGAN, PAGE B2** MEMORY ERASED Kevin Bray explains why teachers spend the summer erasing memories of students.

FACTS & ARGUMENTS DRIVE TIME Why do parents have to cause commuter chaos driving children to school? **JEFF GRAY: NEWS, PAGE A7** GOOD NEWS, ADULTS You don't have to go back to school. They do.

MICHAEL KESTERTON SOCIAL STUDIES, PAGE L6 The poppies grow Canada should remain in Afghanistan to assist farmers with irrigation methods and a return to fabled fruits, author Sarah Chayes writes. **Comment, Page A11**

THE AFGHAN MISSION Latest developments

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072460149

DATE: 2007.09.03

PAGE: A4

BYLINE:

SECTION: International News

SOURCE: AP

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 267

WORD COUNT: 235

Associated Press U.S.-led coalition troops, aided by air strikes, killed 25 suspected militants during raids on a Taliban command centre in southern Afghanistan, the coalition said yesterday.

The force targeted two compounds southwest of Kandahar city late Saturday after weeks of observing the area, it said.

"Local residents had been seen leaving the area for the last few weeks and intelligence has suggested that insurgent commanders were attempting to re-establish their control in the area," it said.

The clashes left 25 suspected militants dead, the coalition said.

No coalition or Afghan soldiers were injured, it added.

More than 4,200 people – most of them insurgents – have been killed so far this year, according to an Associated Press count. This year the southern and eastern provinces have seen the worst bout of violence since the Taliban were ousted from power by a U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

The surge in violence comes despite the presence of more than 50,000 foreign troops and 110,000 Afghan police and military officers.

Saturday's raid followed a similar operation a day earlier in the east, where troops killed more than 20 suspected insurgents and detained 11 others in three villages in the remote Pitigal Valley, close to the border with Pakistan. They discovered a bomb-making factory and seized various weapons and communication gear, the coalition said. One coalition soldier was injured in the operation, it said.

A bomb attached to a bicycle exploded Saturday in a commercial district in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, wounding nine people, two seriously, police spokesman Sher Jan Durani said.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM: strife; deaths; bombs; statistics

ORGANIZATION NAME: Taliban

THE AFGHAN MISSION 'Boomer's Legacy' honours fallen soldier's memory Grieving mother creates 'grassroots' fund to support Afghan families, allowing soldiers on the ground to decide where money goes

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072460148

DATE: 2007.09.03

PAGE: A4 (ILLUS)

BYLINE: JUSTINE HUNTER

SECTION: National News

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: Victoria BC

WORDS: 627

WORD COUNT: 595

JUSTINE HUNTER VICTORIA Before he was killed by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan last year, Corporal Andrew James Eykelenboom – "Boomer" to his friends – urged his parents to send him gifts to share with the impoverished children he met on his tour of duty.

"Making the children happy is the most rewarding thing about this tour," he told them in an e-mail from Kandahar province.

On Sunday, Canada's Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier is expected to travel to the Vancouver Island community of Courtenay to help launch a fundraising effort in the 23-year-old medic's name that will allow Canadian soldiers to direct aid to children and communities in Kandahar province.

Cpl. Eykelenboom was a Canadian military medic travelling on a NATO resupply convoy on Aug. 11, 2006 when a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden pickup truck near the highway.

He wasn't even supposed to be there: His assignment had ended two days earlier, but he had volunteered to complete one extra mission before shipping out.

When his mother travelled to Trenton, Ont., to claim the body of her youngest son, she decided she needed to do something to honour his memory.

The result is Boomer's Legacy foundation, which will raise money for Afghan families. Instead of turning over the funds to non-governmental aid agencies, however, Canadian soldiers deployed in Afghanistan will be able to choose where the money will go based on their experience on the ground.

"This is grassroots," Maureen Eykelenboom said in an interview yesterday from her home in Comox, B.C. "If our soldiers see a need in a village, they can go to that fund and fulfill that need." The money will be channelled through the Assistance to Afghanistan Trust Fund, administered by a committee of soldiers.

"This is not just in memory of Andrew, but for all the soldiers who have been killed and for the ones who are still there, the ones who go back again even though they know what the conditions are like," she said.

Gen. Hillier is the guest speaker at the Sunday fundraising dinner that will feature army rations for appetizers, served after guests have entered the dining hall through a field medical unit.

"We want people to understand what our soldiers do, so it's to raise awareness as much as it is a fundraiser," Ms. Eykelenboom said. The \$100-a-plate event, with a capacity for 280 diners, has sold about 240 tickets so far.

She hopes one day the fund will grow enough to build a school, but in the short term, the project will aim to fill more basic needs, such as shoes for children or water purification systems.

To ensure all of the money raised for charity ends up helping people in Afghanistan, her family will cover the operating costs, she promised.

The project helps her cope with her loss: "Sometimes I just want to hide under a bush," she said. "But I have to be doing something and this helps keep him alive for me." In one of the weekly packages she sent her son while he was in Afghanistan, she included six dolls hand-made by a friend. In an e-mail he sent home, he described giving away one of the dolls to a toddler he had treated for burns.

"I bandaged her hand and after gave a doll that your friend made to her," he wrote. "She instantly stopped crying and started sucking on the nose of the doll. A special thanks goes from her older sister to your friend for such a wonderful gift; and a thanks from me for being the one to accept her gratitude." More information about the trust fund can be found at www.boomerslegacy.ca.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM: strife; war deaths; memorials; charities; fund-raising

PERSONAL NAME: Andrew James Eykelenboom; Maureen Eykelenboom

ORGANIZATION NAME: Boomer's Legacy foundation

THE AFGHAN MISSION We're out by February '09, MacKay says Harper government tells NATO Canada's military mission to Kandahar has an 'expiration date' in 20 months

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072460147

DATE: 2007.09.03

PAGE: A1 (ILLUS)

BYLINE: CAMPBELL CLARK

SECTION: National News

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: Ottawa ONT

WORDS: 820

WORD COUNT: 750

CAMPBELL CLARK OTTAWA Canada has made it clear to its NATO allies that they cannot count on our troops to fight on the deadly battlefields of southern Afghanistan after February of 2009, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said yesterday.

"The signal that has been sent already is that our current configuration will end in February, 2009," Mr. MacKay said in an interview on the CTV television program Question Period .

"Obviously the aid work and the diplomatic effort and presence will extend well beyond that. The Afghan compact itself goes until 2011," he said. "But the way the mission is currently configured, with respect to our presence in Kandahar, there is an expiration date that has been set." Mr. MacKay added that the government has committed to a vote in the Commons on Canada's future in Afghanistan. He also said he and Prime Minister Stephen Harper are in regular contact with North Atlantic Treaty Organization officials and their counterparts among NATO countries.

Opposition parties have been pounding away at the government to notify NATO and Afghan allies that the mission will not be extended past February of 2009.

A spokesman, Dan Dugas, said later that the minister hadn't meant that a new signal was recently sent to allies, but that NATO allies are aware that the current mission will go to 2009 "and that there will be a vote in Parliament to decide the way forward after that." But as the Conservative government embarks on a new effort to sell Canada's contentious role in Afghanistan, there are increasingly strong indications that the Harper government will not try to extend the Canadian Forces' role in the deadly Kandahar area.

Mr. Harper said in June that the role of Canadian troops there would not be extended unless the opposition supports it – and all three opposition parties have vowed to vote against it.

In interviews over the past week, both Mr. MacKay and Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier have played down the idea that the Kandahar mission might be extended, and Mr. Bernier has refused to say whether the government wants to prolong the mission.

Liberal Leader Stephane Dion last week called the government "irresponsible" for failing to notify NATO and Afghanistan that it will not extend the mission in Kandahar, so that another country can be found to take over the role. He pledged to initiate a vote this fall.

One government source said that after recent discussions inside government they now expect that Mr. Harper will ask Parliament to approve a different role in Afghanistan after 2009, rather than an extension of the current Kandahar deployment.

The Afghanistan mission has become increasingly controversial amid a steady stream of casualties. In Quebec, the deployment of the Valcartier, Que.,-based Royal 22nd Regiment, known as the Vandoos, has increased the profile of the mission just before three hotly contested by-elections to be held Sept. 17.

Both the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois have demanded that Mr.

Harper immediately state that the mission will not be extended, and the Bloc has threatened to vote against an expected fall Throne Speech unless it includes such a pledge.

Mr. Harper signalled a shift in government message Aug. 14, when he shuffled former defence minister Gordon O'Connor, who was blamed for poorly communicating Canada's role in Afghanistan and making contradictory statements about the mission.

He was replaced by Mr. MacKay, while Quebecer Mr. Bernier was in turn tapped to replace Mr. MacKay at foreign affairs.

On Saturday, Mr. MacKay told The Canadian Press that successes in improving the lives of ordinary Afghans have been overshadowed by the emotional response to the deaths of Canadian soldiers.

"In my opinion, there's a lot of important, tangible evidence and information that has to be relayed to the public more effectively," he said.

In interviews over the past four days, Mr. MacKay and Mr. Bernier have argued against the idea that Canada is playing chiefly a combat role in Afghanistan.

Instead they have cited a nearly identical list of points to argue that Canada is in Afghanistan under an international mandate along with 37 NATO countries, fighting for the rights and quality of life of Afghans, and making progress. And they have noted the Liberals initiated the mission and the Bloc originally supported it.

Both ministers said that Canada should continue to help Afghanistan for at least four years, noting that the 2006 Afghanistan Compact, in which 60 nations promised to rebuild the strife-torn country, extends until 2011.

But they indicated the Kandahar mission is not likely to be extended past February of 2009.

"2011 for international aid, 2009 for the military mission," Mr.

Bernier told Radio-Canada television last week.

Over the summer, Mr. Harper has also hinted at a shifting role.

He told a radio interviewer in July that Canadians expect that if Canada remains after 2009 "it would be a new mission."

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM:foreign policy; defence; strife; political; statements

PERSONAL NAME: Peter MacKay

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces

'Go to your Gawd like a soldier'

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072460125
DATE: 2007.09.03
PAGE: A10
BYLINE: PAUL M. RODDICK
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Kingston, Ontario
WORDS: 189
WORD COUNT: 242

Paul M. Roddick Kingston, Ontario You criticize Stephane Dion for wanting a fixed deadline to pull Canadian troops out of Afghanistan and ask: "How different might the situation look a year from now? What if it becomes clear that a few extra months would make a difference?" (Dion's Impetuous Demand For A Vote – editorial, Sept. 1).

Realistically, how long will it take "peace, order and good government" to come to Afghanistan? A month? A year? A decade? A century? More than a hundred years ago, Rudyard Kipling wrote: When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains, And the women come out to cut up what remains, Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains An' go to your Gawd like a soldier. Kipling was described by George Orwell as a "prophet of British Imperialism." Has anything changed in Afghanistan since Kipling penned The Young British Soldier in 1892? Yes, in 1919 the British "cut and ran." How many British soldiers died while empire loyalists continued to hope things would change for the better? Now, in Kandahar, it is young Canadians who "go to their Gawd like a soldier."

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM:foreign policy; defence; strife

'Go to your Gawd like a soldier'

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072460119
DATE: 2007.09.03
PAGE: A10
BYLINE: KINGSLEY BROWN
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE:
WORDS: 62
WORD COUNT: 70

Kingsley Brown Southside Antigonish Harbour, N.S.

* A review of your news articles, particularly Christie Blatchford's report Canadian Troops Forced To Start From Scratch (Sept. 1) should dispel any notions on the part of Globe editorialists that matters might improve in Afghanistan.

As for tipping our hand to the enemy with an arbitrary pull-out date, don't you think the Taliban read The Globe online every day?

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM:foreign policy; defence; strife

'Go to your Gawd like a soldier'

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072460118
DATE: 2007.09.03
PAGE: A10
BYLINE: SCOTT BURBRIDGE
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Port Williams, N.S.
WORDS: 53
WORD COUNT: 62

Scott Burbridge Port Williams, N.S.

* The Taliban derive most of their support from the Pashtun, a linguistic and cultural group that constitutes almost half the Afghan population.

Excluding the Taliban and the Pashtun from a political settlement means condemning the country to an endless brutal and destructive civil war – fuelled by the U.S. and its NATO allies.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM:foreign policy; defence; strife

Afghan swap: illegal for legal

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072460117

DATE: 2007.09.03

PAGE: A10

BYLINE: JOHN POLANYI

SECTION: Letter to the Edit

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: Toronto ONT

WORDS: 190

WORD COUNT: 216

John Polanyi Toronto The Senlis Council (cited in What Happened To CIDA's Aid Funds – editorial, Aug. 31) has been reporting for a long time that the tens of millions of dollars in aid sent from our shores to Afghanistan each year are barely reaching the sick and starving, still less civilians injured and displaced by war.

Success in Afghanistan is only possible with the co-operation of the Afghan people. That we shall never have so long as we are seen as part of a foreign force injuring innocent civilians through military action, and impoverishing many through poppy-crop elimination.

Senlis advocates that, on an experimental basis, some poppy growing be licensed by the Afghan government for the international market in legal opiates – codeine and morphine. These painkillers are largely beyond the financial means of patients in the developing world – something the suffering in Canada would view as unconscionable.

This initiative has the potential to make Afghanistan's "greatest problem," as President Hamid Karzai sensibly characterized poppy growing for opium, into a corresponding opportunity, gradually exchanging the illegal for the legal, and making the coalition in Afghanistan additional friends rather than enemies.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; foreign aid; agriculture; illegal drugs

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THE AFGHAN MISSION Stay, Canada: There are real fixes to the opium glut Poppy eradication is a bad idea. But what about limited credit to farmers, new irrigation methods and a return to fabled fruits?

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BYLINE: SARAH CHAYES

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SARAH CHAYES Author of *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* KANDAHAR Last week's United Nations report on opium production in Afghanistan is the latest knell of a doleful bell ringing grim news from that place. But as dreadful as those statistics are, they should not be taken to mean that Canadian efforts in Afghanistan have been worthless, or that it is time for Canada to leave. Afghanistan's problems are not intractable. Nor are their consequences contained within Afghan borders, as the opium case abundantly illustrates.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime has determined that Afghanistan's opium production in 2007 exceeded last year's record by a third.

The country now accounts for just about all of the world's opiates: 93 per cent. And the province of Helmand, right next to Kandahar, where most Canadian troops are deployed, produces more opium than the entire country of Colombia produces cocaine.

I live in Kandahar. During the late spring, before the opium paste was even packed and weighed, the reality communicated in the UN report was plain. The opium harvest absorbed all the available manpower in the Afghan south and beyond. So desperate were they for labour that Helmand planters were offering the equivalent of \$25 a day in wages – six times the normal pay for a day's work. My co-operative, which makes skin-care products, needed someone to gather a flower that grows in the highlands just north of Kandahar. But it was impossible to find someone – everyone was in the poppy fields.

A search for a magic solution is illusory and counterproductive.

Although the problem seems monolithic, it results from a confluence of factors.

For example, credit. How many of you reading this do not own a credit card? Half a dozen? Afghans have no access to credit. And with far less disposable income than most Westerners, they are constantly confronted with the need for liquidity: to buy food, to buy fertilizer or other agricultural inputs, to get married. That event typically costs the family of the groom between \$6,000 and \$12,000 in a country where a decent-sized fruit orchard will clear about \$1,500 a year.

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One of the few places an Afghan farmer can turn for credit is to the local opium trafficker – who typically requires repayment within the year, in opium, valued at half the market price. In other words, the borrower is accepting a 100-per-cent interest loan. The gross return on a hectare of poppy, estimated by the UNODC to be \$5,000, should thus be thought of as \$2,500.

This is one reason why eradicating poppy is a bad idea. Because of rampant corruption, only the most vulnerable farmers actually suffer eradication – that is, those most likely to be in debt. If their production is destroyed one year, they will have to pay the trafficker twice as much opium the next. Fear of a creditor's retaliation will top fear of a second eradication, and farmers will replant.

A better answer would be widespread availability of limited credit to farmers. But in nearly six years since the fall of the Taliban, no institutional donor has launched such a program on a scale that could make a difference.

Another factor is water. Southern Afghanistan, where most opium is grown, is coming out of a devastating decade of drought. Usually, an Afghan field might be bordered by an irrigation channel, and farmers – taking turns with their neighbours according to rules determined on the village level – will receive water a certain number of days a week. But in a protracted drought, a family's turn doesn't come around frequently enough to keep crops in the field. So they have to drill a well. Only there is no electricity, so they have to buy diesel to power a water pump. This makes it too expensive to irrigate all of their land, so they take some out of production and have to grow a more valuable crop on the remaining parcel in order to survive.

A good way to address this problem would be to train Afghan farmers in conservative irrigation methods, and provide them with equipment (including solar-powered water pumps) as part of a no-poppy contract, so as to give them a positive incentive not to grow poppies. One organization is promoting drip irrigation, but the system it has been testing is too precise and technical to be easily adaptable to the rigours of Afghan farming.

The real competitor to opium is Afghanistan's fabled fruit. At least since Babylon, according to cuneiform records, southern Afghanistan has been famous for its fine grapes. Succulent raisins, almonds, apricots, pomegranates, aromatic seeds such as cumin or anise, and vegetable dyes are all present in the south. But decades of war have cut off their access to the market.

International development dollars should be used as venture capital, to foster agricultural processing businesses, sorting, packaging, and international transport of fresh and dried fruit, to support the organic certification of Afghan farmers' collaboratives, and the contract farming of licit crops. Poppies, moreover, cannot be grown in the shade of mature trees. What about a major reforestation program, with farmers paid to keep their land wooded – more money in the first five to 10 years, when trees are too young to provide a full crop of fruit, for example, or leaves for feeding silkworms? This would be a much better approach than the magic bullet now under debate: to legalize the production of opium. Unless the entire land mass of Afghanistan is to be turned over to poppy production (only 7 per cent of arable land is planted in opium poppy), then that proposal would merely displace the problem to the borders of the legalized zone.

One suggestion last week was that schools and hospitals should be built in poppy-growing zones, to offset the pain of eradication.

But that highlights some of the institutional rigidities that have resulted in a lot of money being spent for negative results. As much as Afghans need medical attention and education, schools and hospitals are irrelevant to poppy growing. You can't eat a bandage or a school book. International officials should use development dollars to jump-start job-creating businesses. There is not a single factory that makes cardboard boxes in all of Afghanistan. Helmand, which has cows and an appetite for yogurt, has no dairy plant. But misplaced "free market" thinking has made donors squeamish about supporting private enterprise. Only a healthy, licit economy will both reduce opium production and deprive the Taliban insurgency of manpower.

THE AFGHAN MISSION Stay, Canada: There are real fixes to the opium glut Poppy eradication is a bad idea

In other words, there are real solutions to Afghanistan's opium glut, but they are painstaking and require long-term attention.

The search for quick answers that generate immediate indicators of "progress" has wasted millions of dollars for a disastrous result.

And that is part of why Canada should remain in Afghanistan: Complex solutions demand adroit, experienced handling. Only now have Canadian officials accrued some experience. Afghanistan needs the benefit of it – and programs whose perspective reach beyond 2009.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

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Taliban retake ground lost to Canadians

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Taliban terrorists have reoccupied strategically important areas around the city of Kandahar, including ground won by Canadian forces in deadly, hard-fought battles last year, according to a report published Sunday in The New York Times.

"The setback is part of a bloody stalemate that has occurred between NATO troops and Taliban fighters across southern Afghanistan this summer," says the report on the front page of the influential newspaper.

After Canadian troops gained control of Panjwai district last fall, they withdrew from parts of the area and left largely ineffectual Afghan government forces in their place.

This summer, however, insurgents have re-infiltrated the district and overrun police-held bases or checkpoints. In one such attack on Aug. 7, police called for help from Canadian forces but none came for several hours, until after 16 policemen were dead, says the report.

"Syed Aqa Saqib, Kandahar's provincial police chief, said Canadian and Afghan forces began withdrawing from four checkpoints and two small bases in Panjwai in early July (2007)," says the report.

Those withdrawals coincided with the August rotation of soldiers from the Royal Canadian Regiment, with fresh troops from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment.

Saqib told the newspaper that the pullback left two police posts relatively unprotected. "On Aug. 7, the Taliban attacked the posts simultaneously. For several hours, the police held them off and called for help from Canadian forces, (Saqib) said, but none arrived," the report says.

"The Canadians didn't support them," Saqib said. "Then, we went to collect our dead."

The report says when police issued their plea for help, an Afghan army unit was dispatched to assist them, but it returned to its base and issued its own calls for Canadian help. Canadian troops were then sent to the scene.

The episode highlights one of biggest problems facing the NATO mission in southern Afghanistan -- a lack of troops. With only a single infantry battalion to secure all of Kandahar province, Canadian forces can capture ground and defeat the Taliban in battle, but they, like their coalition allies, do not have enough soldiers to hold an area once it has been seized.

At least 30 Canadian soldiers were killed, and dozens more wounded, during operations last year to kill and root out insurgents from the districts around Kandahar. Canada and its allies rely on Afghan police to hold strategic areas. But the Afghan police are notoriously unreliable, underpaid and poorly trained and equipped.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay seemed unaware of such challenges Sunday when he said in a CTV television interview that the increasing reliance on Afghan government forces is one of the success stories of the war.

Canadian sacrifices in Kandahar "have paved the way for incredible progress," he said. "We're seeing an Afghan army and Afghan police force able to participate in a more fulsome way in the defence and security of their own country."

Data from an internal United Nations report, revealed by The New York Times, paints a different picture.

The UN report says violence has spiked across southern Afghanistan over the past year.

CanWest News Service made requests Sunday to MacKay's office, and to the Department of National Defence, for a response to the New York Times story. No response was provided.