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MISSION MAY TAKE LONGER; General doesn't share defence minister's optimism about Afghan army's readiness to take command

IDNUMBER 200707300116
PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Front
PAGE: A1
DATELINE: OTTAWA
SOURCE: Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 522

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, federal Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan national army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter — as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them . . . so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March — it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers. But it's too early to say when Canadians may be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high-risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

He took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor, but Hillier clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the south in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

MISSION MAY TAKE LONGER; General doesn't share defence minister's optimism about Afghan army's re

Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment — set to end in February 2009 — with the consensus of Parliament. That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois set against any extension.

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada and NATO partners as they try to rebuild that country.

"Quite frankly, I think all engaged with the mission on any level have been frustrated by the slow progress on building an effective government that can efficiently deliver the kinds of programs that people back in Canada take for granted. And to do it without that corruption — which is significant, which does detract from the mission."

As for the training of Afghan soldiers, the defence committee of the British House of Commons released a report earlier this month that also cast doubt on how soon they'll be able to take over from international forces.

"They will be able to do much more by 2009, but their numbers are small," committee chair James Arbuthnot told question period last week.

"We can rely on them more and more but . . . I don't think it is possible to put Western time scales on this.

"It's going to be a long-term project and we cannot be impatient. Impatience doesn't work in Afghanistan."

Van Doos begin arriving home after 8-month tour

IDNUMBER 200707300114
PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Front
PAGE: A3
DATELINE: CFB VALCARTIER, QUE.
SOURCE: Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 40

Friends and family greeted 85 Quebec-based soldiers who returned from Afghanistan yesterday.

Troops from the famed Royal 22nd Regiment, also known as the Van Doos, arrived at CFB Valcartier following an eight-month tour.

Meanwhile, more than 2,000 soldiers from the Quebec City-area base are making their way to Kandahar .

Bush, Brown seek rapport despite political differences; They plan to discuss the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and terrorism in general

IDNUMBER 200707300098

PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: Front

PAGE: A5

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: ASSOCIATED PRESS / U.S. President George W. Bushwelcomes British Prime Minister Gordon Brown yesterday to Camp David, Md., where they are to discuss common issues. ;

DATELINE: CAMP DAVID, MD.

SOURCE: Associated Press

COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation

WORD COUNT: 217

U.S. President George W. Bush, starting a new relationship late in his presidency, welcomed British Prime Minister Gordon Brown last night with casual diplomacy.

In the tranquility of Camp David, Md., Bush and Brown began their brief meeting — last night and today — with an emphasis on private time between the two. Their agenda is familiar: terror threats, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and crisis in Darfur.

Yet the overarching theme is rapport — and establishing some.

Bush is aiming for at least a solid relationship with Brown, shaped around their nations' mutual interests.

That much is expected, but it is far from the kinship Bush had with Brown's predecessor, Tony Blair, who lost favour at home because of his close ties to Bush.

Brown arrived by helicopter. He emerged to find a military honour guard and Bush waiting for him.

"It's a great pleasure to be here at Camp David because there's so much history associated with it," Brown told Bush as the leaders chatted.

En route to the U.S., the new British leader said the world is indebted to the United States for taking the lead in the fight against terrorism.

London and Washington are focused on "the biggest single and immediate challenge the world has to defeat: global terrorism," Brown said.

Brown spokesperson Michael Ellam told reporters yesterday that Britain had made it "very clear" to U.S. officials there had been no change to British government policy over Iraq.

Military chiefs in London have said Britain is likely to hand over control of the southern Iraqi city of Basra to local forces by the end of the year.

Bush, Brown seek rapport despite political differences; They plan to discuss the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and

We're all entitled to our informed opinions

IDNUMBER 200707300088
PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Opinion
PAGE: A6
BYLINE: Marion Nugent
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 236

Tony Olivieri, in his letter printed July 23 (Yellow Ribbon Debate Is Dividing Canadians) makes the assumption that those who question the "war on terrorism" must be anti-American and anti-Conservative. Many Canadians do make a concerted effort to form unbiased opinions through the media, the double-talk of politicians, plus the knowledge acquired researching historical facts and their own personal value system.

In 2003 I recall reading "anti-Canadian" letters to the editor concerning Canada's decision not to participate in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Some writers said they were "embarrassed" and "ashamed" to be Canadian, and accused those who agreed with Canada's decision of being "anti-American" and "pro-Saddam Hussein."

The media has strongly emphasized that the yellow ribbons "support the troops" campaign has nothing whatever to do with "supporting the war" in Afghanistan. I support our troops, but do not feel the need to prove it by exhibiting a yellow ribbon.

The fine line of keeping "support the troops" separate from "support the war" was irrevocably blurred when politics blundered in. Local councils let the cat out of the bag by approving the expenditure of placing yellow stickers on police cars.

After 2009, Canadians would support engagement in Afghanistan in peacekeeping and re-building capacities only. Some may regard this as "ignorance." I prefer to call it an "informed opinion."

Other NATO countries will step up and pull their weight once they know Canada's position.

Marion Nugent

Cambridge

Keeping the troops well fed no easy task

IDNUMBER 200707300080
PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Front
PAGE: A8
DATELINE: OTTAWA
SOURCE: Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 284

In 55 C heat and with Taliban rockets raining down, the last thing most of us would feel like doing is chowing down on a steaming bag of preserved salmon fillet.

With that in mind, the Canadian Armed Forces is set to introduce a protein drink to its field ration kits, a specially formulated supplement similar to what body builders use.

"Nobody really wants to choke down ravioli when it's 150 degrees out, so the protein supplement is something that can be used in lieu," said Maj. Julie Johnson, who is responsible for keeping the army's supply of individual meal packs flowing to the front.

The supplement is a powdered drink that mixes with water and comes in three flavours — vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. It will begin appearing in soldiers' rations within the next couple of weeks, said Johnson.

About a year ago, the army started to realize that soldiers, especially those running the gauntlet of supply convoys from Kandahar Airfield to far-flung desert bases, didn't have the time or the inclination to eat breakfast, lunch and supper every day.

"When I saw that, I said that was inappropriate and we need to maintain their nutritional wellness," said Johnson.

Individual meal packs are the stuff of culinary legend in the army, with a shelf life of over three years.

Often derided as an assault on the palate, the rations are distributed to troops when it's impossible to set up field kitchens, which in Afghanistan means pretty much everywhere outside of the main NATO base at Kandahar Airfield, the provincial team base in the city and select forward operating bases.

The meals, of which there are 18 varieties, contain one main entree, a dessert, powdered fruit drinks, coffee and candy.

Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, who would have been happy scarfing down wieners and beans, many soldiers today have sophisticated and diverse taste buds.

Some of the dinner menu selections now include Indian chicken, Szechwan chicken and cabbage rolls.

Afghan abductions 'shameful', leaders say

IDNUMBER 200707300079

PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: Front

PAGE: A8

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: ASSOCIATED PRESS / An Afghan police officer frisks aman yesterday at a checkpoint in Ghazni province where South Korean hostages were kidnapped. President Hamid Karzai said the kidnapping of 22 South Koreans by Taliban militants was shameful. ;

DATELINE: KABUL

SOURCE: Associated Press

COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation

WORD COUNT: 510

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality yesterday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesperson shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. EDT today. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted on July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace, according to a statement from his office.

Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council said. "The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it."

A former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first."

But the Taliban spokesperson, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that Western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar, and saying that the Taliban can do the same. He said the Taliban could detain and kill "women, men or children."

"It might be a man or a woman . . . We may kill one, we may kill two, we may kill one of each (gender), two of each, four of each," Ahmadi told the Associated Press from an unknown location. "Or we may kill all of

them at once."

Ahmadi said the militant group had given a list of 23 insurgent prisoners it wants released to government officials, and that if they weren't freed by midday today hostages would be killed.

The Taliban has set several deadlines that passed without consequence and it wasn't clear how seriously the militants would treat their latest ultimatum. A leader of the South Korean group was shot and killed Wednesday, but it was unclear why.

Two days of meetings between elders of Qarabagh district in Ghazni province, where the South Korean hostages were kidnapped on the Kabul–Kandahar highway, and a delegation of senior officials from Kabul yielded no results so far, said Shirin Mangal, spokesperson for the Ghazni provincial governor.

The meeting is being held behind closed doors, and Mangal did not divulge any details.

In his meeting with Karzai, Korean presidential envoy Baek Jong–chun thanked the president for the Afghan government's help with the hostage situation and said South Korea will respect the Afghan government's way of ending the crisis, according to Karzai's office.

Pope Benedict also called for the hostages' release, saying the perpetrators "desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed."

Aghan mission future in doubt; Top soldier doubts Afghan forces can take over from Canadians by February

IDNUMBER 200707300023
PUBLICATION: Times & Transcript (Moncton)
DATE: 2007.07.30
SECTION: News
PAGE: B1
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Times & Transcript (Moncton)
WORD COUNT: 512

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Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment — set to end in February 2009 — with the consensus of Parliament. That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois set against any extension.

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada and NATO partners as they try to rebuild that country.

"Quite frankly, I think all engaged with the mission on any level have been frustrated by the slow progress on building an effective government that can efficiently deliver the kinds of programs that people back in Canada take for granted. And to do it without that corruption — which is significant, which does detract from the mission."

As for the training of Afghan soldiers, the defence committee of the British House of Commons released a report earlier this month that also cast doubt on how soon they'll be able to take over from international forces.

"They will be able to do much more by 2009, but their numbers are small," committee chairman James Arbuthnot told Question Period last week.

n Canadian commander says other countries can help complete Afghan mission after 2009/NEWTODAY B2

n Afghan leaders try to shame Taliban into releasing women hostages/ NEWSTODAY B2

Afghan leaders try to shame Taliban into releasing women hostages; Taliban ignores demands, sets new deadline for executions

IDNUMBER 200707300021
PUBLICATION: Times & Transcript (Moncton)
DATE: 2007.07.30
SECTION: News
PAGE: B2
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Times & Transcript (Moncton)
WORD COUNT: 485

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality yesterday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 4:30 a.m. today.

Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted on July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

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Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council said. "The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it."

And a former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first."

But the Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that Western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar, and saying that the Taliban can do the same. He said the Taliban could detain and kill "women, men or children."

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Afghan leaders try to shame Taliban into releasing women hostages; Taliban ignores demands, sets new de

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Other countries can finish Afghan mission: general; Doesn't matter who completes mission after 2009, so long as it gets done: Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier

IDNUMBER 200707300019
PUBLICATION: Times & Transcript (Moncton)
DATE: 2007.07.30
SECTION: News
PAGE: B2
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Times & Transcript (Moncton)
WORD COUNT: 304

Canadian troops are not the only foreign military that can complete the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan beyond 2009, a top Canadian commander said on yesterday.

"Whether we accomplish it ourselves, or it's accomplished by others, it doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things," Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, told a news conference in Kandahar.

Gauthier said the international community will need to be present in Afghanistan for several more years for the country to become self-sufficient.

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is slated to end in February 2009.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend that mandate with the consensus of Parliament, which seems unlikely. The mounting death toll — 66 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002 — has renewed the political debate back home over the mission's future, with the opposition parties pushing the government to come up with an exit strategy.

Gauthier said the situation has improved in the war-torn country, but it will require years of continued contributions from the international community.

"I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February, 2009, from an international community perspective," Gauthier said.

"No one has any illusion that Afghanistan will be self-sustaining and self-sufficient by February, 2009."

Gauthier's observations were shared yesterday by the Canadian military's top general, Rick Hillier, who said he wasn't so sure troops would be able to hand over much of the frontline fighting to the Afghan National Army by February, 2009.

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A fresh batch of soldiers from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment — the Van Doos — are in the midst of arriving in Kandahar, replacing 2,500 battle-hardened soldiers from bases in Atlantic Canada.

Canadian troops will gradually spend less time in combat operations and more time training Afghan troops,

Other countries can finish Afghan mission: general; Doesn't matter who completes mission after 2009, so long

Gauthier said.

He said Canadians should not expect that combat operations are nearly at an end for our military.

"We're going to have to continue the fight for the foreseeable future," he said.

Hillier contradicts minister's projections; Mission | Afghan troops won't be able to go it alone soon

IDNUMBER 200707300051
PUBLICATION: The Daily Gleaner (Fredericton)
DATE: 2007.07.30
SECTION: News
PAGE: A7
BYLINE: The Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 The Daily Gleaner (Fredericton)
WORD COUNT: 488

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter — as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said.

"But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them ... so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March — it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers.

But it's too early to say when Canadians may be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high-risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

He took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor, but Hillier clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the South in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment — set to end in February 2009 — with the consensus of Parliament.

That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois set against any extension.

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada and NATO partners as they try to rebuild that country.

"Quite frankly, I think all engaged with the mission on any level have been frustrated by the slow progress on building an effective government that can efficiently deliver the kinds of programs that people back in Canada take for granted.

And to do it without that corruption — which is significant, which does detract from the mission."

As for the training of Afghan soldiers, the defence committee of the British House of Commons released a report earlier this month that also cast doubt on how soon they'll be able to take over from international forces.

"They will be able to do much more by 2009, but their numbers are small," committee chairman James Arbuthnot told Question Period last week.

"We can rely on them more and more but...I don't think it is possible to put Western time scales on this. It's going to be a long-term project and we cannot be impatient. Impatience doesn't work in Afghanistan."

Commander assesses mission; Other nations can help rebuild Afghanistan after '09, Lt.-Gen. says

PUBLICATION: Kingston Whig-Standard (ON)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: National/World

PAGE: B1

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

BYLINE: Martin Ouellet

DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan

ILLUSTRATION: Gauthier: Canadian commander.

WORD COUNT: 361

Canadian troops are not the only foreign military that can complete the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan beyond 2009, a top Canadian commander said yesterday.

"Whether we accomplish it ourselves, or it's accomplished by others, it doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things," Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, told a news conference in Kandahar.

Gauthier said the international community will need to be present in Afghanistan for several more years for the country to become self-sufficient.

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is slated to end in February 2009.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend that mandate with the consensus of Parliament, which seems unlikely. The mounting death toll – 66 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002 – has renewed the political debate back home over the mission's future, with the opposition parties pushing the government to come up with an exit strategy.

Gauthier said the situation has improved in the war-torn country, but it will require years of continued contributions from the international community.

"I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February 2009, from an international community perspective," Gauthier said.

"No one has any illusion that Afghanistan will be self-sustaining and self-sufficient by February 2009."

Gauthier's observations were shared yesterday by the Canadian military's top general, Rick Hillier, who said he wasn't so sure troops would be able to hand over much of the frontline fighting to the Afghan National Army by February 2009.

Gauthier said he does not see any major changes in the Canadian mission as a new rotation of troops begins a six-month mission.

A fresh batch of soldiers from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment – the Van Doos – are in the midst of arriving in Kandahar, replacing 2,500 battle-hardened soldiers from bases in Atlantic Canada.

Canadian troops will gradually spend less time in combat operations and more time training Afghan troops, Gauthier said.

He said Canadians should not expect that combat operations are nearly at an end for our military.

"We're going to have to continue the fight for the foreseeable future," he said.

The expansion of the Afghan army is only one piece of Afghanistan's security puzzle. The even greater challenge is creating a professional and effective national police force from the ragtag and often corrupt units that have existed.

"I'm told that the Afghan National Police is three or four years behind the army," Gauthier said. "It's a problem, a tremendous challenge."

Afghan police guard the country's porous border and patrol local communities across the country.

Korean hostage crisis continues

PUBLICATION: Kingston Whig-Standard (ON)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: National/World

PAGE: B1

COLUMN: In brief

WORD COUNT: 101

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality yesterday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives. A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. today. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

The Koreans were abducted on July 19.

Exceptional acts of valour; Gananoque's 'Harry' Brown is one of 94 Canadians to be awarded a Victoria Cross

PUBLICATION: Kingston Whig–Standard (ON)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: Forum

PAGE: 5

COLUMN: Column

BYLINE: bill beswetherick

PHOTO: Photo courtesy of Bill Beswetherick Photo courtesy of BillBeswetherick

ILLUSTRATION: Private John Henry 'Harry' Brown was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross, the rarest military award in the world, after delivering a vital message under combat conditions even though he was severely wounded. He died of his wounds the next day. More than 9,000 Canadians were killed in the taking and holding of Hill 70, just east of Vimy Ridge.; The Victoria Cross

WORD COUNT: 1248

Two things have altered not

Since first the world began

The beauty of the wild green earth

And the bravery of man.

– British poet T. Wilson

Ninety years ago, on Aug. 16, 1917, a local soldier's courage resulted in him posthumously being awarded the Victoria Cross. It was created by Queen Victoria in 1856 at the conclusion of the Crimean War to recognize exceptional acts of valour in the face of the enemy and is the rarest military award in the world. Since it was created, 1,400,000 British and Commonwealth sailors, soldiers and airmen have died in wars, yet only 1,352 men – including 94 Canadians – have been awarded this medal, which still is made from cannon captured by the British from the Russians during the Crimean War. Most recently, Victoria Crosses were awarded to British soldiers for valour in Afghanistan and Iraq.

John Henry "Harry" Brown was born in Gananoque in 1898. Following the death of his father, the family settled near Peterborough just before the First World War. Harry Brown enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in August 1916, a few weeks after his 18th birthday. Following training in Britain, he reported to the 10th Battalion (Canadians), an infantry unit, in June 1917. On Aug. 15, the battalion and other units of the Canadian Corps captured Hill 70, just east of Vimy Ridge in Northern France. The next day, the Germans launched the first of 21 intense counter–attacks.

Brown and another runner were given a crucial message to deliver "at all costs." It requested immediate artillery support for the beleaguered Canadians. The official historian of the Canadian Expeditionary Force wrote: "Then occurred one of the many acts of heroism that illuminate the dark pages of war." The other runner was killed. Although Brown had his left arm almost torn off by a shell and his hip so badly damaged he crawled part of the way, he delivered the message before collapsing. He died the next day.

Exceptional acts of valour; Gananoque's 'Harry' Brown is one of 94 Canadians to be awarded a Victoria Cro

In early 1918, his mother accepted his Victoria Cross from the governor general of Canada. The citation states: "His devotion to duty was of the highest degree possible, and his successful delivery of the message undoubtedly saved the loss of many lives."

The fighting at Hill 70 was intense: Six Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross and 9,199 were killed or wounded in 10 days in an area only the size of the town of Gananoque.

Private Brown's Victoria Cross, which is held by the Canadian War Museum, will be displayed at the Gananoque Legion between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. daily from Tuesday, Aug. 14 to Thursday, Aug. 16., along with items showing Gananoque's involvement in the Great War. Although the town and local area had a population of less than 4,000, more than 550 men and women served, of whom 58 were killed, including a 15-year-old soldier, a father of 12 and four sets of brothers. One family lost a son in each of the world wars.

In addition to Private Harry Brown, two other Gananoque men were recognized for their bravery during the Great War. William Hale was a graduate of Queen's medical school and became the medical officer of the 42nd Battalion (Black Watch of Canada). He was awarded the Military Cross twice for bravery while assisting wounded men under fire. They are on display at the Gananoque Legion. Private Joseph Calvert, who lost a brother during the war, served in the medical corps as a stretcher bearer and won the Military Medal "For Bravery In The Field." He also served during the Second World War.

Courage, however, is not always recognized with a medal. The message Private Harry Brown delivered and that posthumously earned him the Victoria Cross called on Canadian artillery units to stop German infantry attacks. In order to neutralize these units, the Germans saturated their positions with 15,000 shells filled with the newly developed mustard gas, which caused severe blistering to exposed skin and destroyed the lungs. In order to maintain the heavy work required to fire so many rounds in the August heat, Bombardier Alfred Stunden of Gananoque and many other gunners removed their gas masks and suffered the full effects of the poison. He died three weeks later. An officer in his unit wrote: "There is no finer record of sacrificial devotion to duty in the annals of the army than that recorded by the gunners on that fateful night."

Just months after graduating from Queen's medical school in early 1917, William Brown of Mallorytown enlisted. In May 1918, he was serving in a British field hospital that was hit by a poison gas barrage. Brown sent the other medical staff away and remained with his patients. He died three days later of the effects of the gas. Bombardier Stunden and Captain Brown, both 24, received no recognition for their courage, largely because only the rarely awarded Victoria Cross can be given posthumously.

Sometimes a man's courage is recognized only through luck. In 1944, Warrant Officer Andrew Mynarski of Winnipeg was a gunner on a bomber that was attacked by a German fighter. The crew was ordered to bail out, but Mynarski remained in an unsuccessful attempt to free the trapped rear gunner. Just before Mynarski jumped with his uniform on fire, he saluted the rear gunner. Mynarski died of his wounds, but by an incredible stroke of luck the rear gunner survived the crash to give witness to his courage. One man, a New Zealander, was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross solely on evidence provided by the captain of the German submarine he sank.

Queen Victoria insisted the Victoria Cross recognize courage regardless of the individual's rank or race. One of the first men to receive it was a black Canadian whose parents had been slaves. They were freed by the British in 1812 during the war with the U.S. and taken to Halifax. William Hall was born in 1827, joined the British marines, and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his courage during the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

Although women are eligible to receive the Victoria Cross, until recently that has not been possible because they were not allowed into combat, and one of its requirements is that it must be earned "in the face of the enemy."

Exceptional acts of valour; Gananoque's 'Harry' Brown is one of 94 Canadians to be awarded a Victoria Cro

Some argue the Victoria Cross should be awarded more often. Seventy-one Canadians received it during the First World War, but only 16 during the Second World War. At least another 24 were recommended but did not receive it, and no Canadian has been awarded it since 1945. In contrast to the only 1,352 Victoria Crosses awarded British and Commonwealth men, the U.S. Medal of Honour, created in 1863, has been awarded 3,459 times. During this period, the U.S. has suffered considerably fewer casualties than British and Commonwealth armies.

In 1993, Canada created its own version of the Victoria Cross, which bears the inscription Pro Valore – a Latin version of the words that are on the original medal: "For Valour." It never has been awarded. – Bill Beswetherick served in the Canadian Forces for 34 years. He lives near Seeleys Bay.

Canada not Afghanistan's only hope commander; International forces will be needed for years, Gauthier says

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: World

PAGE: A4

BYLINE: Martin Ouellet

ILLUSTRATION: Lt.–Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, says Afghanistan's future doesn't depend on Canada alone. (MARTIN OUELLET / CP)

WORD COUNT: 365

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan – Canadian troops are not the only foreign military that can complete the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan beyond 2009, a top Canadian commander said on Sunday.

"Whether we accomplish it ourselves, or it's accomplished by others, it doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things," Lt.–Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, told a news conference in Kandahar.

Gauthier said the international community will need to be present in Afghanistan for several more years for the country to become self-sufficient.

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is slated to end in February 2009.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend that mandate with the consensus of Parliament, which seems unlikely. The mounting death toll – 66 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002 – has renewed the political debate back home over the mission's future, with the opposition parties pushing the government to come up with an exit strategy.

Gauthier said the situation has improved in the war-torn country, but it will require years of continued contributions from the international community.

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Gauthier's observations were shared Sunday by the Canadian military's top general, Rick Hillier, who said he wasn't so sure troops would be able to hand over much of the frontline fighting to the Afghan National Army by February, 2009.

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Canada not Afghanistan's only hope commander; International forces will be needed for years, Gauthier says

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He said Canadians should not expect that combat operations are nearly at an end for our military.

"We're going to have to continue the fight for the foreseeable future," he said.

The expansion of the Afghan army is only one piece of Afghanistan's security puzzle. The even greater challenge is creating a professional and effective national police force from the ragtag and often corrupt units that have existed.

"I'm told that the Afghan National Police is three or four years behind the army," Gauthier said. "It's a problem, a tremendous challenge."

Afghan police guard the country's porous border and patrol local communities across the country.

Canada not Afghanistan's only hope commander; International forces will be needed for years, Gauthier says

Segregation not always a bad thing

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: News

PAGE: A4

BYLINE: Scott Taylor

WORD COUNT: 759

RECENT MEDIA reports out of Afghanistan have hinted that there is a slight rift between the outgoing anglophone Canadian units and the newly arrived French speaking Royal 22nd Regiment (Vandoos). One anecdote detailed how members of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were instructing their Afghan police recruits on some basic French phrases. Using phonetic repetition in the belief that they were learning how to say "Hello, how are you?" in French, the Afghans were overheard chanting "F– – you, Vandoo" by an embedded journalist.

Such sophomoric practical jokes could easily be dismissed as harmless inter–regimental rivalry, but those familiar with our army's recent past know that the animosity between our anglophone and francophone combat units runs deeper than that. One of the reasons for this is that the senior brass has consistently oversold the Vandoos, and the media have bought into the largely unwarranted hype without question.

In the weeks leading up to the troop rotation currently underway, any reference to the Vandoos was invariably embellished with a glowing adjective such as "famed," "fabled" or "storied. Until now, the combat operations in Afghanistan have been conducted by either the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry or the Royal Canadian Regiment, and yet neither of these units receives similarly fawning monikers in the national press.

When one factors in that the casualty count of 66 dead and 260 wounded to date has been borne solely by these anglophone regiments, one can understand their resentment when headlines herald the francophones arrival with such phrases as "Vandoos bring can–do spirit to Afghanistan." Without having taken a single patrol outside the wire in Kandahar, one francophone officer told reporters he felt his troops could do "a better job" at reconstruction than the homeward bound veterans.

Lost in the media love affair is the fact that the Vandoos were directly responsible for three of the biggest black eyes the Canadian military received during the scandal–plagued 1990s.

First there was the release of a notorious hazing video depicting Vandoo paratroopers engaged in public acts of drunkenness, nudity, defecation, feces–ingestion and simulated sodomy, all of which directly led to the 1995 disbandment of the entire Canadian Airborne Regiment.

And in 1996 it was revealed that a large number of Vandoos had discredited themselves while guarding a mental hospital in Bakovici, Bosnia. Among the allegations was that an officer had sex with a female patient while his drunken troops shouted encouragement. Despite internal police reports and evidence, the military brass had kept the lid on this scandal for three years. Subsequent investigations implicated nearly three dozen Vandoos in the misconduct, but due to the expired statute of limitations, no charges were laid and names of the accused were not released. The entire army was tarnished by the scandal.

Later that same year, Lt.–Gen. Armand Roy, the senior serving Vandoo, was dismissed from his post as the deputy chief of defence staff. Publicly fired from the army, Roy was ordered to repay more than \$86,000 that he had allegedly misappropriated.

The rank and file were shell-shocked to learn that the Judge Advocate General would not press charges against the disgraced general, the most senior official in Canada ever dismissed for theft. The double standard of justice led to a collapse of faith in the military hierarchy and a top-to-bottom review of the military justice system.

That being stated, I have no doubt that the current rotation of Vandoos into Afghanistan is eager to erase the recent past and will set out to earn the copious praise that has been heaped upon them. What we should learn from our own linguistic diversity is that despite the fact we are an officially bilingual army, in order to maximize efficiency at the operational level we recognize the need to have segregated combat units.

As we shift the focus to training the Afghan National Army, perhaps the architects of this new force should look to the Canadian example. Rather than simply herding together Afghan recruits into one single battalion, why not separate them into sub-units that allow them to train and fight with members of their own language and ethnicity?

For the record, there are 10 major ethnic factions in Afghanistan – Pashtu, Persian, Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Hazara, Baluch, Waziri, Kirgiz and Arab – and their past history of bitter inter-sectarian violence runs far deeper than our little Canadian inter-regimental rivalries.

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Soldiers' rations to include meal replacement packet

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: Canada

PAGE: A4

BYLINE: Murray Brewster

WORD COUNT: 344

OTTAWA – In 55-degree heat and with Taliban rockets raining down, the last thing most of us would feel like doing is chowing down on a steaming bag of preserved salmon fillet.

With that in mind, the Canadian army is set to introduce a protein drink to its field ration kits, a specially formulated supplement similar to what body builders use.

Maj. Julie Johnson, who is responsible for keeping the army's supply of individual meal packs flowing to the front, says the military has found soldiers in Afghanistan operating "outside of the wire" have often not been eating three meals a day.

"Nobody really wants to choke down ravioli when it's 150 degrees out, so the protein supplement is something that can be used in lieu," she said in an interview.

The meal replacement is a powdered drink that mixes with water and comes in three flavours – vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. It will begin appearing in soldiers' rations within the next couple of weeks, said Johnson.

About a year ago, the army started to realize that soldiers, especially those running the gauntlet of supply convoys from Kandahar Airfield to far-flung desert bases, didn't have the time or the inclination to eat breakfast, lunch and supper every day.

"When I saw that, I said that was inappropriate and we need to maintain their nutritional wellness," said Johnson.

Individual meal packs – or IMPs – are the stuff of culinary legend in the army, with a shelf life of over three years.

As soldiers often say: "Once you've had it, you'll never forget it, although you wish you could."

Often derided as an assault on the pallet, the rations are distributed to troops when it's impossible to set up field kitchens, which in Afghanistan means pretty much everywhere outside of the main NATO base at Kandahar Airfield, the provincial team base in the city and select forward operating bases.

The brown-bagged meals, of which there are 18 varieties, contain one main entree, a dessert, powdered fruit drinks, coffee, candy and, significantly, a comment card.

Over the years, there have been some colourful responses. A macaroni and cheese dinner, into which the supplier inexplicably added freeze-dried peas, elicited a barrage of comments.

Nicole Belanger–Drapeau, the civilian manager of the ration program at National Defence, said she was bombarded with notes for three years saying: "Pleeeeeease get rid of the peas."

Afghan leaders try to shame Taliban into freeing women; Rebels set new deadline for release of Korean hostages

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: World

PAGE: A3

BYLINE: Rahim Faiez

ILLUSTRATION: South Koreans pray for the safe return of 18 women kidnapped by the Taliban in Afghanistan. (AHN YOUNG–JOON / AP)

WORD COUNT: 537

KABUL, Afghanistan – Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality Sunday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 4:30 a.m. ADT today. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted on July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace, according to a statement from his office.

Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council said. "The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it."

And a former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first."

But the Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that Western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar, and saying that the Taliban can do the same. He said the Taliban could detain and kill "women, men or children."

"It might be a man or a woman. . . . We may kill one, we may kill two, we may kill one of each (gender), two of each, four of each," Ahmadi told The Associated Press by satellite phone from an unknown location. "Or we may kill all of them at once."

Ahmadi said the militant group had given a list of 23 insurgent prisoners it wants released to government officials, and that if they weren't freed by midday today hostages would be killed.

The Taliban has set several deadlines that passed without consequence and it wasn't clear how seriously the militants would treat their latest ultimatum. A leader of the South Korean group was shot and killed Wednesday but it was unclear why.

Two days of meetings between elders of Qarabagh district in Ghazni province, where the South Korean hostages were kidnapped on the Kabul–Kandahar highway, and a delegation of senior officials from Kabul yielded no results so far, said Shirin Mangal, spokesman for the Ghazni provincial governor.

The meeting is being held behind closed doors, and Mangal did not divulge any details.

In his meeting with Karzai, Korean presidential envoy Baek Jong–chun thanked the president for the Afghan government's help with the hostage situation and said South Korea will respect the Afghan government's way of ending the crisis, according to Karzai's office. Pope Benedict also called for the hostages' release, saying the perpetrators "desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed."

'Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders.'

Hillier downplays hope of February military handoff

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: Canada

PAGE: A3

BYLINE: By

ILLUSTRATION: Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier salutes as hereviews the troops at a change–in–command ceremony in Ottawa on Thursday. (TOM HANSON / CP)

WORD COUNT: 396

OTTAWA – Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front–line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter – as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them . . . so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March – it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec–based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers. But it's too early to say when Canadians may be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high–risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

He took pains not to flat–out contradict O'Connor, but Hillier clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the South in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Sixty–six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment – set to end in February 2009 – with the consensus of Parliament. That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois set against any extension.

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada and NATO partners as they try to rebuild that country.

Afghani leaders working to free captives

PUBLICATION: The Guardian (Charlottetown)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: World

PAGE: B8

SOURCE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL, Afghanistan

ILLUSTRATION: Karzai

WORD COUNT: 163

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality Sunday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

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"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace, according to a statement from his office.

We need a debate on Afghanistan

PUBLICATION: The Guardian (Charlottetown)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: Opinion

PAGE: A7

SOURCE: Special to The Guardian

BYLINE: Kathleen O'Hara

WORD COUNT: 878

Human beings have a wonderful defence mechanism. They can virtually ignore important things in the world around them – war, climate change – allowing them to carry on their daily lives, keeping them sane. However, this same mechanism can prevent them from understanding and acting on certain issues, even in their own best interest.

The defence mechanisms of the citizens of Kingston, Ontario, have been taking a beating since the death of Capt. Matthew Dawe, the city's second Afghan war victim. With numerous reports of the young man's violent death by roadside bomb – along with five other soldiers and an Afghan interpreter – and the suffering of his prominent military family, the realities and tragedies of battle have made their way into local homes.

At the same time, the war's supporters are exhorting citizens to strengthen their resolve in the fight for freedom – making it awkward for those opposed. Just days before Dawe's death, I attended an outdoor concert in the city's downtown. When the MC mentioned supporting our troops, I yelled loudly: Bring them home! No more war! The crowd was silent then, but I wouldn't do it now. (Another form of self-defence!)

For a long time, war seemed a thing of the past for Kingston. Old Fort Henry and the limestone towers, which dot Lake Ontario, are testaments to earlier fears that the Americans might invade from the south. They are the stuff of tourism now. The mobilizations of the First, Second, and Korean Wars, too, are history.

While growing up there, I thought that my father, who died at age 31 as a delayed result of being interned during World War II, was among the last victims of fighting. The immediate world was safe. The Cold War and nuclear threat were far away, abstract.

Nevertheless, it was difficult not to have a sense of things soldierly. On Sundays, I would watch in awe as colourfully dressed Royal Military College cadets marched in tight formation from St. George's Cathedral across the La Salle Causeway to their lovely campus. I never dreamed that their successors would actually go to war as Dawe, who graduated in civil engineering in 2004, did.

More than 2,000 people attended Dawe's funeral. Needless to say, this change in the status of war from abstract to very real, this collapse of people's defence mechanisms, is not a good thing. However, it illustrates – as does every death and injury since 2001 – how desperately we need a national debate on Canada's presence in Afghanistan. It is time we asked some very serious, possibly unpleasant and controversial questions.

We must begin with an assessment of our overall goal in the region. Our main ally, the United States, has a blighted history there. The CIA conducted its very first coup in Iran, 1953, overthrowing a democratically elected government and installing the Shah, who became a cruel dictator. When the Islamic fundamentalists finally tossed out the Shah, they vowed they wouldn't be "liberal" victims of the U.S., like their democratic forerunners.

Today, the U.S. purports to be spreading democracy and freedom. I find this difficult to believe in light of its behaviour in Iraq just after the invasion. As administrator for the Coalition Provisional Government, American Paul Bremer imposed several major changes – "orders" – on the country, such as free trade, privatization, a flat tax. He granted full immunity to foreign corporations from Iraqi laws. He even made it illegal for farmers to re-use seeds from their plants, as they have done for centuries, thus helping giant corporations like Monsanto.

In other words, the U.S. forced Iraqis to accept its version of extreme capitalism, its values, its interests, regardless of their own economic needs and culture. This isn't democracy, and it is a far cry from the moderate approach Stephen Harper was touting on his recent trip to South America and the Caribbean. But is the U.S. model what we are fighting for in Afghanistan?

Militant fundamentalism is similar to communism. It provides a disciplined response to perceived injustices – internal and external – and American geo-political and economic agendas are fanning its flames. (Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraq, the resurgence of the Taliban, and more) Do we really want to be part of this destructive dynamic? Can we not think of a more positive role? Concerning Afghanistan, we must also ask ourselves about the immorally high number of civilian deaths caused, according to President Karzai, by coalition forces' "extreme use of force", the inhumane detentions, the torture. These aren't mere details or unavoidable side effects. And what about the corrupt government? Karzai's election was marred by complaints of fraud and improper procedures. Is this really our style?

Finally, there is the *raison d'etre* of the war itself. I have read that the FBI has not laid charges against Osama bin Laden in relation to 9/11, presumably because it lacks the evidence to do so. If this is the case, do we have enough evidence to sacrifice our young people's lives?

Kathleen O'Hara writes for the Issues Network.

Top general cautious on turning over fighting role; Hillier downplays hope of military handoff to Afghans by February

PUBLICATION: The Guardian (Charlottetown)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: Front

PAGE: A1

SOURCE: CP

DATELINE: OTTAWA

WORD COUNT: 228

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's "Question Period" Sunday, Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter – as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said.

"But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them . . . so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March – it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers. But it's too early to say when Canadians may be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high-risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

Afghan leaders try to shame Taliban into releasing hostages

PUBLICATION: The Telegram (St. John's)
DATE: 2007.07.30
SECTION: International
PAGE: B4
SOURCE: The Associated Press
BYLINE: Rahim Faiez
DATELINE: Kabul, Afghanistan
ILLUSTRATION: South Korean Christians pray during a service demanding the safe return of South Koreans kidnapped in Afghanistan at a church in Seoul Sunday. – Photo by The Associated Press
WORD COUNT: 484

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality Sunday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. EDT today. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted on July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace, according to a statement from his office. Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council said. "The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it."

And a former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first."

But the Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that Western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar, and saying that the Taliban can do the same. He said the Taliban could detain and kill "women, men or children."

"It might be a man or a woman. ... We may kill one, we may kill two, we may kill one of each (gender), two of each, four of each," Ahmadi told The Associated Press by satellite phone from an unknown location. "Or we may kill all of them at once."

Ahmadi said the militant group had given a list of 23 insurgent prisoners it wants released to government officials, and that if they weren't freed by midday Monday hostages would be killed. The Taliban has set

several deadlines that passed without consequence and it wasn't clear how seriously the militants would treat their latest ultimatum. A leader of the South Korean group was shot and killed Wednesday but it was unclear why.

Two days of meetings between elders of Qarabagh district in Ghazni province, where the South Korean hostages were kidnapped on the Kabul–Kandahar highway, and a delegation of senior officials from Kabul yielded no results so far, said Shirin Mangal, spokesman for the Ghazni provincial governor.

Pope Benedict also called for the hostages' release, saying the perpetrators "desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed."

Hillier not sure military handoff will happen in February

PUBLICATION: The Telegram (St. John's)

DATE: 2007.07.30

SECTION: National/World

PAGE: A5

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

DATELINE: Ottawa

WORD COUNT: 509

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"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them ... so they can be ready for operations.

"Whether that's February or March – it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Too early to say

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers. But it's too early to say when Canadians may be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high-risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

He took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor, but Hillier clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the South in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Pressure to confirm exit plan

Sixty–six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment – set to end in February 2009 – with the consensus of Parliament.

That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois set against any extension.

Corruption is a challenge

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada and NATO partners as they try to rebuild that country.

"Quite frankly, I think all engaged with the mission on any level have been frustrated by the slow progress on building an effective government that can efficiently deliver the kinds of programs that people back in Canada take for granted. And to do it without that corruption – which is significant, which does detract from the mission."

'Impatience doesn't work'

As for the training of Afghan soldiers, the defence committee of the British House of Commons released a report earlier this month that also cast doubt on how soon they'll be able to take over from international forces.

"They will be able to do much more by 2009, but their numbers are small," committee chairman James Arbuthnot told Question Period last week.

"We can rely on them more and more but ... I don't think it is possible to put Western time scales on this.

"It's going to be a long–term project and we cannot be impatient. Impatience doesn't work in Afghanistan."

Hillier not sure Afghans ready to take front lines

Doubts Canadians replaced by Feb.

PUBLICATION: WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A9

SECTION: World Wire

WORD COUNT: 570

CP Wire OTTAWA — Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

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Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter — as O'Connor predicted.

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"We've got a large training role to help them...so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March — it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it." O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

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"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the South in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been." Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

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"It's going to be a long-term project and we cannot be impatient.

Impatience doesn't work in Afghanistan." -- Canadian Press {Ottawa ONT}

Afghan leaders cite traditions in arguing for hostages' release

PUBLICATION: WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A9

SECTION: World Wire

WORD COUNT: 297

CP Wire Rahim Faiez KABUL, Afghanistan -- Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality Sunday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. EDT Monday. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted on July 19, Afghan President Hamid Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace, according to a statement from his office.

Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council said.

"The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it." And a former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first." But the Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that Western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar.

— Associated Press

Tories focus on election strategy PM, caucus to meet in Charlottetown

PUBLICATION: WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A6

SECTION: Canada Wire

WORD COUNT: 406

CNS Richard Foot OTTAWA — Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his parliamentary caucus are to convene in Charlottetown on Wednesday for three days of closed-door strategy meetings, confronted by a dilemma: How to engineer an election that almost no one in Canada wants — including most MPs on both the government and opposition benches — for another crack at a majority government.

With polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals stuck in a stagnant pool of popular support of about 30 per cent each, and with the economy rolling along happily, Harper's dream of a quick minority regime followed by a decisive, second-term majority appears out of reach.

"We might actually find ourselves here for a full term," says a rueful Myron Thompson, the Alberta Tory MP whose hope of retiring to the Rockies before the next election may turn out to be years away.

Tim Powers, a Conservative campaign insider, says no matter how keen Harper was for only a short-lived minority regime, the party leadership has accepted, for now, that people want it to govern.

"This is the reality of our times," he says. "The public at large is comfortable with minority governments right now... there's no appetite for change, the economy is good, and when the economy is good and there is no single pressing domestic issue, people tend to want their politicians to focus on governing." But how will Harper focus his government after exhausting the "five priorities" he set for himself two years ago? Senate reform, including locally elected senators, could be one new priority, says Thompson, who says the Liberal-dominated Senate's "disgusting" decision this spring to hold up legislation passed by the Commons gives the Tories the perfect opening to press their case for democratic reform of the upper chamber.

Crime is another obvious political choice. Among the four pieces of legislation stalled by the Senate, the bill to impose mandatory prison sentences for gun crimes will only gain public support following this summer's shootings in Winnipeg and Halifax, and the tragic, cross-fire shooting of an innocent boy in Toronto. Tax reform and tax fairness, along with another possible cut to the GST, are also good candidates for inclusion in a new Conservative priority list.

And whether the war in Afghanistan makes the list, the issue is certain to continue creating headlines.

— CanWest News Service

Afghan leaders try to shame Taliban into releasing women hostages

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: INTERNATIONAL POLITICS DEFENCE

PUBLICATION: cpw

WORD COUNT: 524

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) _ Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality Sunday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. EDT Monday. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted on July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace, according to a statement from his office.

Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council said. "The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it."

And a former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first."

But the Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that Western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar, and saying that the Taliban can do the same. He said the Taliban could detain and kill "women, men or children."

"It might be a man or a woman. ... We may kill one, we may kill two, we may kill one of each (gender), two of each, four of each," Ahmadi told The Associated Press by satellite phone from an unknown location. "Or we may kill all of them at once."

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The Taliban has set several deadlines that passed without consequence and it wasn't clear how seriously the militants would treat their latest ultimatum. A leader of the South Korean group was shot and killed Wednesday but it was unclear why.

Two days of meetings between elders of Qarabagh district in Ghazni province, where the South Korean hostages were kidnapped on the Kabul–Kandahar highway, and a delegation of senior officials from Kabul yielded no results so far, said Shirin Mangal, spokesman for the Ghazni provincial governor.

The meeting is being held behind closed doors, and Mangal did not divulge any details.

In his meeting with Karzai, Korean presidential envoy Baek Jong–chun thanked the president for the Afghan government's help with the hostage situation and said South Korea will respect the Afghan government's way of ending the crisis, according to Karzai's office.

Pope Benedict also called for the hostages' release, saying the perpetrators ``desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed."

Hillier downplays hope of military handoff to Afghans by February

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

PUBLICATION: cpw

WORD COUNT: 534

OTTAWA (CP) _ Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's "Question Period," Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter _ as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them...so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March _ it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

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He took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor, but Hillier clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the South in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment _ set to end in February 2009 _ with the consensus of Parliament. That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois set against any extension.

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada and NATO partners as they try to rebuild that country.

“Quite frankly, I think all engaged with the mission on any level have been frustrated by the slow progress on building an effective government that can efficiently deliver the kinds of programs that people back in Canada take for granted. And to do it without that corruption _ which is significant, which does detract from the mission.”

As for the training of Afghan soldiers, the defence committee of the British House of Commons released a report earlier this month that also cast doubt on how soon they'll be able to take over from international forces.

“They will be able to do much more by 2009, but their numbers are small,” committee chairman James Arbuthnot told Question Period last week.

“We can rely on them more and more but...I don't think it is possible to put Western time scales on this.

“It's going to be a long-term project and we cannot be impatient. Impatience doesn't work in Afghanistan.”

CP News Budget – Sunday, July 29, 2007

DATE: 2007.07.29
KEYWORDS: ADVISORIES
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 418

Here are the CP coverage plans as of 19:30 ET. The CP editor handling World news in Toronto can be reached at 416-507-2165.

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan _ A top Canadian Forces commander says it doesn't have to be Canadian soldiers who stay in Afghanistan past February 2009 to help finish rebuilding the country. Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, says work in Afghanistan will be far from over in 18 months, when Canada is scheduled to end its mission. 475 words. See CP Photo KANDX101. By Martin Ouellet. BC-Afghan-Cda-Mission, 1st Writethru. Moved.

KABUL, Afghanistan _ Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality on Sunday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives. A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. EDT Monday. 600 words. By Rahim Faiez. BC-Afghanistan, 1st Writethru. Moved.

BAGHDAD _ Defying orders from authorities, revellers fired celebratory gunshots and poured into the streets after Iraq beat Saudi Arabia to clinch its first Asian Cup soccer championship on Sunday. Mosques broadcast calls to stop the shootings, which killed at least four people. Security forces enforced a vehicle ban in an effort to prevent a repeat of car bombings that killed dozens celebrating Iraq's progress to the finals Wednesday. 1,050 words. By Bushra Juhi. See AP Photos. BC-Iraq, 1st Writethru. Moved.

TOKYO _ Prime Minister Shinzo Abe vowed Sunday to stay in office despite leading his scandal-stained ruling coalition to an unexpectedly severe and humiliating defeat in parliamentary elections. Exit polls showed Abe's Liberal Democratic party losing the majority it held with its coalition partner in the upper house, a stunning reversal of fortune for a ruling party that has controlled Japan virtually uninterrupted since 1955. 700 words. See AP Photos. By Hiroko Tabuchi. BC-Japan-Elections, 1st Writethru. Moved.

WASHINGTON _ British Prime Minister Gordon Brown travelled to the United States on Sunday, saying he planned to use the official visit to strengthen what his country already considers its "most important bilateral relationship." 600 words. By David Stringer. BC-Brown-Bush, 1st Writethru. Moved.

Cdn commander: Other countries can help complete Afghan mission after 2009

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

PUBLICATION: cpw

WORD COUNT: 369

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan (CP) _ Canadian troops are not the only foreign military that can complete the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan beyond 2009, a top Canadian commander said on Sunday.

“Whether we accomplish it ourselves, or it's accomplished by others, it doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things,” Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, told a news conference in Kandahar.

Gauthier said the international community will need to be present in Afghanistan for several more years for the country to become self-sufficient.

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is slated to end in February 2009.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend that mandate with the consensus of Parliament, which seems unlikely. The mounting death toll _ 66 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002 _ has renewed the political debate back home over the mission's future, with the opposition parties pushing the government to come up with an exit strategy.

Gauthier said the situation has improved in the war-torn country, but it will require years of continued contributions from the international community.

“I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February, 2009, from an international community perspective,” Gauthier said.

“No one has any illusion that Afghanistan will be self-sustaining and self-sufficient by February, 2009.”

Gauthier's observations were shared Sunday by the Canadian military's top general, Rick Hillier, who said he wasn't so sure troops would be able to hand over much of the frontline fighting to the Afghan National Army by February, 2009.

Gauthier said he does not see any major changes in the Canadian mission as a new rotation of troops begins a six-month mission.

A fresh batch of soldiers from Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment _ the Van Doos _ are in the midst of arriving in Kandahar, replacing 2,500 battle-hardened soldiers from bases in Atlantic Canada.

Canadian troops will gradually spend less time in combat operations and more time training Afghan troops, Gauthier said.

He said Canadians should not expect that combat operations are nearly at an end for our military.

“We're going to have to continue the fight for the foreseeable future,” he said.

The expansion of the Afghan army is only one piece of Afghanistan's security puzzle. The even greater challenge is creating a professional and effective national police force from the ragtag and often corrupt units that have existed.

“I'm told that the Afghan National Police is three or four years behind the army,” Gauthier said. “It's a problem, a tremendous challenge.”

Afghan police guard the country's porous border and patrol local communities across the country.

Quebec troops arrive home after eight-month tour in Afghanistan

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL

PUBLICATION: cpw

WORD COUNT: 63

CFB VALCARTIER, Que. (CP) _ Friends and family greeted 85 Quebec-based soldiers who returned from Afghanistan on Sunday.

Troops from the famed Royal 22nd Regiment, also known as the Van Doos, arrived at CFB Valcartier following an eight-month tour.

A company of 156 Van Doos has been working at the provincial reconstruction team base since November.

Meanwhile, more than 2,000 soldiers from the Quebec City-area base are currently making their way to Kandahar.

The new rotation of troops assumes official command of the mission next month.

INDEX:Defence, International, Politics

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

PUBLICATION: bnw

WORD COUNT: 101

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan – A top Canadian Forces commander says it doesn't have to be Canadian soldiers who stay in Afghanistan past February 2009 to help finish rebuilding the country.

Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, says work in Afghanistan will be far from over in 18 months, when Canada is scheduled to end its mission.

But Gauthier said in Kandahar today it doesn't make a difference whether the work is done by Canadians or troops from other countries.

Gauthier says the international community will need to be present in Afghanistan for several more years for the country to become self-sufficient.

(BN)

INDEX:Defence, International, Politics

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

PUBLICATION: bnw

WORD COUNT: 132

OTTAWA – Canada's chief of defence staff isn't so sure Canadian troops will be able to hand over front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Rick Hillier said it will be a significant challenge for the Afghan National Army to be ready by next winter.

That's not what Hillier's boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor, told the same program last week.

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained Afghan battalions will likely put Canadian troops into 'reserve' in Afghanistan by February.

Hillier says Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers. But it's too early to put a date on when Canadians may be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Hillier says widespread corruption within the Afghan government is another challenge facing Canada as it tries to rebuild that country.

(BN)

Afghan–Kidnappings–Update (Karzai)

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: INTERNATIONAL POLITICS JUSTICE

PUBLICATION: bnw

WORD COUNT: 79

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan's president says the kidnapping of 23 South Koreans will have a "shameful effect" on the Afghan people.

And Hamid Karzai said today that abducting women in particular is un-Islamic.

It's Karzai's first comments on the crisis since the South Koreans were taken hostage July 19th.

Karzai's statement was after talks with a South Korean delegation.

Earlier, Pope Benedict issued a call for the release of the Korean hostages.

He called on the perpetrators to — quote — "desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed."

Originally there were 23 captives, but one has been killed.

Their Taliban captors are demanding the release of jailed militants.

(AP)

RMo

Quebec troops arrive home after eight-month tour in Afghanistan

DATE: 2007.07.29

KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL

PUBLICATION: bnw

WORD COUNT: 64

CFB VALCARTIER, Que. – Friends and family greeted 85 Quebec-based soldiers who returned from Afghanistan on Sunday.

Troops from the famed Royal 22nd Regiment, also known as the Van Doos, arrived at CFB Valcartier following an eight-month tour.

A company of 156 Van Doos has been working at the provincial reconstruction team base since November.

Meanwhile, more than 2,000 soldiers from the Quebec City-area base are currently making their way to Kandahar.

The new rotation of troops assumes official command of the mission next month.

(BN)

More is less on Afghan battlefields

IDNUMBER 200707300088
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Star
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Ont
SECTION: Opinion
PAGE: AA08
BYLINE: Jeffery Ewener
SOURCE: Special to The Star
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 480

History may or may not repeat itself as farce. But sometimes farce repeats itself as history.

There's an old comedy routine, which goes back at least to the days of silent movies, about a man with a nice table, except that one of its four legs is a bit too long. This makes the whole thing unstable. So, being an enterprising fellow, he gets out his saw and cuts that leg down to size.

Except he does the job too well. Now the leg that used to be too long is just a bit too short. Our man studies the situation a while, then realizes that having one leg too short is just like having three legs too long. And he knows what to do about that. He gets busy with his saw again.

But once again he overdoes it, and now he has three legs too short, or one leg too long again. Meanwhile the table itself is getting shorter and shorter.

At this point, if Abbott and Costello were doing the routine, Lou would be slapping his face and rolling his eyes and crushing his hat into a ball.

It's funny stuff. Way funnier than Afghanistan. Yet weirdly similar.

A while ago it was reported that, while the terrorists have killed many innocent Afghani civilians this year, we, the defenders of civilization and opponents of terrorism, have actually killed more.

This role-reversal seems to be a result of NATO's, and particularly the U.S. 's, reliance on air power. Apparently even smart bombs are too dumb to tell the difference between a terrorist camp and a kindergarten.

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai warned that this strategy will steadily erode the support of the (surviving) Afghani civilians for the NATO operation.

Of course, over-reliance on air power is partly a result of not having enough soldiers on the ground. So a recent pull-no-punches report to the British Parliament warned that NATO's mission in Afghanistan risked failing, unless we get more soldiers on the ground, from more NATO countries.

In other words, what we're doing now is making the situation worse, so we need to do much more of it to make it better.

Let's put down our saws for a moment and think about this.

People often say war is the continuation of policy by other means. What they don't say is the reason we need other means is because those policies have failed.

NATO soldiers, including and maybe especially the Canadians, are making heroic efforts to succeed in the mission we have saddled them with.

But the very fact that they have this mission at all is a sign we have failed to solve the situation by means short of war – means that would have a lot more chance of succeeding, though maybe not exactly the way we would choose.

Militarily, as the British parliamentary report says, the only solution is more of the same.

But sooner or later, there will be a political solution in Afghanistan, negotiated by all parties, including those we don't like.

The only question is, how many people have to die first?

Eventually, who killed them won't matter any more, even to the living. It never matters to the dead.

Canada has the moral authority – paid for with the blood of our soldiers – to call for such a solution, to begin the process of finding peace. Whether we have the moral courage to do so is another question.

But otherwise, we're going to saw that table right down to a cutting-board.

Jeffery Ewener is a Toronto writer.

Hillier doubts Afghans ready to take over battlefront; General not as hopeful as defence minister about Canadians' ability to pull back by February

IDNUMBER 200707300082
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Star
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Met
SECTION: News
PAGE: A04
SOURCE: Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 474

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter, as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them ... so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March – it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors and trainers. But it's too early to say when Canadians will be able to leave the most dangerous front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high-risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

Hillier took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor, but clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process, because we've just gotten the first soldiers in the south in the last few months here. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Hillier doubts Afghans ready to take over battlefront; General not as hopeful as defence minister about Canada

Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment, set to end in February 2009, with the consensus of Parliament. That appears unlikely with the Liberals calling for an end to the combat role on schedule, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois against any extension.

Canadian troops are not the only foreign military that can complete the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan beyond 2009, a top Canadian commander said in Afghanistan yesterday.

"Whether we accomplish it ourselves, or it's accomplished by others, it doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things," Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, told a news conference in Kandahar.

Gauthier said the international community will need to be present in Afghanistan for several more years for the country to become self-sufficient. "I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February 2009, from an international community perspective," Gauthier said.

"No one has any illusion that Afghanistan will be self-sustaining and self-sufficient by February 2009."

Councils all tangled up in ribbons

IDNUMBER 200707300036
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Star
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Ont
SECTION: Editorial
PAGE: AA06
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 319

Maybe it's no coincidence the Support Our Troops ribbons look like a noose because municipal politicians sure wind up getting hanged in them.

The latest to be tripped up by the yellow ribbons were Calgary's mayor and aldermen who voted against accepting a donation of 5,000 of the stickers for display on city vehicles.

The mayor was condemned for uttering "weasel words" by one Calgary newspaper columnist; the aldermen who voted with him were labelled the "Terrible Ten."

The emotions were as high in Calgary as they were a month ago in Toronto where council, faced with a public backlash, reversed its original decision to decline display of the decals on its fleet of vehicles.

In Edmonton, city hall purchased 1,500 decals at a cost of \$5,250.

The debate comes down to whether the decals are purely morale boosters for the men and women of the Forces or whether they make a political statement about the war itself. The answer to that is in the eye of the beholder.

But let's be clear. The decals are decals, nothing more. Displaying them doesn't necessarily mean someone is pro-war, just as not displaying one doesn't make someone unpatriotic or less appreciative of the considerable sacrifice being made by Canada's troops in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, whatever benefit the decals might provide to troops is questionable, particularly if they haven't been purchased as official "Support Our Troops" merchandise.

That merchandise includes T-shirts, ball caps and fridge magnets, and the proceeds from their sale go to the Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency, which uses the revenue to support its morale and welfare programs for the Canadian Forces family. The agency operates a network of family services that includes the Calgary Military Family Resource Centre, which serves Lethbridge military families as well.

Lethbridge's council, wisely, hasn't joined the ribbon debate. It shouldn't. Surely, it has its own business to attend to. And that doesn't make them less patriotic or appreciative of men and women of the military than their counterparts in Edmonton or Toronto.

This is an edited version of an editorial that appeared Friday in the Lethbridge Herald.

Hillier doubts Afghans ready to take charge

IDNUMBER 200707300064
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A4
COLUMN: Canada Briefing
DATELINE: OTTAWA
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 115

OTTAWA — Canada's top soldier is pouring cold water on the Harper government's suggestions that Afghan troops are almost ready to take the lead in the battle against the Taliban, allowing Canadian soldiers to move away from deadly combat situations in southern Afghanistan.

Gen. Rick Hillier said yesterday that he doesn't expect his soldiers will be out of danger any time soon. Last week, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor suggested that Canada's troops could move into a reserve role by the end of the year, once the newly trained Afghan soldiers are ready to take the lead.

Hillier said the Afghan army simply wouldn't be ready, despite a major training effort by Canadians.

Kids the front line of Afghan conflict; Lack of international aid dooms starving children to grisly fate

IDNUMBER 200707300053
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Comment
PAGE: A6
COLUMN: Don Martin
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Malnourished kids: 35 per cent die.;
DATELINE: KANDAHAR CITY, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 774

With crying babies filling every bed, she waits for treatment in a plastic tub dangling beneath a weigh scale, weakly trying to smile.

The reading above the two-year-old's failing body could well be her tombstone. It puts her at seven kilograms. The pediatric chart I consulted said the average weight for a healthy female her age should be about 12 kilograms. The doctors here peg her chances of survival at 60 per cent.

Kids are starving in Kandahar and the surrounding refugee camps. And the allegation levelled by the Senlis Council, an international think-tank now branching into humanitarian relief, is that the Canadian government won't help and doesn't care.

Such incendiary accusations must be proven, so the Swiss-funded agency, founded by Vancouver lawyer Norine MacDonald, provided a fast driver and an armed guide so I could tour the darkest underbelly of Kandahar's missing social safety net.

Our day-long trek began at the malnourishment ward in Kandahar's main hospital, where the children's wing is so full, they put two babies to a cot. Sadly, it does not appear overcrowded: These babies, all of them over a year old, are barely newborn size.

Dr. Mohammed Sidiq tells me the number of starvation cases in his ward has almost doubled to 22 in the past year, but he isn't about to declare a crisis. "It may just be that it's easier to get into the city for treatment now," he shrugs.

Nor is it about a scarcity of food. "They have food, but don't know how to utilize it. We've found mothers breastfeeding until their child is two years old and that's not sufficient."

We move around the ward, each room with a handful of soiled beds and floors puddled with urine. The Pakistan-trained pediatrician is curiously detached as he examines babies clinically near death. "This one weighs four kilograms and should be nine." He pauses to gently prod the screaming infant's grotesquely distended stomach. "It doesn't look good."

He puts infants on a supplement-laced, antibiotics-enhanced milk feeding program when they arrive, to treat what are invariably multiple health problems.

It takes a week to know if a child can be saved. About 65 per cent survive and are discharged within 20 days.

But ask Sidiq about a wish list from Canada and he pauses. True, he needs more medication for parents to take with them after their child is discharged. But he's not inclined to condemn Canada or any other country for failing to help enough. "I'd suggest help fighting illiteracy so the mothers know how to care for their child."

Ironically, perhaps, that's a key Canadian International Development Agency program in the city.

Our next stop is the Marghar refugee camp, 18 kilometres southwest of Kandahar City. My guide nervously fingers the trigger on his AK-47 as we approach the camp, muttering about Taliban roaming nearby.

"Don't worry," he grins, "before they kill you, they'll have to kill me." Funny. I'm still worried.

An elder waves us inside a mud hut to talk about the 8,000 people living on this rocky mountain slope. They used to be nomads who roamed southern Afghanistan plains to find green pasture for their herds. But as one drought year became six, their livestock livelihood was decimated and their temporary villages grew permanent. Preferring not to accept this sad fact, the national and provincial governments have tried repeatedly to bulldoze the settlements.

There are no schools, electricity, health care or sanitation facilities and only two wells for the entire camp. People work at occasional day jobs in gardens or as day labourers in the city. But the elders say things are more desperate now, more than a year after United Nations aid stopped coming.

"You could search this entire camp and won't find two bags of flour," says the elder. There are no signs of toys or a single diversion for the kids, so I sparked a near riot by handing out pencils, pens and candy.

We end the day on a upbeat note at another Kuchi tribe on the edge of a river, downstream from Kandahar. The children appear better fed, goats wander the compound, and the parents show plenty of affection and concern for their children. The proof is in how they line up for hepatitis B vaccinations for themselves and their children in a pilot project by the Senlis Council.

Even so, the whole day was an unsettling and depressing experience. In a land where life is cheap, the Kandahar region's starving refugees are the fire sale. Thousands are clearly unwanted, denied government assistance and trapped in hopeless, lifelong situations.

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

But the Kandahar pediatrician makes an interesting observation.

"I haven't been to many places, but from what I've read, I don't think we're any worse off than any other Third World country. There are hungry children all over the world."

How sadly true. And that puts Canada in the dilemma of having to pick where it feeds the world from its severely limited financial ration.

dmartin@canwest.com

No quick fixes for troubled Afghanistan

IDNUMBER 200707300005
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: D6

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: CanWest News Service / A fenced compound near Kandahar airfield holds hundreds of Soviet tanks abandoned when the former superpower fled Afghanistan 20 years ago. It is a grim reminder that a military victory may be impossible. ;

DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan

BYLINE: Don Martin

SOURCE: CanWest News Service

WORD COUNT: 821

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — They're ghosts from a lost war, a 20-year-old reminder that a foreign-led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

Hundreds of Soviet tanks, troop carriers, trucks and artillery guns, perfectly preserved by Kandahar's desert-dry environment right down to goggles and binoculars, lie abandoned in a gated compound within sight of Canadian base headquarters.

For nine bloody years in the 1980s, the Soviet Union tried to prop up a Communist government in Kabul and annihilate the mujahedeen insurgency before the fading superpower ditched its military hardware here in the rush to flee a fight they couldn't win.

To the skeptics viewing Canada's counter-insurgency mission today, this military graveyard could preview our future if we botch the battle to rid Kandahar of the Taliban.

Seven weeks in southern Afghanistan is but an observational blink in a country that's been at war within itself for most of the last 30 years, but as I leave Kandahar today, trends and patterns are possible to detect and decipher. Some are hopeful. Others border on hopeless.

Right off the bat, let me argue that Canada cannot impose a political timetable on successfully ending this military mission.

It's like picking a date before the Normandy invasion for Canada to withdraw from the Second World War, yet we're just 18 months from a House of Commons vote to retreat with no obvious heir to our United Nations responsibility for the dangerously volatile Kandahar province.

Canadian-assisted progress on redevelopment, political reform, army training, police education and humanitarian relief will be terminated for political expediency, not measurable accomplishment. Canadian soldiers will be demoralized by any tail-between-legs departure, and billions of dollars worth of upgraded military equipment purchased specifically for the Afghanistan climate and terrain will be left without an active purpose. Perhaps they could be parked alongside the Soviet equipment here as our contribution to Afghan military history.

– Prime Minister Stephen Harper should not revisit Kandahar any time soon.

His sudden wimpiness on the file, replacing unconditional support for the mission with a shrugged surrender to a fix-is-in consensus of Parliament, is seen as inexplicable here. Soldiers who believed they had a Churchillian prime minister now know he's just another political weather vane, twisting in response to the winds of public opinion. A return visit would not receive a warm welcome, even in the scorching summer.

– Canada is transferring leadership of military operations to the Afghan army.

While local soldiers only receive a rudimentary three-week training and \$100 a month for a paycheque, they are nevertheless improving as a military force. Canadian commanders are giving them considerable say in setting military priorities and targets. During the only combat reporters witnessed recently, Afghans were leading the charge against the Taliban while Canada provided backup firepower. Brig.-Gen. Tim Grant also told me the reason for stranding a huge convoy (and this columnist) atop a mountain pass near Ghorak for almost two weeks was the result of a direct request to refortify the district offices from high in the Afghan government.

– The humanitarian and redevelopment pillars of this mission have become a higher priority, in words if not deeds.

The new base commander, Brig.-Gen. Guy Laroche, signalled as much when he landed here Saturday morning, but the drift was evident long before his arrival. Reconstruction and mentoring teams are being beefed up and their efforts praised in every second breath from military brass. The Canadian International Development Agency, often under attack for dragging its heels on feel-good projects, appears to have found a firmer footing in health, education and women's projects.

– The Taliban are not beaten.

The combined air and ground firepower of the joint forces here is a sight to behold. How so much destructive technology can be neutralized by a few thousand religious extremists armed with ancient rocket launchers, last-generation rifles and old anti-tank mines boggles the mind. Yet the Taliban, while no longer surfacing in large military formations, are having considerable success in planting bigger and better roadside bombs to put security forces on edge, slow reconstruction efforts and, most importantly, prevent Afghans from any sense their lives are returning to normal. And pity the poor villager in the faraway hills of southern Kandahar.

– OK, so I left the brightest development for last, but Kandahar City is on an economic roll, booming in population and bursting with building activity.

The lineup of truck traffic outside the city's customs terminal is a sight vaguely reminiscent of a Windsor border crossing, albeit with colourful jingle trucks in lieu of 18-wheelers. There are billboards extolling the virtues of a university education over becoming a suicide bomber. It is, veteran observers say, an echo of what happened in Kabul several years ago when the capital prospered and security concerns abated. If the south's largest city can thrive in spite of chronic security problems, hope springs anew for the entire region.

Free prisoners or hostages die today, say Taliban

IDNUMBER 200707300003
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: D6
DATELINE: GHAZNI, Afghanistan
SOURCE: Agence France–Presse
WORD COUNT: 369

GHAZNI, Afghanistan (AFP) — Taliban extremists threatened to start killing their 22 South Korean hostages today if the government did not accept by noon their demand for the release of jailed militants.

The Islamic group has already killed the leader of the group of Christian aid workers captured 12 days ago, saying he was shot last week because talks on Afghanistan's latest foreign–hostage crisis had stalled.

The insurgents have also, however, let four other deadlines pass without incident.

Today's deadline was the last, Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi told AFP yesterday as a stalemate emerged over the demand for a prisoner release, which a government negotiator said was not up for discussion.

"We give a last deadline of tomorrow 12 o'clock to the Afghan government to give us their last word if they can release our eight suggested prisoners."

"Otherwise we will start killing the hostages," Ahmadi said.

President Hamid Karzai said during a meeting with a South Korean special envoy yesterday that his government was doing its best to secure the release of the 22 that includes 16 women.

But "no prisoners will be released," said a leading member of a government–appointed negotiating team, Mahmood Gailani, a parliamentarian from the troubled southern province of Ghanzi where the group was caught July 19.

"It's not government policy to exchange prisoners," he told AFP.

The Afghan government was roundly condemned when it released five Taliban prisoners in March to free an Italian hostage, and Karzai vowed afterward that such a deal would not be repeated.

Gailani said the government wanted the Islamic fundamentalists to unconditionally free the women and would then consider other Taliban demands.

The holding of women as hostages or prisoners is against Islamic law and Afghan culture, he said, a statement repeated by Karzai in yesterday's talks with South Korean presidential envoy Baek Jong–Chun.

There are concerns for the health of the 22, who are said to be in their 20s and 30s.

They were on an evangelical and aid mission to devoutly Islamic Afghanistan.

"Some of the hostages have some health problems due to the weather or psychological pressure they feel," Ahmadi said yesterday with temperatures in southern Afghanistan in the high 30s.

The hostages have been divided into small groups and are being held in three different provinces, Ahmadi said. Medicine sent to them has been passed along, another spokesman said.

Several foreigners have been seized this year by militants waging a deadly insurgency against the Western-backed government that replaced the Taliban regime that was driven from power in late 2001 for sheltering al-Qaeda.

Most have been freed, some reportedly after hefty ransom payments.

Observers warned at the time that the move increased the threat of foreigners being kidnapped, by the Taliban or criminal gangs seeking ransom.

Graveyard of Soviet tanks may be foreboding

IDNUMBER 200707300036
PUBLICATION: The Leader–Post (Regina)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: B4
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: CanWest / Soviet tanks sit in a graveyard near Kandahar air field, a fate that met the Russians following their failed attempt to put down the Afghan insurgency. ;
DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 952

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — They're ghosts from a lost war, a 20-year-old reminder that a foreign-led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

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– The war against the poppy is lost.

Even with eradication activity picking up under British supervision, the opium-producing plant is setting record high harvests. Detection is not a problem — soldiers often remark how beautiful the poppy fields look when they're in full red bloom. But British military officials tell me it's an uphill struggle to convince farmers to switch their illegal crop for less lucrative melons, grapes or even marijuana.

– The Taliban are not beaten.

The combined air and ground firepower of the joint forces here is a sight to behold. How so much destructive technology can be neutralized by a few thousand religious extremists armed with ancient rocket launchers, last-generation rifles and old anti-tank mines boggles the mind. Yet the Taliban, while no longer surfacing in large military formations, are having considerable success in planting bigger and better roadside bombs to put security forces on edge, slow reconstruction efforts and, most importantly, prevent Afghans from any sense their lives are returning to normal.

And pity the poor villager in the faraway hills of southern Kandahar. Every month or so, Canadian soldiers show up to declare themselves their protector while Taliban watch from the sidelines. But without reliable, well-armed detachments of Afghan military or police based near villages, the Taliban will return the minute Canadians leave.

n Okay, so I left the brightest development for last, but Kandahar City is on an economic roll, booming in population and bursting with building activity.

The lineup of truck traffic outside the city's customs terminal is a sight vaguely reminiscent of a Windsor border crossing, albeit with colourful jingle trucks in lieu of 18-wheelers. There are billboards extolling the virtues of a university education over becoming a suicide bomber.

It is, veteran observers say, an echo of what happened in Kabul several years ago when the capital prospered and security concerns abated. If the south's largest city can thrive in spite of chronic security problems, hope springs anew the entire region will stabilize and revitalize.

But know this for sure: If Canada pulls out in early 2009 as expected, hope for Kandahar will fade. It seems to me imperative that Canadian forces stay here until the job is done, even if the surrender monkeys in Ottawa think it's politically convenient to leave.

Marching on their stomachs Keeping troops fed, happy challenges military meal planners

SOURCETAG 0707300381

PUBLICATION: The Winnipeg Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 12

ILLUSTRATION: photo by Mathieu Belanger, Reuters Master Cpl. Steve Martin hugs his son Samuel in Quebec City yesterday as 85 Van Doos return from Afghanistan.

BYLINE: CP

DATELINE: OTTAWA

WORD COUNT: 473

In 55 C heat and with Taliban rockets raining down, the last thing most of us would feel like doing is chowing down on a steaming bag of preserved salmon fillet.

With that in mind, the Canadian army is set to introduce a protein drink to its field ration kits, a specially formulated supplement similar to what body builders use.

PROTEIN SUPPLEMENT

Maj. Julie Johnson, who is responsible for keeping the army's supply of individual meal packs flowing to the front, says the military has found soldiers in Afghanistan operating "outside of the wire" have often not been eating three meals a day.

"Nobody really wants to choke down ravioli when it's 150 degrees out, so the protein supplement is something that can be used in lieu," she said in an interview.

The meal replacement is a powdered drink that mixes with water and comes in three flavours — vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. It will begin appearing in soldiers' rations within the next couple of weeks, said Johnson.

About a year ago, the army started to realize that soldiers, especially those running the gauntlet of supply convoys from Kandahar Air Field to far-flung desert bases, didn't have the time or the inclination to eat breakfast, lunch and supper every day.

"When I saw that, I said that was inappropriate and we need to maintain their nutritional wellness," said Johnson.

Individual meal packs — or IMPs — are the stuff of culinary legend in the army, with a shelf life of over three years.

As soldiers often say: "Once you've had it, you'll never forget it, although you wish you could."

Often derided as an assault on the palate, the rations are distributed to troops when it's impossible to set up field kitchens, which in Afghanistan means pretty much everywhere outside of the main NATO base at

Kandahar Airfield, the provincial team base in the city and select forward operating bases.

The brown-bagged meals, of which there are 18 varieties, contain one main entree, a dessert, powdered fruit drinks, coffee, candy and, significantly, a comment card.

Over the years, there have been some colourful responses. A macaroni and cheese dinner, into which the supplier inexplicably added freeze-dried peas, elicited a barrage of comments.

Nicole Belanger-Drapeau, the civilian manager of the ration program at National Defence, said she was bombarded with notes for three years saying: "Pleeeeeease get rid of the peas."

Other unpopular selections that have now been purged from the menu include the breakfast ham omelette and the ham steak dinner.

TASTE-TESTING EVENTS

Belanger-Drapeau has perhaps one of the most unforgiving jobs at National Defence, deciding what to put on the combat ration menu. She organizes annual taste-testing events at bases across Canada to try out new selections.

"It's extremely difficult and it's becoming even more difficult with the younger generation," she said.

Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, who would have been happy scarfing down wieners and beans, many of the country's new soldiers have sophisticated and diverse taste buds.

They like food with a lot of flavour and spices, said Belanger-Drapeau.

"With 18 choices you're trying to feed over 1,600 troops — or even the entire army — it's very difficult because in a family of four you have two people who don't eat this and the others don't eat that."

Despite the grumbling, soldiers must not be able to get enough of the IMPs. The meal packs have become a hot commodity — so to speak — even back in Canada, where EBay on Friday had listed five -packs for \$42.
KEYWORDS=CANADA

Rocker not fighting Good fight

SOURCETAG 0707300376
PUBLICATION: The Winnipeg Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: 10
BYLINE: JEREMY LOOME
COLUMN: Editorial
WORD COUNT: 322

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Afghanis may not be ready to take over: Hillier

SOURCETAG 0707300367
PUBLICATION: The Winnipeg Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 7
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: OTTAWA
WORD COUNT: 105

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff played down the kind of training progress predicted a week ago on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter -- as O'Connor predicted.

"We've got a large training role to help them ... so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March -- it's hard to tell on a specific date.

"We're working very hard at it." KEYWORDS=WORLD CUP

Taliban reminded of code

SOURCETAG 0707300365
PUBLICATION: The Winnipeg Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 7
BYLINE: AP
DATELINE: KABUL
WORD COUNT: 175

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality yesterday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. today.

Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

CONTRARY TO TENETS

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace.

Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council explained. KEYWORDS=WORLD

3 NATO troops felled Attacks in Afghanistan kill 2 Americans, British lose 3rd soldier in 3 days

SOURCETAG 0707290801

PUBLICATION: The Winnipeg Sun

DATE: 2007.07.29

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 8

BYLINE: REUTERS

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 257

Taliban insurgents killed three NATO troops and an Afghan soldier and wounded 13 other NATO soldiers in two separate clashes in Afghanistan, the alliance and an Afghan official said yesterday.

Two U.S. soldiers from the NATO force and the Afghan were killed Friday in eastern Nuristan province in a clash with Taliban rebels. The alliance said 24 insurgents were also killed in the clashes, close to the border with Pakistan.

Fighting was still going on yesterday, provincial governor Tameem Nuristani said, but he declined further details.

A Taliban spokesman said only three insurgents were killed in the clashes and said the casualties of NATO and Afghan troops were higher than reported.

During the fighting, a NATO airstrike hit a civilian vehicle in the Kamdish district of Nuristan province killing four people and wounding seven others, said a provincial official who declined to be named.

TRUCK ATTACKED

"Eleven passengers were travelling in a pick-up truck ... to Kamdish when it came under attack from the air," the official said. "Among the seven wounded civilians, two of them are in a serious condition."

President Hamid Karzai has warned international forces in Afghanistan that civilian casualties risk alienating support for the presence of foreign troops in his country.

A British soldier in the NATO force was killed in another clash in the south of the country on Friday.

He was the third British soldier killed in three days in the south, one of the main strongholds for the resurgent Taliban.

Also on Friday, six Taliban rebels and an Afghan working for a U.S. security company were killed in a clash in the western province of Farah, the interior ministry said.

Violence has surged in Afghanistan in the past 18 months, the bloodiest period since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001.

Separately, four Afghan police were killed in an ambush yesterday on a road in Logar province, which lies to the south of the capital Kabul.

Friday's deaths bring the number of foreign forces killed in Afghanistan to more than 90 this year.

KEYWORDS=WORLD

South Korean hostage pleads for release

SOURCETAG 0707290800

PUBLICATION: The Winnipeg Sun

DATE: 2007.07.29

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 8

ILLUSTRATION: photo by Ahn Young-Joon, AP Anti-war protesters rally in Seoul yesterday for the safe return of 22 South Korean hostages.

BYLINE: REUTERS

DATELINE: GHAZNI, Afghanistan

WORD COUNT: 296

A female hostage among the remaining 22 Koreans held by Taliban fighters appealed yesterday for a speedy end to their ordeal while a senior Afghan official said force may be used to free them if talks fail.

The woman, one of 18 female hostages among the South Korean Christian volunteers kidnapped in Afghanistan more than a week ago, spoke to Reuters on the cellphone of a Taliban fighter.

"We are tired and being moved from one location to another," she said in broken Dari, one of the main languages in Afghanistan. "We are kept in separate groups and are not aware of each other. We ask the Taliban and the government to release us."

'OTHER MEANS'

Earlier, Deputy Interior Minister Munir Mangal said negotiators were attempting to hold more talks. "We believe in the talks and if dialogue fails then we will resort to other means," he said. Asked if that meant use of force, he replied: "Certainly."

Mangal, who heads a government team charged with securing the release of the South Koreans, said mediators included Islamic clergy who were trying to persuade the Taliban to free the hostages without conditions. He ruled out bowing to the Taliban demand to free insurgent captives held by Kabul.

'UNDERSTANDING'

"We are trying to finish this work through understanding without any conditions," he said.

The Taliban have set a series of deadlines for the Afghan government to agree to free rebel prisoners and killed the leader of the South Korean church group on Wednesday.

Taliban spokesmen could not be reached yesterday.

On Friday spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf said the group would not issue any further deadlines as he said Kabul had given assurances it would release Taliban prisoners as part of an exchange deal. The spokesman accused the government of "killing time and playing tricks".

The Taliban seized the 23 South Koreans from a bus on the main highway south from Kabul in Ghazni province.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has pledged not to swap prisoners for hostages, but has remained silent throughout the latest ordeal. KEYWORDS=WORLD

Rocker not fighting Good fight

SOURCETAG 0707300542
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: 17
BYLINE: JEREMY LOOME
COLUMN: Editorial
WORD COUNT: 322

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Good's argument fails for two principle reasons: First, he contends we need to address our own social and political failings before lecturing anyone else. But nations aren't set in stone; they evolve, improve and develop over time, and for all our problems, western democracies are still light years ahead of theocracies.

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SOURCETAG 0707300535

PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 10

BYLINE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 175

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SOURCETAG 0707300534

PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 10

BYLINE: CP

DATELINE: OTTAWA

WORD COUNT: 104

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Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter -- as O'Connor predicted.

"We've got a large training role to help them ... so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March -- it's hard to tell on a specific date.

"We're working very hard at it." KEYWORDS=WORLD

Canadian hero lost his legs aiding the Afghan people. Now his condo management wants to take away his mobility.

SOURCETAG 0707300532

PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 8

ILLUSTRATION: file photo by Tracy McLaughlin, Sun Media Jody Mitic tries out his new specially designed Harley Davidson motorcycle in April. Mitic may have his bike towed today.

BYLINE: JOE WARMINGTON

WORD COUNT: 508

The murderous Taliban robbed Master Cpl. Jody Mitic of his legs but we won't be able to blame them for taking his parking spot.

If it happens, that second atrocity is courtesy of someone right here in Canada.

It kind of reminds one of what military and international affairs columnist Stephen Brown often says: "Don't volunteer to be a hero in Canada because you might be disappointed with the results."

To be honest with you, I have never heard of a disabled person's vehicle being towed before. But that's what just might happen today.

If a letter the veteran received Friday from his condominium manager is true, his custom-made motorcycle, made with love from a community trying to get him back on his artificial legs and feet that were blown off by the Taliban, will be towed.

Some heavy stuff happens in Afghanistan. Some pretty stupid stuff happens in Canada.

Mitic, 30, of Brampton, knows all too well about the realities of both. This might be the craziest case of insensitive bureaucracy gone mad since some on Toronto city council tried to get the yellow ribbons removed from the fire trucks.

While it is true there is one Canadian who won't let a war amputee park his motorcycle in a condominium underground — citing rules-are-rules — it is also true there are hundreds of Canadians out there who will. In fact, my phone has been ringing off the hook with offers. And my e-mail file is piling up.

Now it's important to say that Jody Mitic didn't ask to be wounded and he didn't ask for the bike. Both happened. The reason they happened is because of something for which he did ask — to serve his country in uniform and go over to Afghanistan to help liberate the Afghan people from the horrors of the ruthless Taliban.

He did that without hesitation. In fact, on Sept. 10 he'll move back to his base in CFB Petawawa and start getting ready to move on with his military career, which could include a return trip to the war zone. We are hoping someone in his rented condo building at Yonge St. and Sheppard Ave. will cut him a break and let him

Canadian hero lost his legs aiding the Afghan people. Now his condo management wants to take away his mobility.

keep the donated bike parked there for a few more weeks.

If not, loads of GTAers have come forward with a solution.

"This guy has paid enough of a price," said Jim Brown, one of many who have offered a spot in his garage. "My grandfather fought in WWI and my father in WWII. This is no way to treat a veteran."

"It's abuse," added talkshow host Roy Green. "And it's vicious."

Cory Wickham, the very person who spearheaded the drive to build the bike, was appalled.

"If you're going to complain about something a soldier has done or needs, or won't "bend the rules," kiss your wife or husband, girlfriend, boyfriend, children and the rest of your family goodbye, grab a gun and go defend this beautiful country," Wickham said.

Doubtful that will happen since the person behind this decision has not even called me or Mitic back for an explanation. There is a bumper sticker that says, "If you don't stand behind our troops, then stand in front of them."

Nowhere does it say, "Pick on them."

At 1 p.m. today, we will find out if the city will place a ticket on this bike that will allow a tow truck to remove it. It may very well happen. Sure they can take away his legs and even his parking spot.

But when it comes to Master Cpl. Jody Mitic and all of the other fine Canadian soldiers, they are never going to take away a majority of Canadians' respect. KEYWORDS=OTHER NEWS

Rocker not fighting Good fight

SOURCETAG 0707300309
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: 12
BYLINE: JEREMY LOOME
COLUMN: Editorial
WORD COUNT: 322

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Drinks to rally troops Military introduces protein supplements into field ration kits

SOURCETAG 0707300305

PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 8

BYLINE: MURRAY BREWSTER, CANADIAN PRESS

COLUMN: Target: Terror

WORD COUNT: 406

In 55-degree heat and with Taliban rockets raining down, the last thing most of us would feel like doing is chowing down on a steaming bag of preserved salmon fillet.

With that in mind, the Canadian army is set to introduce a protein drink to its field ration kits, a specially formulated supplement similar to what bodybuilders use.

Maj. Julie Johnson, who is responsible for keeping the army's supply of individual meal packs flowing to the front, says the military has found soldiers in Afghanistan operating "outside of the wire" have often not been eating three meals a day.

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"It's extremely difficult and it's becoming even more difficult with the younger generation," she said.

Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, who would have been happy scarfing down wieners and beans, many of the country's new soldiers have sophisticated tastes.

"We've moved towards what you would call ethnic food so you have a good variety," Belanger–Drapeau said.

Some of the dinner menu selections now include Indian chicken, Szechwan chicken and cabbage rolls.

GOOEY MESS

Another unexpected problem: The length of time troops eat the bagged food. With field operations sometimes lasting weeks, the chances of eating the same meal over and over are pretty high.

"What was appealing on a 10–day exercise in Canada is no longer appealing in Afghanistan — or it's hard with the temperatures to swallow," said Johnson.

Peanut butter and chocolate are examples of things that are popular back home, but quickly become a gooey mess in the withering deserts. KEYWORDS=NATIONAL

Afghans might not be ready to take over: Hillier

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BYLINE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL

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'UNDERSTANDING'

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The Taliban have set a series of deadlines for the Afghan government to agree to free rebel prisoners and killed the leader of the South Korean church group on Wednesday.

Taliban spokesmen could not be reached yesterday.

On Friday spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf said the group would not issue any further deadlines as he said Kabul had given assurances it would release Taliban prisoners as part of an exchange deal. The spokesman accused the government of "killing time and playing tricks".

The Taliban seized the 23 South Koreans from a bus on the main highway south from Kabul in Ghazni province.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has pledged not to swap prisoners for hostages, but has remained silent throughout the latest ordeal. KEYWORDS=WORLD

Rocker not fighting Good fight

SOURCETAG 0707300235
PUBLICATION: The London Free Press
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: A6
BYLINE: JEREMY LOOME
WORD COUNT: 301

Rock star Matthew Good has good intentions, and a well-expressed argument on Afghanistan. That alone puts him well above the maddening crowd of big-mouth celebrities.

But Good's popular blog, in which he implores Canadians to sign a petition to get Canada out of combat operations in the war-torn country, misses some important -- and rather enormous -- points.

Regardless of why we're there, the people of that country haven't enjoyed the kind of non-ideological, non-theocratically controlled freedoms they currently possess at any point in their lifetime.

That freedom can't exist without foreign military intervention.

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But to reach that after such a fractured history will require decades, not a few mere years, of military and financial support. It will require the total defeat of the Taliban in practical operational terms and in the bulk of its ideological support. And it will require a willingness to endure Canadian military deaths.

Good's argument fails for two principle reasons: First, he contends we need to address our own social and political failings before lecturing anyone else. But nations aren't set in stone; they evolve, improve and develop over time, and for all our problems, western democracies are still light years ahead of theocracies.

Secondly, he doesn't consider the wishes of the soldiers -- the guys doing the actual killing and dying. We're a volunteer military, not one that conscripts. These guys aren't forced to serve; they're there because they know the difference they can make, even if it costs their lives.

Pulling out as early as 2009 without even having a prolonged, honest national debate on why we're there and the potential consequences to the Afghan people is the easy answer, but not necessarily the right one.

Canadians must collectively determine first whether we are willing to accept the cost of bravery and the bloody consequences of helping to build a free nation.

O'Connor timeline shot down Canada's top soldier casts doubt on a prediction, made by the defence minister, about Afghanistan.

SOURCETAG 0707300223
PUBLICATION: The London Free Press
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A3
ILLUSTRATION: photo of RICK HILLIER
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: OTTAWA
WORD COUNT: 479

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff downplayed the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same TV program by his political boss, Gordon O'Connor, the defence minister.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter — as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," Hillier said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them.

"We've got a large training role to help them . . . so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March — it's hard to tell on a specific date. We're working very hard at it."

O'Connor made headlines when he said newly trained local battalions will likely allow Canadian troops to cede most of the fighting around Kandahar to Afghan soldiers by the time the Quebec-based Van Doos finish their rotation in February.

Hillier said Afghan soldiers are playing a bigger role with help from Canadian mentors. But it's too early to say when Canadians may be able to leave the deadliest front lines.

Whether troops are in a lead or supportive position, "we're still going to be in a high-risk environment," Hillier said of the firefights, roadside bombs and suicide attacks waged in southern Afghanistan's hottest insurgent zones. "You cannot eliminate casualties."

He took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor, but Hillier clearly downplayed expectations that Afghan soldiers will replace Canadians on the front lines by spring.

"It's going to take a long while. We've just started the process . . . we've just gotten the first soldiers in the south in the last few months here."

Sixty–six Canadian soldiers and a diplomat have died there since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the Conservatives to more clearly define an exit strategy from the war.

OTHER NEWS IN AFGHANISTAN

– Afghan officials reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure the release of 22 South Korean hostages held by the Taliban, as a South Korean envoy met with the Afghan president to discuss the matter yesterday. Two days of meetings between elders of Qarabagh district in Ghazni province, where the South Korean hostages were kidnapped on July 19, and a delegation of senior officials from Kabul yielded no results so far, said Shirin Mangal, spokesperson for the Ghazni provincial governor. "So far there is no progress from the meetings," Mangal said.

– Canadian troops are not the only foreign military that can complete the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan beyond 2009, a top Canadian commander said yesterday. "Whether we accomplish it ourselves, or it's accomplished by others, it doesn't matter in the greater scheme of things," Lt.–Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, told a news conference in Kandahar. The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is slated to end in February 2009. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend that mandate with the consensus of Parliament. KEYWORDS=WORLD

Ghost tanks remind troops of tough task

IDNUMBER 200707300123
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Early
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1 / FRONT
COLUMN: Don Martin in Afghanistan
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Don Martin, Calgary Herald / A graveyard for Soviet tanks in Kandahar is a chilling reminder of the formidable task facing Canadian troops in Afghanistan. ;
KEYWORDS: WAR
DATELINE: KANDAHAR
BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: The Canadian Press; The Associated Press
WORD COUNT: 254

KANDAHAR – They're ghosts from a lost war, a 20-year-old reminder that a foreign-led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

Hundreds of Soviet tanks, troop carriers, trucks and artillery guns, perfectly preserved by Kandahar's desert-dry environment right down to goggles and binoculars, lie abandoned in a gated compound within sight of Canadian base headquarters.

For nine bloody years in the 1980s, the Soviet Union tried to prop up a Communist government in Kabul and annihilate the mujahedeen insurgency before the fading superpower ditched its military hardware here in the rush to flee a fight it couldn't win.

To the skeptics viewing Canada's counter-insurgency mission today, this military graveyard could preview our future if we botch the battle to rid Kandahar of the Taliban.

Seven weeks in southern Afghanistan is but an observational blink in a country that's been at war within itself for most of the past 30 years, but as I leave Kandahar today, trends and patterns are possible to detect and decipher. Some are hopeful. Others border on hopeless.

Let me argue that Canada cannot impose a political timetable on successfully ending this military mission. It's like picking a date before the Normandy invasion for Canada to withdraw from the Second World War, yet we're just 18 months from a House of Commons vote to retreat with no obvious heir to our United Nations responsibility for the dangerously volatile Kandahar province.

Canadian-assisted progress on redevelopment, political reform, army training, police education and humanitarian relief will be terminated for political expediency, not measurable accomplishment.

Smaller NATO bombs to limit civilian casualties

IDNUMBER 200707300113
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A4
KEYWORDS: ORGANIZATIONS; DEFENCE; FOREIGN RELATIONS;
APPOINTMENT; AFGHANISTAN
DATELINE: LONDON
SOURCE: Agence France–Presse
WORD COUNT: 202

LONDON – NATO is to use smaller bombs in its campaign against Islamist Taliban rebels in Afghanistan to try to limit rising civilian casualties, the alliance's chief told Monday's Financial Times.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer acknowledged that the number of civilians killed in clashes between NATO forces and Taliban fighters had damaged its reputation.

NATO was "working with weapons load on aircraft to reduce collateral damage," he said, but noted that it was impossible to entirely eliminate civilian casualties.

De Hoop Scheffer said that General Dan McNeill, the commander of the 37,000–strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, had told troops that they should hold off attacking Taliban fighters in situations where civilians would be put at risk.

"We realize that, if we cannot neutralize our enemy today without harming civilians, our enemy will give us the opportunity tomorrow," De Hoop Scheffer told the business daily.

"If that means going after a Taliban not on Wednesday but on Thursday, we will get him then."

His comments follow criticism from Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who last month accused ISAF troops of killing about 90 civilians in June, most of them in air operations.

There are more than 50,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, mainly under NATO command, fighting Taliban who have waged a bloody insurgency since being ousted from power in late 2001.

Top soldier doubts Afghan army ready to take lead; Canadian pullback from combat 'a long while' away

IDNUMBER: 200707300111
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A4
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Tim Fraser, for CanWest News Service / Gen. Rick Hillier doesn't expect Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan to be out of danger any time soon. ;
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Mike De Souza
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 542

OTTAWA – Canada's top soldier is pouring cold water on the Harper government's suggestions that local Afghan troops are almost ready to take the lead in the battle against the Taliban, allowing Canadian soldiers to move away from deadly combat situations in southern Afghanistan.

Gen. Rick Hillier said Sunday he doesn't expect his soldiers will be out of danger any time soon.

"Whether we're working to conduct an operation directly ourselves and lead it supporting the Afghan troops or whether we are supporting Afghan troops in operations and they are in the lead, we are still going to be in a high-risk environment and you cannot eliminate casualties or ensure that they don't take place completely," Hillier said on CTV's Question Period.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor had suggested last week that Canada's troops could move into a reserve role by the end of the year, once the newly trained Afghan soldiers are ready to take the lead.

But Hillier raised serious doubts about the strategy, noting that the local army simply wasn't going to be ready any time soon, despite a major training effort by Canadians.

"It's going to take a long while," Hillier said. "We've just started the process, because we've just got the first soldiers in the south in these last few months. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Although he stressed that he was on the same page as O'Connor, Hillier added it was unlikely the training could be finished by the time Canada's current commitment ends in 2009.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," he said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them."

A Conservative government official also insisted that Hillier and O'Connor were using different words to say the same thing.

"Initially the Canadian Forces took the lead in combat operations, largely because there were very few (Afghan) soldiers available to support operations within Kandahar province," said Isabelle Bouchard,

Top soldier doubts Afghan army ready to take lead; Canadian pullback from combat 'a long while' away

O'Connor's director of communications. "However, now we are stepping up our training and mentoring role. In the months ahead, the (Afghan) brigade in Kandahar will grow in strength to include more infantry battalions, a headquarters, as well as large army support and service battalions. In the future, the Afghan National Army will take the lead in defending Kandahar, in defending their country."

Canada has suffered about 50 casualties over the past 18 months since it took over a new mission in southern Afghanistan to contain Taliban insurgents and rebuild the wartorn region. In total, Canada has lost 66 soldiers and one diplomat since the mission began.

Some analysts have suggested the Harper government could pay a political price if casualties continue to mount with more than 2,000 troops from Quebec heading into combat over the next few months. Opposition to the war is already stronger in Quebec than many other regions of the country.

"We have a little frustration that perhaps Canadians don't see and understand many of the incredible things that are occurring in southern Afghanistan," Hillier said. "All they've seen back here are detainees, casualties and that kind of thing, and all the great things that have been occurring just don't seem to be seen back here in this country."

He said 75 per cent of people who know about all the aide aspects of the mission are supportive.

Kidnapping of Koreans 'is against Islam'

IDNUMBER 200707300099
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A10
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Hamid Karzai;
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM; FOREIGN AID; AFGHANISTAN
DATELINE: KABUL, Afghanistan
SOURCE: Los Angeles Times
WORD COUNT: 234

KABUL, Afghanistan – President Hamid Karzai declared Sunday that the abduction of 22 South Korean church workers by Taliban militants was an un-Islamic act that brought disgrace on Afghanistan.

Karzai issued his statement, his first since the hostage crisis began, after meeting with Baek Jong-chun, a special envoy sent by South Korea's President Roh Moo-hyun.

Eighteen of the captives are women, and Karzai said their abduction was a particularly heinous act.

"Hostage taking and abuse of foreign guests, especially women, is against Islam and the Afghan culture," Karzai's office quoted him as telling the South Korean envoy.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values."

Similar sentiments were voiced Sunday by Afghanistan's national council of clerics.

Meanwhile, a purported Taliban spokesman set a new deadline of Monday for the freeing of 23 militants held by Afghan authorities, threatening to kill the hostages if the demand was not met.

"If the Kabul administration fails to meet our conditions by then, we will start killing the hostages," said Qari Yousef Ahmadi, who claims to speak for the kidnappers, by telephone.

The Korean church workers were seized by terrorists July 19 as they travelled on a public bus along the Kabul-Kandahar highway.

The group's leader, a pastor, was shot and killed by his captors Wednesday, setting off a wave of grief and dismay in South Korea.

The church group's decision to take public transport on a notoriously dangerous stretch of highway has been termed extremely foolhardy by security officials and foreign aid personnel who work in Afghanistan.

At the same time, South Koreans have become riveted to the drama, and there has been an outpouring of sympathy for their plight.

Afghanis may not be ready to take over: Hillier

SOURCETAG 0707300710
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 30
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: OTTAWA
WORD COUNT: 104

Top general Rick Hillier isn't so sure Canadian troops in Afghanistan will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff played down the kind of training progress predicted a week ago on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter -- as O'Connor predicted.

"We've got a large training role to help them ... so they can be ready for operations. Whether that's February or March -- it's hard to tell on a specific date.

"We're working very hard at it." KEYWORDS=WORLD

Taliban reminded of code

SOURCETAG 0707300709
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 30
BYLINE: AP
DATELINE: KABUL
WORD COUNT: 175

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality yesterday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesman shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by 3:30 a.m. today.

Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

Afghan officials, meanwhile, reported no progress in talks with tribal elders to secure hostages' freedom.

CONTRARY TO TENETS

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted July 19, Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy during a meeting at the presidential palace.

Echoing Karzai's words, Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council explained. KEYWORDS=WORLD

Rocker not fighting Good fight

SOURCETAG 0707300700
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: 10
BYLINE: JEREMY LOOME
COLUMN: Editorial
WORD COUNT: 322

Rock star Matthew Good has good intentions, and a well-expressed argument on Afghanistan. That alone puts him well above the maddening crowd of big-mouth celebrities.

But Good's popular blog, in which he implores Canadians to sign a petition to get Canada out of combat operations in the war-torn country, misses some important — and rather enormous — points.

Regardless of why we're there, the people of that country haven't enjoyed the kind of non-ideological, non-theocratically controlled freedoms they currently possess at any point in their lifetime.

That freedom can't exist without foreign military intervention.

Afghanistan has never really been more than a series of theocratically and culturally controlled tribes trying to keep fractured peace over small territories, ruled at large by puppet monarchs.

The ouster of the Taliban has offered a new way: Democracy, warts and all. But to reach that after such a fractured history will require decades, not a few mere years, of military and financial support. It will require the total defeat of the Taliban in practical operational terms and in the bulk of its ideological support. And it will require a willingness to endure Canadian military deaths.

Good's argument fails for two principle reasons: First, he contends we need to address our own social and political failings before lecturing anyone else. But nations aren't set in stone; they evolve, improve and develop over time, and for all our problems, western democracies are still light years ahead of theocracies.

Secondly, he doesn't consider the wishes of the soldiers — the guys doing the actual killing and dying. We're a volunteer military, not one that conscripts. These guys aren't forced to serve, they're there because they know the difference they can make, even if it costs their lives.

Pulling out as early as 2009 without even having a prolonged, honest national debate on why we're there and the potential consequences to the Afghan people is the easy answer, but not necessarily the right one. Canadians must collectively determine first whether we are willing to accept the cost of bravery and the bloody consequences of helping to build a free nation.

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SOURCETAG 0707300617

PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: Editorial/Opinion

PAGE: 14

BYLINE: JEREMY LOOME

COLUMN: Editorial

WORD COUNT: 322

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Afghanis may not be ready to take over: Hillier

SOURCETAG 0707300612
PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 10
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: OTTAWA
WORD COUNT: 104

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Taliban reminded of code

SOURCETAG 0707300611

PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun

DATE: 2007.07.30

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 10

BYLINE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 175

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"Even in the history of Afghanistan, in all its combat and fighting, Afghans respected women, children and elders," the council explained. KEYWORDS=WORLD

3 NATO troops felled Attacks in Afghanistan kill 2 Americans, British lose 3rd soldier in 3 days

SOURCETAG 0707290797

PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun

DATE: 2007.07.29

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 10

BYLINE: REUTERS

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 257

Taliban insurgents killed three NATO troops and an Afghan soldier and wounded 13 other NATO soldiers in two separate clashes in Afghanistan, the alliance and an Afghan official said yesterday.

Two U.S. soldiers from the NATO force and the Afghan were killed Friday in eastern Nuristan province in a clash with Taliban rebels. The alliance said 24 insurgents were also killed in the clashes, close to the border with Pakistan.

Fighting was still going on yesterday, provincial governor Tameem Nuristani said, but he declined further details.

A Taliban spokesman said only three insurgents were killed in the clashes and said the casualties of NATO and Afghan troops were higher than reported.

During the fighting, a NATO airstrike hit a civilian vehicle in the Kamdish district of Nuristan province killing four people and wounding seven others, said a provincial official who declined to be named.

TRUCK ATTACKED

"Eleven passengers were travelling in a pick-up truck ... to Kamdish when it came under attack from the air," the official said. "Among the seven wounded civilians, two of them are in a serious condition."

President Hamid Karzai has warned international forces in Afghanistan that civilian casualties risk alienating support for the presence of foreign troops in his country.

A British soldier in the NATO force was killed in another clash in the south of the country on Friday.

He was the third British soldier killed in three days in the south, one of the main strongholds for the resurgent Taliban.

Also on Friday, six Taliban rebels and an Afghan working for a U.S. security company were killed in a clash in the western province of Farah, the interior ministry said.

Violence has surged in Afghanistan in the past 18 months, the bloodiest period since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001.

Separately, four Afghan police were killed in an ambush yesterday on a road in Logar province, which lies to the south of the capital Kabul.

Friday's deaths bring the number of foreign forces killed in Afghanistan to more than 90 this year.

KEYWORDS=WORLD

South Korean hostage pleads for release

SOURCETAG 0707290796

PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun

DATE: 2007.07.29

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 10

ILLUSTRATION: photo by Ahn Young-Joon, AP Anti-war protesters rally in Seoul yesterday for the safe return of 22 South Korean hostages.

BYLINE: REUTERS

DATELINE: GHAZNI, Afghanistan

WORD COUNT: 296

A female hostage among the remaining 22 Koreans held by Taliban fighters appealed yesterday for a speedy end to their ordeal while a senior Afghan official said force may be used to free them if talks fail.

The woman, one of 18 female hostages among the South Korean Christian volunteers kidnapped in Afghanistan more than a week ago, spoke to Reuters on the cellphone of a Taliban fighter.

"We are tired and being moved from one location to another," she said in broken Dari, one of the main languages in Afghanistan. "We are kept in separate groups and are not aware of each other. We ask the Taliban and the government to release us."

'OTHER MEANS'

Earlier, Deputy Interior Minister Munir Mangal said negotiators were attempting to hold more talks. "We believe in the talks and if dialogue fails then we will resort to other means," he said. Asked if that meant use of force, he replied: "Certainly."

Mangal, who heads a government team charged with securing the release of the South Koreans, said mediators included Islamic clergy who were trying to persuade the Taliban to free the hostages without conditions. He ruled out bowing to the Taliban demand to free insurgent captives held by Kabul.

'UNDERSTANDING'

"We are trying to finish this work through understanding without any conditions," he said.

The Taliban have set a series of deadlines for the Afghan government to agree to free rebel prisoners and killed the leader of the South Korean church group on Wednesday.

Taliban spokesmen could not be reached yesterday.

On Friday spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf said the group would not issue any further deadlines as he said Kabul had given assurances it would release Taliban prisoners as part of an exchange deal. The spokesman accused the government of "killing time and playing tricks".

The Taliban seized the 23 South Koreans from a bus on the main highway south from Kabul in Ghazni province.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has pledged not to swap prisoners for hostages, but has remained silent throughout the latest ordeal. KEYWORDS=WORLD

Missionary zeal puts Koreans at risk

IDNUMBER 200707300081
PUBLICATION: The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Forum
PAGE: A6
COLUMN: Jonathon Manthorpe
BYLINE: Jonathon Manthorpe
SOURCE: Vancouver Sun
WORD COUNT: 663

Christianity is a fiercely competitive business in South Korea, with evangelists vying to attract followers by demonstrating ever more outlandish feats of holiness.

Sending missionaries in large numbers to the world's most violent trouble spots is seen as a surefire way to fill the churches with admiring disciples. These days, dispatching missionaries to Afghanistan and Iraq, into the jaws of militant Islam, is the ultimate demonstration of Christian fervour.

And the larger the army of followers, of course, the larger the spiritual and financial rewards.

It is a tried and true promotional technique that has produced a surge in popularity for Christianity since the Second World War. A recent survey by the Pew organization found 26.3 per cent of South Koreans say they are Christians, a proportion second only to the Philippines in Asia.

Most belong to fundamentalist Protestant or evangelical Christian churches, where the passion for missionary zeal has always been strong. There are nearly 13,000 South Korean missionaries operating in about 160 countries.

In some popular missionary destinations such as Africa, there are sometimes hundreds of South Korean missionaries in the same town. There even are reports that the competition among evangelists sometimes becomes so intense that fistfights have erupted over territory.

Only the United States, with 46,000 missionaries abroad, has a larger army of faith. But as a proportion of the population, South Korea's missionary force is much larger.

However, to call these people missionaries is not always accurate. Most are not bent on making converts, but are more like aid agency workers. Indeed, the South Korean missionary operations are more like those Japanese television game shows, where the prize goes to the contestant who takes the greatest humiliation and still comes up grinning.

The missionaries are frequently naive young people driven by an unfocused desire to do good, just like most of the 23 South Korean hostages taken by the Taliban on the road from Kabul to Kandahar in Afghanistan.

The group is made up mostly of young women. They were not off to try to convert Afghan Muslims to Christianity, but to provide medical and child-care services for needy people.

They were led by pastor Bae Hyung-kyum from their Saemmul Presbyterian Church, just outside the South

Korean capital Seoul. The Taliban demanded that some of their people being held by the Afghan government be released, but there seems also to have been a ransom demand.

It is not yet clear whether the negotiations stumbled over the refusal of the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai to release Taliban prisoners — though it did so in March to get the freedom of a kidnapped Italian journalist — or the Kabul government's obstruction of the Koreans' efforts to pay a ransom.

At any rate, the Taliban became agitated, shot Bae a dozen times and dumped his body by the highway.

This is not the first time South Korean missionary operations have come to grief in Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere.

In April 2004, terrorists in Iraq kidnapped and beheaded an aspiring South Korean missionary, Kim Sun-il. Earlier this year, a South Korean pastor was killed in Kenya. As well, hundreds of South Korean missionaries are believed to be in prison in China after trying to convert North Koreans in refugee camps there.

In August 2006, a potentially highly dangerous event was narrowly avoided when the Kabul and Seoul governments managed to stop 1,300 South Korean evangelicals from travelling to Afghanistan to hold a public peace rally.

The giggly group of young Saemmul Church missionaries even posed with raised clenched fists for a photograph before their July departure from Seoul's international airport in front of a government notice that advises Koreans not to travel to Afghanistan.

But avoiding government barriers and disapproval in both Seoul and Kabul is one of the joys of competition in these missionary contests. Overcoming bureaucratic hurdles brings bragging rights and more followers.

The death of Bae and the uncertain fate of the remaining 22 young hostages has had a sobering effect on South Korean public opinion. There is now much questioning of the habit of sending neophyte young people to these dangerous places without even the most basic training in the type of cultural quagmires they will face.

Setting policy minister's job

IDNUMBER 200707300076
PUBLICATION: The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Forum
PAGE: A6
COLUMN: SP Opinions
SOURCE: The StarPhoenix
WORD COUNT: 341

No one elected Gen. Rick Hillier or named him defence minister, but there was Canada's chief of defence staff last week, announcing public policy as if that job has fallen to the military by now.

"We're not in the business of creating new reserve units," Hillier told the CBC. "We have sufficient units ... We don't need new units."

The general is right, of course. The federal Conservatives were on the wrong track when they pledged during the last election campaign to create 14 regional defence battalions of 100 regular soldiers and 400 reservists who would respond to emergencies such as floods or ice storms.

While they later modified that to make these all-reserve units because the regulars were needed for the Afghanistan commitment, it still made no sense to create new units with reservists waiting around for storms while the regular forces serving abroad needed all the support they could get.

What Hillier plans to do is to create seven regional units by juggling the current reserves, to provide an approximation of what the government had promised.

The problem isn't with the general's plan but in the fact that it was Hillier, not the increasingly weak-looking Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor who made the announcement. It's the job of the military leader to advise the publicly accountable civilian leader on the proper course of action, with the policy decisions to be made by cabinet.

It's certainly the case that Hillier is a most personable man, whose blunt talk and political savvy are in utter contrast to the dour O'Connor, whose performance on the job has been inept at best and a disaster at worst.

The longer Prime Minister Stephen Harper keeps him in the job, the more it appears that the hapless O'Connor is out of touch.

His incredible pronouncement about the readiness of the Afghan army to take over the duties of Canadians within six months says it all about the credibility he wields not only with intelligent Canadians but with the troops nominally under his direction.

His tenure needs to end, with his replacement being someone able to rein in the enthusiastic Hillier and ensure that he understands the concept of civilian control.

Afghan army needs more training: Hillier; Canadian troops will still be in danger for some time: Hillier

IDNUMBER 200707300055
PUBLICATION: The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: National
PAGE: B5
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: CanWest News Service / Gen. Rick Hillier(left) with with Lt-Gen. Angus Watt ;
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Mike De Souza
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 429

OTTAWA — Canada's top soldier is pouring cold water on the Harper government's suggestions that local Afghan troops are almost ready to take the lead in the battle against the Taliban, allowing Canadian soldiers to move away from deadly combat situations in southern Afghanistan.

Gen. Rick Hillier said on Sunday that he doesn't expect his soldiers will be out of danger any time soon.

"Whether we're working to conduct an operation directly ourselves and lead it supporting the Afghan troops or whether we are supporting Afghan troops in operations and they are in the lead, we are still going to be in a high-risk environment and you cannot eliminate casualties or ensure that they don't take place completely," Hillier said on CTV's Question Period.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor had suggested last week that Canada's troops could move into a reserve role by the end of the year, once the newly-trained Afghan soldiers are ready to take the lead.

But Hillier raised serious doubts about the strategy, noting that the local army simply wasn't going to be ready any time soon, despite a major training effort by Canadians.

"It's going to take a long while," Hillier said. "We've just started the process, because we've just got the first soldiers in the south in these last few months. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Although he stressed that he was on the same page as O'Connor, Hillier added that it was unlikely that the training could be finished by the time Canada's current commitment ends in 2009.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," he said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them."

A Conservative government official also insisted that Hillier and O'Connor were using different words to say the same thing.

"Initially the Canadian Forces took the lead in combat operations, largely because there were very few (Afghan) soldiers available to support operations within Kandahar Province," said Isabelle Bouchard, O'Connor's director of communications. "However, now we are stepping up our training and mentoring role."

Afghan army needs more training: Hillier; Canadian troops will still be in danger for some time: Hillier

In the months ahead, the (Afghan) brigade in Kandahar will grow in strength to include more infantry battalions, a headquarters, as well as large army support and service battalions. In the future, the Afghan National Army will take the lead in defending Kandahar, in defending their country."

Canada has suffered about 50 casualties over the past 18 months since it took over a new mission in southern Afghanistan to contain Taliban insurgents and rebuild the war-torn region. In total, Canada has lost 66 soldiers and one diplomat since the mission began.

Harper and Co. begin planning for next election

IDNUMBER 200707300053
PUBLICATION: The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: National
PAGE: B5
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 603

OTTAWA — Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his parliamentary caucus are to convene in Charlottetown on Wednesday for three days of closed-door strategy meetings, confronted by a dilemma: How to engineer an election that almost no one in Canada wants — including most MPs on both the government and opposition benches — for another crack at a majority government.

With polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals stuck in a stagnant pool of popular support of about 30 per cent each, and with the economy rolling along happily, Harper's dream of a quick minority regime followed by a decisive, second-term majority appears out of reach.

"We might actually find ourselves here for a full term," says a rueful Myron Thompson, the Alberta Tory MP whose hope of retiring to the Rockies before the next election may turn out to be years away.

Tim Powers, a Conservative campaign insider, says no matter how keen Harper was for only a short-lived minority regime, the party leadership has accepted, for now, that people want it to govern.

"This is the reality of our times," he says. "The public at large is comfortable with minority governments right now . . . There's no appetite for change, the economy is good, and when the economy is good and there is no single pressing domestic issue, people tend to want their politicians to focus on governing."

But how will Harper focus his government after exhausting the "five priorities" he set for himself two years ago?

"They're going to have to come up with a new plan," says Bill Casey, the Nova Scotia MP expelled from the Tory caucus this spring for refusing to support the budget because of the still-simmering dispute over Atlantic offshore petroleum revenues.

"They need a new set of policies that's going to reflect a direction for the country, because they've used up their five points and they need a plan."

Senate reform, including locally-elected senators, could be one new priority, says Thompson — who says the Liberal-dominated Senate's "disgusting" decision this spring to hold up legislation passed by the Commons gives the Tories the perfect opening to press their case for democratic reform of the upper chamber.

Crime is another obvious political choice. Among the four pieces of legislation stalled by the Senate, the bill to impose mandatory prison sentences for gun crimes will only gain public support following this summer's shootings in Winnipeg and Halifax, and the tragic, cross-fire shooting of an innocent boy in Toronto.

Tax reform and tax fairness, along with another possible cut to the GST, are also good candidates for inclusion in a new Conservative priority list.

And whether the war in Afghanistan makes the list, the issue is certain to continue creating headlines, and headaches for the Conservatives, through the fall and winter.

"There's no escaping the issue of Afghanistan," says Peter McKenna, a political scientist at the University of Prince Edward Island, who says there will likely be at least a small group of protesters in Charlottetown camped outside the hotel where the Tories are meeting, demonstrating against Canada's mission in Kandahar.

"We all know that in order for Harper to have a reasonable chance of forming a majority he's got to do better in Quebec," says McKenna. "But Afghanistan is a vote killer in Quebec, and will only make matters worse for the Tories in that province if (soldiers from the Quebec-based) Van Doos (regiment) start coming home from Kandahar in coffins."

McKenna says the Conservatives are likely "scrambling to come up with innovative and creative ideas to put in the policy window," and that the Charlottetown meeting is a chance for Harper and his inner circle to hear input from MPs, who have had a month to go home to their ridings and tap the mood of their constituents.

Politics jeopardize success in Afghanistan

IDNUMBER 200707300006
PUBLICATION: The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: World
PAGE: D8

ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: CanWest News Photo / A graveyard of abandoned tanks near Kandahar testifies to the Soviet Union's failed attempt to put down the Afghan insurgency in the 1980s ; Colour Photo: CanWest News File Photo / Sgt. Ron Anderson leads troops through harvested poppy fields near Ghorak, Afghanistan ;

DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan

BYLINE: Don Martin

SOURCE: CanWest News Service

WORD COUNT: 1046

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — They're ghosts from a lost war, a 20-year-old reminder that a foreign-led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

Hundreds of Soviet tanks, troop carriers, trucks and artillery guns, perfectly preserved by Kandahar's desert-dry environment right down to goggles and binoculars, lie abandoned in a gated compound within sight of Canadian base headquarters.

For nine bloody years in the 1980s, the Soviet Union tried to prop up a Communist government in Kabul and annihilate the mujahedeen insurgency before the fading superpower ditched its military hardware here in the rush to flee a fight they couldn't win.

To the skeptics viewing Canada's counter insurgency mission today, this military graveyard could preview our future if we botch the battle to rid Kandahar of the Taliban.

Seven weeks in southern Afghanistan is but an observational blink in a country that's been at war within itself for most of the last 30 years, but as I leave Kandahar today, trends and patterns are possible to detect and decipher. Some are hopeful. Others border on hopeless.

Right off the bat, let me argue that Canada cannot impose a political timetable on successfully ending this military mission.

It's like picking a date before the Normandy invasion for Canada to withdraw from the Second World War, yet we're just 18 months from a House of Commons vote to retreat with no obvious heir to our United Nations responsibility for the dangerously volatile Kandahar province. Canadian-assisted progress on redevelopment, political reform, army training, police education and humanitarian relief will be terminated for political expediency, not measurable accomplishment. Canadian soldiers will be demoralized by any tail-between-legs departure and billions of dollars worth of upgraded military equipment purchased specifically for the Afghanistan climate and terrain will be left without an active purpose. Perhaps they could be parked alongside the Soviet equipment here as our contribution to Afghan military history.

– Prime Minister Stephen Harper should not revisit Kandahar any time soon.

His sudden wimpiness on the file, replacing unconditional support for the mission with a shrugged surrender to a fix-is-in consensus of Parliament, is seen as inexplicable here. Soldiers who believed they had a Churchillian prime minister now know he's just another political weather vane, twisting in response to the winds of public opinion. A return visit would not receive a warm welcome, even in the scorching summer.

– Canada is transferring leadership of military operations to the Afghan army.

While local soldiers only receive a rudimentary three-week training and \$100 a month for a pay cheque, they are nevertheless improving as a military force. Canadian commanders are giving them considerable say in setting military priorities and targets. During the only combat reporters witnessed recently, Afghans were leading the charge against the Taliban while Canada provided backup firepower. Brig-Gen. Tim Grant also told me the reason for stranding a huge convoy (and this columnist) atop a mountain pass near Ghorak for almost two weeks was the result of a direct request to refortify the district offices from high in the Afghan government.

– The humanitarian and redevelopment pillars of this mission have become a higher priority, in words if not deeds.

The new base commander, Brig-Gen. Guy Laroche, signalled as much when he landed here Saturday morning, but the drift was evident long before his arrival. Reconstruction and mentoring teams are being beefed up and their efforts praised in every second breath from military brass. The Canadian International Development Agency, often under attack for dragging its heels on feel-good projects, appears to have found a firmer footing in health, education and women's projects.

– The war against the poppy is lost.

Even with eradication activity picking up under British supervision, the opium-producing plant is setting record high harvests. Detection is not a problem — soldiers often remark how beautiful the poppy fields look when they're in full red bloom. But British military officials tell me it's an uphill struggle to convince farmers to switch their illegal crop for less lucrative melons, grapes or even marijuana.

– The Taliban are not beaten.

The combined air and ground firepower of the joint forces here is a sight to behold. How so much destructive technology can be neutralized by a few thousand religious extremists armed with ancient rocket launchers, last-generation rifles and old anti-tank mines boggles the mind. Yet the Taliban, while no longer surfacing in large military formations, are having considerable success in planting bigger and better roadside bombs to put security forces on edge, slow reconstruction efforts and, most importantly, prevent Afghans from any sense their lives are returning to normal. And pity the poor villager in the faraway hills of southern Kandahar. Every month or so, Canadian soldiers show up to declare themselves their protector while Taliban watch from the sidelines. But without reliable, well-armed detachments of Afghan military or police based near villages, the Taliban will return the minute Canadians leave.

– OK, so I left the brightest development for last, but Kandahar City is on an economic roll, booming in population and bursting with building activity.

The lineup of truck traffic outside the city's customs terminal is a sight vaguely reminiscent of a Windsor, Ont., border crossing, albeit with colourful jingle trucks in lieu of 18-wheelers. There are billboards extolling the virtues of a university education over becoming a suicide bomber. It is, veteran observers say, an echo of what happened in Kabul several years ago when the capital prospered and security concerns abated. If the south's largest city can thrive in spite of chronic security problems, hope springs anew the entire region will stabilize and revitalize.

But know this for sure: If Canada pulls out in early 2009 as expected, hope for Kandahar will fade. As Lt.-Gen Michel Gauthier, commander of Canadian expeditionary forces, told reporters Sunday: "I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February '09 from an international community perspective. Nobody's under any illusion that Aghanistan will be self sustaining and self sufficient by February '09."

He won't say it, but that reality makes it imperative that Canadian forces stay here until the job is done, even if the surrender monkeys in Ottawa think it's politically convenient to leave.

Abduction 'un-Islamic', Karzai says

IDNUMBER 200707300002
PUBLICATION: The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: World
PAGE: D8
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Karzai;
DATELINE: KABUL, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Laura King and Emal Haidary
SOURCE: The Los Angeles Times
WORD COUNT: 370

KABUL, Afghanistan — President Hamid Karzai declared Sunday that the abduction of 22 South Korean church workers by Taliban militants was an un-Islamic act that brought disgrace on Afghanistan.

Karzai issued his statement, his first since the hostage crisis began, after meeting with Baek Jong-chun, a special envoy sent by South Korea's President Roh Moo-hyun.

Eighteen of the captives are women, and Karzai said their abduction was a particularly heinous act.

"Hostage taking and abuse of foreign guests, especially women, is against Islam and the Afghan culture," Karzai's office quoted him as telling the South Korean envoy. "The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values."

Similar sentiments were voiced Sunday by Afghanistan's national council of clerics.

Meanwhile, a purported Taliban spokesperson set a new deadline of today for the freeing of 23 militants held by Afghan authorities, threatening to kill the hostages if the demand was not met.

"If the Kabul administration fails to meet our conditions by then, we will start killing the hostages," said Qari Yousef Ahmadi, who claims to speak for the kidnappers, by telephone.

The Korean church workers were seized by militants on July 19 as they travelled on a public bus along the Kabul-Kandahar highway. The group's leader, a pastor, was shot and killed by his captors Wednesday, setting off a wave of grief and dismay in South Korea.

The church group's decision to take public transport on a notoriously dangerous stretch of highway has been termed extremely foolhardy by security officials and foreign aid personnel who work in Afghanistan. At the same time, South Koreans have become riveted to the drama, and there has been an outpouring of sympathy for their plight.

Karzai's office said South Korean envoy Baek had thanked the Afghan leader for his efforts and would respect whatever course of action the government took to end the standoff.

Tribal elders in Ghazni province, where the group was taken captive, have been seeking without success to mediate an agreement with the kidnappers.

Several deadlines for the granting of the kidnappers' demands have passed without incident, but the abductors repeatedly have warned against trying to rescue the captives by force.

Karzai has ruled out a prisoner swap to free the captives. He was heavily criticized in March for trading five insurgent prisoners to free a captured Italian journalist — a move blamed by many for triggering more abductions.

Release prisoners or Koreans die today, Taliban tell Afghan government; South Korean envoy, Afghan leader meet to resolve Monday deadline

IDNUMBER 200707300110
PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A4
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM
DATELINE: SEOUL
SOURCE: Bloomberg News
WORD COUNT: 346

SEOUL – South Korean presidential envoy Baek Jong Chun met Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday for talks on releasing 22 South Koreans held by Taliban militants.

Baek and Karzai had a "serious discussion" during their 50-minute meeting in Kabul, South Korean presidential spokesman Chun Ho Sun said Sunday in Seoul. Chun declined to elaborate "due to the sensitivity of the negotiations."

The South Koreans were abducted July 19 on a highway in Ghazni province as their bus travelled from Kabul to the southern city of Kandahar. They were members of a Protestant church group on a 10-day relief mission. Most are women in their 20s and 30s, some of them nurses and teachers. The militants killed one of the hostages on July 25

The insurgents said the government must release eight Taliban prisoners by 7:30 a.m. GMT today (12:30 a.m. MT) or they will kill the rest of the hostages, Agence France-Press cited spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi as saying. Afghan negotiator Mahmood Gailani said there won't be a prisoner exchange and the militants must free 16 women in the group before further talks can take place.

The Afghan government was widely criticized for releasing five Taliban militants in March in exchange for an Italian hostage, AFP said. Karzai vowed never to repeat such a deal.

Seventeen of the South Koreans held are ill, AFP cited Ahmadi as saying. A German engineer kidnapped on July 18 is "not doing very well," he said.

The militants previously threatened to kill the South Koreans if the government in Seoul didn't withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. South Korea has about 200 soldiers in the country and plans to withdraw them by the end of the year, Foreign Minister Song Min Soon said July 22.

A South Korean hostage told JoongAng Ilbo newspaper in a telephone interview today that the hostages were split up into small groups and are regularly moved to different locations.

Lee Ji Young, a 36-year-old translator and guide in the group, said she is being held with two women and a man, the Seoul-based newspaper reported. Her group moved, "sometimes once a day, sometimes every other day," she said.

Release prisoners or Koreans die today, Taliban tell Afghan government; South Korean envoy, Afghan leader

Hillier doubts Afghan troops ready for duty; Top soldier contradicts defence minister's claim transfer of mission to local army will be swift

IDNUMBER 200707300105
PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A5
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Hillier;
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Mike De Souza
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 471

OTTAWA – Canada's top soldier is pouring cold water on the Harper government's suggestions that Afghan troops are almost ready to take the lead in the battle against the Taliban, allowing Canadian soldiers to move away from deadly combat situations in southern Afghanistan.

Gen. Rick Hillier said Sunday that he doesn't expect his soldiers will be out of danger any time soon.

"Whether we're working to conduct an operation directly ourselves and lead it supporting the Afghan troops or whether we are supporting Afghan troops in operations and they are in the lead, we are still going to be in a high-risk environment and you cannot eliminate casualties or ensure that they don't take place," Hillier said on CTV's Question Period.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor had suggested last week that Canada's troops could move into a reserve role by the end of the year, once the newly trained Afghan soldiers are ready to take the lead.

But Hillier raised serious doubts about the strategy, noting that the Afghan army wasn't going to be ready any time soon, despite a major training effort.

"It's going to take a long while," Hillier said. "We've just started the process, because we've just got the first soldiers in the south in these last few months."

Although he stressed that he was on the same page as O'Connor, Hillier added it was unlikely that the training could be finished by the time Canada's commitment ends in 2009.

A Conservative government official insisted Hillier and O'Connor were using different words to say the same thing.

"Initially the Canadian Forces took the lead in combat operations, largely because there were very few Afghan soldiers available to support operations within Kandahar province," said Isabelle Bouchard, O'Connor's director of communications.

"However, now we are stepping up our training and mentoring role. In the months ahead, the Afghan brigade in Kandahar will grow in strength to include more infantry battalions, a headquarters, as well as large army support and service battalions. In the future the Afghan National Army will take the lead in defending Kandahar, in defending their country."

Canada has lost 66 soldiers and one diplomat over the past 18 months since it took over a new mission in southern Afghanistan to contain Taliban insurgents and rebuild the area.

Some analysts have suggested the Harper government could pay a political price if casualties continue to mount with more than 2,000 troops from Quebec heading into combat over the next few months. Opposition to the war is stronger in Quebec than many other regions in the country.

"We have a little frustration that perhaps Canadians don't see and understand many of the incredible things that are occurring in southern Afghanistan," Hillier said. "All they've seen back here are detainees, casualties and that kind of thing, and all the great things that have been occurring just don't seem to be seen back here."

He said 75 per cent of people who know about all the aide aspects of the mission are supportive.

Political pullout would kill Afghan success; If Canada leaves before the job is done, our gains will be lost

IDNUMBER 200707300085
PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A15
COLUMN: Don Martin
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM
DATELINE: KANDAHAR
BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 770

KANDAHAR – They're ghosts from a lost war, a 20-year-old reminder that a foreign-led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

Hundreds of Soviet tanks, troop carriers, trucks and artillery guns, perfectly preserved by Kandahar's desert-dry environment right down to goggles and binoculars, lie abandoned in a gated compound within sight of Canadian base headquarters.

For nine bloody years in the 1980s, the Soviet Union tried to prop up a Communist government in Kabul and annihilate the mujahedeen insurgency before the fading superpower ditched its military hardware here in the rush to flee a fight they couldn't win. To the skeptics viewing Canada's counter-insurgency mission, this military graveyard could preview our future if we botch the battle to rid Kandahar of the Taliban.

Seven weeks in southern Afghanistan is but an observational blink in a country that's been at war within itself for most of the last 30 years, but as I leave Kandahar today, trends and patterns are possible to detect and decipher. Some are hopeful. Others border on hopeless.

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– Prime Minister Stephen Harper should not revisit Kandahar any time soon.

Political pullout would kill Afghan success; If Canada leaves before the job is done, our gains will be lost 127

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DIPLOMACY Embassy shakeup targets energy interests Yemen, Mongolia set for upgrades

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072110113

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A1

BYLINE: BRIAN LAGHI

SECTION: National News

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 922

WORD COUNT: 825

BRIAN LAGHI OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF Ottawa is preparing a shakeup of overseas diplomatic offices to bolster Prime Minister Stephen Harper's positioning of Canada as an energy "superpower." Sources have told The Globe and Mail that the shuffle would see the government upgrade or open about a half-dozen new foreign offices – including in regions with emerging mining and energy interests – as it contemplates closing others to save money.

A senior source said the countries being considered for upgrades include Yemen, where Canada has only an honorary consul. The oil industry has lobbied the government hard to expand Canadian representation in the Middle Eastern country because of significant Canadian energy interests there.

Mongolia, where Canadian firms are involved in significant mining interests, is also being considered for an upgrade.

Fen Hampson, director of Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, said increased presence in countries such as Yemen suggests a more commercial direction for the government.

"These upgrades, if indeed they take place, it's a case of the flag following trade as opposed to trade following the flag," he said.

Earlier this summer, foreign policy officials were issued marching orders to better "align" their work with Mr. Harper's priorities.

Those main concerns include the mission in Afghanistan and the emerging markets of China and India.

The Prime Minister has also recently visited Latin America.

Mr. Harper has quietly criticized the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for not following through on the government's main concerns.

In Mongolia, Canadian mining interests have been pushing for a stronger Canadian involvement to help corporations operate in the country.

Canada has responded by sending an official to Mongolia from Beijing once a month to deal with trade issues. Canada also has a consulate there.

Mongolia has a full-fledged embassy in Ottawa and has encouraged Canada to reciprocate.

Prof. Hampson said upgrading a consulate to an embassy is a significant step because it allows for logistical support for corporations and knowledge of local conditions.

"Sometimes it's something as simple as expeditiously getting visas for your corporate executives who are going to be spending some time there," he said.

"If you want to put it in layman's terms, it's like saying a relationship is in the back of economy class, which is pretty cramped these days and nobody pays much attention to you, and moving it up to first class." Earlier this year, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay told a House of Commons committee that the government was committed to saving money for taxpayers.

It later emerged that the government was considering closing up to 19 diplomatic offices after having shut two consulates in Japan and another in Milan.

The department has been asked to deal with a cut of \$142.8-million this year.

But the source said that won't prevent the government from opening at least a few offices in an exercise he characterized as "reprofiling." The government is also in the process of cutting costs by selling a portion of its foreign real estate holdings.

Canada operates 98 embassies and high commissions around the world.

Canada abroad Current count of Canadian representation abroad: 76 embassies 22 high commissions 25 consulates-general 8 permanent missions Earlier this summer, foreign policy officials were issued marching orders to better "align" their work with Mr. Harper's priorities.

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In Mongolia, Canadian mining interests have been pushing for a stronger Canadian involvement to help corporations operate in the country.

Canada has responded by sending an official to Mongolia from Beijing once a month to deal with trade issues. Canada also has a consulate there.

Mongolia has a full-fledged embassy in Ottawa and has encouraged Canada to reciprocate.

Prof. Hampson said upgrading a consulate to an embassy is a significant step because it allows for logistical support for corporations and knowledge of local conditions.

"Sometimes it's something as simple as expeditiously getting visas for your corporate executives who are going to be spending some time there," he said.

"If you want to put it in layman's terms, it's like saying a relationship is in the back of economy class, which is pretty cramped these days and nobody pays much attention to you, and moving it up to first class." Earlier this year, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay told a House of Commons committee that the government was

committed to saving money for taxpayers.

It later emerged that the government was considering closing up to 19 diplomatic offices after having shut two consulates in Japan and another in Milan.

The department has been asked to deal with a cut of \$142.8-million this year.

But the source said that won't prevent the government from opening at least a few offices in an exercise he characterized as "reprofiling." The government is also in the process of cutting costs by selling a portion of its foreign real estate holdings.

Canada operates 98 embassies and high commissions around the world.

Canada abroad Current count of Canadian representation abroad: 76 embassies 22 high commissions 25 consulates—general 8 permanent missions Trend shift For more on how diplomatic practices are changing, and what former ambassadors are saying about the sale of Canada's foreign residences. Page L3

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Yemen; Mongolia

SUBJECT TERM: government; political; diplomatic service; table; foreign relations

PERSONAL NAME: Stephen Harper

THE AFGHAN MISSION Vandoos won't be shielded, military says No pressure to hold regiment back from heavy fighting to avoid inflaming anti-war sentiment in Quebec, commander states

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072110106

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A4 (ILLUS)

BYLINE: PAUL KORING

SECTION: National News

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN

WORDS: 362

WORD COUNT: 354

PAUL KORING KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN The commander of all Canadian expeditionary forces overseas directly confronted and rejected yesterday a whispering campaign suggesting the government has quietly requested the Royal 22nd Regiment be held back from the worst fighting, so as to avoid casualties and inflame anti-war sentiment in Quebec.

It's a suggestion that deeply offends many in the regiment, known as the Vandoos, now arriving in Kandahar.

Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier said yesterday it's just not true.

"It would matter not one bit whether it would be Vandoos coming into the mission area or Patricias coming into the mission area or more Royals coming into the mission area," he said, referring colloquially to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and the Royal Canadian Regiment, both of which have already fought tours in southern Afghanistan.

And he flatly rejected suggestions that there was political interference from the Harper government shaping the role of the Vandoos to avoid casualties.

"Categorically, absolutely not," he said. "I have been given full freedom to decide how I am going to do this job and how I am going to employ forces in the mission area." "It honestly makes no difference to me," he said. "I don't consider 'Well the troops are coming from one particular province and therefore I will tailor the tasks in a certain way.' " However, the general did confirm that the Vandoos will spend more effort on training and mentoring the growing number of Afghan National Army soldiers than the outgoing battle group.

That shift to increased training has long been a central element to the Canadian and NATO long-term campaign plans in Afghanistan.

The shift was not taken "with the objective of us not fighting any more, because we are going to have to fight for the foreseeable future," Gen. Gauthier said.

In a series of opinion polls since the mission began, about half those surveyed nationwide have been against the decision to send Canadian forces to Afghanistan, while about two-thirds of Quebecers have been

THE AFGHAN MISSION Vandoos won't be shielded, military says No pressure to hold regiment back from h

opposed.

The military is hoping returning Quebec-based soldiers will help increase support for the mission, by talking about their experiences to schools and community groups.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada; Quebec

SUBJECT TERM: strife; foreign policy; defence

PERSONAL NAME: Michel Gauthier

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces; Vandoos

THE AFGHAN MISSION: WILL CANADA'S COMMITMENT LAST PAST FEBRUARY OF 2009?

Training Afghans will take 'a long while' A week after Ottawa's optimistic prediction, top soldiers express doubt over local troops' ability to take over combat role by spring

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072110097
DATE: 2007.07.30
PAGE: A1
BYLINE: PAUL KORING, ERIN ANDERSSSEN
SECTION: National News
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN AND OTTAWA
WORDS: 691
WORD COUNT: 623

PAUL KORING, ERIN ANDERSSSEN KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN AND OTTAWA Top Canadian military commanders voiced doubts yesterday about how rapidly the Afghan National Army can shoulder the fighting load – raising the possibility of NATO pressure to extend Canada's Afghanistan mission past the current commitment that expires in February, 2009.

In Ottawa, General Rick Hillier seemed to contradict Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor's optimistic predication that the Afghans would be taking on most of the front–line combat by next spring in Kandahar province, where Canada's powerful battle group is waging a tough counter–insurgency war against the Taliban.

"It's going to take a long while," Gen. Hillier told CTV's Question Period , referring to the training of the Afghan National Army.

"We've just started the process." He also said it would be a "significant challenge" for the ANA to be ready in the time frame proposed by Mr. O'Connor only a week ago on the same program.

Ujjal Dosanjh, the Liberal foreign affairs critic, said inconsistent statements between the Defence Minister and the country's top soldier create confusion for the international community and at home, where Canada's position on its mission in Afghanistan needs to be clear.

"Canadians need to know who's in charge here," he said in a telephone interview from Vancouver yesterday.

Meanwhile, in Kandahar, the general running all of Canada's overseas deployments said defeating the Taliban and rebuilding Afghanistan won't be done by February, 2009, adding that if Canadians don't remain to complete the job, then some other nation will have to do it. Already, NATO is struggling to find nations willing to contribute to the mission – especially if it involves sending troops to the war–torn southern half of the country.

"Whether we accomplish it ourselves or it's accomplished by others doesn't matter a whole lot in the greater scheme of things," Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, commander of all Canadian expeditionary forces overseas, said yesterday.

Gen. Gauthier, who knows Afghanistan well, is soldiering on in the full knowledge that a political debate is raging over whether Canada's commitment to Afghanistan should be extended beyond February, 2009. Mounting casualties, rising disquiet at home and sagging public support for Canada's first sustained combat in half a century hangs like a cloud over the mission's future.

Last week, Mr. O'Connor seemed to be putting a positive political gloss – and a hurry-up timetable – on shifting the combat burden to the Afghan National Army.

"We will continue to withdraw, train them, put more emphasis on training, and at, some stage, basically be in reserve," he said.

It's a stand that's seen as an attempt to soften opposition to the war in Afghanistan, which is particularly strong in Quebec.

But Gen. Hillier made it clear that Canada's soldiers will remain in the thick of the fighting. "We are in the fight. There are direct combat actions required to keep the Taliban from stopping the progress in southern Afghanistan and tearing the country further apart," he said.

In Kandahar, as one battle group heads home and another – based on Quebec's famed Vandoos, the Royal 22nd Regiment – is arriving, Gen. Gauthier rejected the notion that Afghanistan in general, and Kandahar province, the Taliban's original heartland, would be safe, secure and thriving by the end of the Harper government's commitment.

"I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February, '09," Gen. Gauthier said.

"From an international community perspective, no one is under any illusions that Afghanistan will be self-sustaining and self-sufficient by February, '09," he said from the Canadian headquarters at the sprawling NATO base at Kandahar Airfield.

But nor is Gen. Gauthier planning for a Canadian role in Kandahar beyond the troops who will arrive next summer and leave at about the time the current commitment ends.

The high command is working on plans "for the group that will be deploying in August, '08 – we have no plans beyond that right now," he said.

"Trying to anticipate where we might be in February, '09, would be a waste of time," he said.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; foreign policy; defence

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces; North Atlantic Treaty Organization

AFGHANISTAN: SOUTH KOREAN CAPTIVES Taliban leaders set new deadline in bid to swap hostages for prisoners

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072110095

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A9 (ILLUS)

BYLINE: SAYED SALAHUDDIN

SECTION: International News

SOURCE: REUT

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: Kabul AFGHANISTAN

WORDS: 524

WORD COUNT: 478

SAYED SALAHUDDIN Reuters News Agency KABUL Taliban leaders said yesterday their fighters would kill 22 remaining South Korean hostages if the Afghan government did not release rebel prisoners by a new deadline of 2:30 a.m. EDT today.

Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf said the deadline had been set by the Taliban leadership council, headed by elusive leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, giving the threat added weight.

The kidnapers killed the leader of the Korean Christian group last Wednesday, but several further deadlines passed without the rebels carrying out their threat to kill the remaining hostages.

"Since the talks between us, the Kabul administration and Korean government have reached deadlock and they are not honest ... we will start killing the hostages if they do not start releasing our prisoners . . ." Mr. Yousuf told Reuters by telephone from an unknown location.

Sporadic talks between the Afghan government and South Korean diplomats on one side and Taliban militants on the other repeatedly snagged on the rebel demand for Kabul to swap jailed insurgents for the Koreans.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai had ruled out any deals with the Taliban after coming under harsh criticism for freeing five rebel prisoners in exchange for the release of an Italian hostage in March.

In his first comments on the latest hostage case, Mr. Karzai condemned the kidnapping, but did not say whether any deal might be possible.

"Hostage-taking and the abuse of foreign guests, especially women, is against Islam and Afghan culture and the perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," a spokesman quoted him as saying.

Eighteen of the Korean hostages are women. Mr. Yousuf said some of the captives, being held in small groups at different locations, were sick.

Ghazni's governor, Mirajuddin Pathan, said medicines the Korean government had wanted to send could not be delivered on Saturday because the Afghan team could not establish contact with the Taliban.

AFGHANISTAN: SOUTH KOREAN CAPTIVES Taliban leaders set new deadline in bid to swap 106 hostages for

Mr. Pathan said the government did not want to use force to rescue the hostages. "We have no plan of attack. We are trying to send the delegation for more talks," he said in an interview.

In addition to Afghan forces, foreign troops are also stationed in Ghazni.

South Korean special envoy Baek Jong–chun met Mr. Karzai yesterday to discuss ways to end the hostages' ordeal.

"We are well aware of Afghan culture and the difficulties the Afghan government and people are faced with in their fight against terrorism, and will respect their decision to end the hostage crisis," a statement by Mr. Karzai's office quoted Mr. Baek, Korea's chief national security adviser, as saying.

The Taliban are also holding one German and four of his Afghan colleagues, abducted from a neighbouring province a day before the Koreans. Another German seized alongside them was later found dead with gunshot wounds.

The abduction of the Koreans is the largest kidnapping of foreigners by the Taliban since U.S.–led and Afghan forces overthrew the movement's radical Islamic government in 2001.

It comes amid an increase of violence in the past 18 months, the bloodiest period since the Taliban's removal.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; kidnapping; hostages; south koreans

ORGANIZATION NAME: Taliban

AFTHANISTAN: SOUTH KOREAN CAPTIVES POPE APPEALS FOR RELEASE OF HOSTAGES

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072110094

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A9 (ILLUS)

BYLINE:

SECTION: International News

SOURCE: AP

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 155

WORD COUNT: 184

Associated Press Pope Benedict XVI called yesterday for the release of Korean hostages held in Afghanistan, saying their abduction by Taliban militants represents "a grave violation of human dignity." "I issue my appeal so that the perpetrators of such criminal acts desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed," the Pope said, speaking from Castel Gandolfo, his summer retreat.

"Unfortunately the habit of taking advantage of innocent people for partisan ends is spreading among armed groups. It is a grave violation of human dignity that is in contrast with every elementary norm of civility and law. . . ." Later, a Taliban spokesman questioned why the Pope called for the release of the Christian hostages but did not speak out against civilian casualties by foreign troops.

He also asked why the pontiff was silent about the fate of Afghan women, who the Taliban claims are being held at U.S. military bases in Afghanistan.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; kidnapping; hostages; south koreans; religion; statements

PERSONAL NAME: Pope Benedict XVI

ORGANIZATION NAME: Taliban

The good soldier Grant

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072110085

DATE: 2007.07.30

PAGE: A12

BYLINE: F.B. ALI

SECTION: Letter to the Edit

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: Toronto ONT

WORDS: 97

WORD COUNT: 112

F.B. Ali Toronto Brigadier-General Tim Grant's desire to tell Canadians what it will take to win in Afghanistan (Top General Vows To Tell It Like It Is – front page, July 28) is commendable. But what he doesn't seem to realize is that, even if the West, including Canada, defeats the Taliban, what will remain is a corrupt, tribal, medieval narco-state.

The qualities required to make a good soldier are not much imagination, moderate intelligence and lots of bull-headed determination. That's why countries that entrust their policy-making to soldiers usually come to regret it.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM: strife; government

PERSONAL NAME: Tim Grant

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces; Taliban

Leaders try to shame Taliban

IDNUMBER 200707300086
PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Canada/World
PAGE: A3
DATELINE: Kabul, Afghanistan
SOURCE: The Associated Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 247

Afghanistan's top political and religious leaders invoked Afghan and Islamic traditions of chivalry and hospitality yesterday in attempts to shame the Taliban into releasing 18 female South Korean captives.

A purported Taliban spokesperson shrugged off the demands and instead set a new deadline for the hostages' lives, saying the hardline militants could kill one or all of the 22 captives if the government didn't release 23 militant prisoners by early today.

A leader of the South Korean group was shot and killed Wednesday. Several other deadlines have passed without killings.

In his first comments since 23 Koreans were abducted July 19, President Hamid Karzai criticized the Taliban's kidnapping of "foreign guests," especially women, as contrary to the tenets of Islam and national traditions.

"The perpetration of this heinous act on our soil is in total contempt of our Islamic and Afghan values," Karzai told a South Korean envoy.

Afghanistan's national council of clerics said the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, taught that no one has the right to kill women.

"The killing of women is against Islam, against the Afghan culture, and they shouldn't do it," the council said.

A former Taliban commander and current legislator who has joined the negotiations, Abdul Salaam Rocketi, said the government policy was that the "women should be released first."

But the Taliban spokesperson, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, instead invoked the religious tenet of "an eye for an eye," alleging that western militaries are holding Afghan females at bases in Bagram and Kandahar.

Pope Benedict also called for the hostages' release, saying the perpetrators should "desist from the evil they have carried out and give back their victims unharmed."

Afghan army not ready: Hillier

IDNUMBER 200707300085
PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Canada/World
PAGE: A3
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Mathieu Belanger, Reuters /;
DATELINE: Ottawa
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 186

As one group of Canadian troops returned home to their families yesterday, top general Rick Hillier said he isn't so sure Canadian troops will be able to hand over much of the front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers by February.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period, Canada's chief of defence staff played down the kind of training progress predicted a week earlier on the same program by his political boss, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

Hillier said it will be tough for the Afghan National Army to start doing the heaviest military lifting by next winter — as O'Connor predicted.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," said Hillier, who took pains not to flat-out contradict O'Connor. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them."

Sixty-six Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in Afghanistan since 2002. Pressure has steadily built on the federal Conservative government to more clearly define its exit strategy from the war. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he'll only extend Canada's combat commitment, set to end in February 2009, with the consensus of Parliament.

RELATED STORY: A5

Military to spice up rations for soldiers' diverse taste buds

IDNUMBER 200707300078
PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Canada/World
PAGE: A5
DATELINE: Ottawa
BYLINE: Murray Brewster
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 577

In 55 degree heat and with Taliban rockets raining down, the last thing most of us would feel like doing is chowing down on a steaming bag of preserved salmon fillet.

With that in mind, the Canadian army is set to introduce a protein drink to its field ration kits, a specially formulated supplement similar to what body builders use.

Major Julie Johnson, who is responsible for keeping the army's supply of individual meal packs flowing to the front, says the military has found soldiers in Afghanistan operating "outside of the wire" have often not been eating three meals a day.

"Nobody really wants to choke down ravioli when it's 150 degrees out, so the protein supplement is something that can be used in lieu," she explains.

The meal replacement is a powdered drink that mixes with water and comes in three flavours — vanilla, chocolate and strawberry.

About a year ago, the army started to realize that soldiers, especially those running the gauntlet of supply convoys from Kandahar Airfield to far-flung desert bases, didn't have the time or the inclination to eat breakfast, lunch and supper every day.

"When I saw that, I said that was inappropriate and we need to maintain their nutritional wellness," Johnson added.

Individual meal packs are the stuff of culinary legend in the army, with a shelf life of more than three years. As soldiers often say: "Once you've had it, you'll never forget it, although you wish you could."

Often derided as an assault on the pallet, the rations are distributed to troops when it's impossible to set up field kitchens, which in Afghanistan means pretty much everywhere outside of the main NATO base at Kandahar Airfield, the provincial team base in the city and select forward operating bases.

The brown-bagged meals, of which there are 18 varieties, contain one main entree, a dessert, powdered fruit drinks, coffee, candy and, significantly, a comment card.

Over the years, there have been some colourful responses. A macaroni and cheese dinner, into which the supplier inexplicably added freeze-dried peas, elicited a barrage of comments.

Nicole Belanger-Drapeau, the civilian manager of the ration program at National Defence, said she was bombarded with notes for three years saying: "Pleeeeeease get rid of the peas."

When the company that manufactures the rations decided to drop the little chunk of preserved, bagged bread from its inventory, Belanger-Drapeau decided to replace it with packages of dried toast, which soldiers later compared to eating chunks of hardened Styrofoam.

"Well, again I was proven wrong because soldiers did not like them," she said with a mildly exasperated wave of her hand.

Belanger-Drapeau has perhaps one of the most unforgiving jobs at National Defence, deciding what to put on the combat ration menu. She organizes annual taste-testing events at Canadian bases to try out new selections.

"It's extremely difficult and it's becoming even more difficult with the younger generation," she said.

Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, who would have been happy scarfing down wieners and beans, many of the country's new soldiers have sophisticated and diverse taste buds. They like food with a lot of flavour and spices, said Belanger-Drapeau.

"We've moved towards what you would call ethnic food, so you have a good variety," she said. "With 18 choices you're trying to feed over 1,600 troops ... or even the entire army ... it's very difficult because in a family of four you have two people who don't eat this and the others don't eat that."

Some of the dinner menu selections now include Indian chicken, Szechwan chicken and cabbage rolls.

Another unexpected problem: The length of time troops eat the bagged food. With field operations sometimes lasting weeks, the chances of eating the same meal over and over are pretty high.

"What was appealing on a 10-day exercise in Canada is no longer appealing in Afghanistan ... or it's hard with the temperatures to swallow," Johnson remarked.

Our military spending may be off target

IDNUMBER 200707300046
PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Opinion
PAGE: A15
COLUMN: James Travers
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: General Rick Hillier;
DATELINE: Ottawa
BYLINE: James Travers
SOURCE: Toronto Star
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 462

Not much about Stephen Harper's government is as simple or complex as its support for the military.

Since promising in the last election to boost defence budgets by more than \$5 billion, Conservatives have been even more generous, ordering planes, ships and even tanks while talking about restoring pride and more muscular offshore missions.

What isn't clear is how that spending fits the forces into a coherent foreign policy.

Critics insist the reason is obvious: This prime minister's international priorities are pleasing Washington and playing diaspora politics at home. Neither requires a sophisticated, overarching strategy.

Mostly true, that analysis shortchanges Harper's multi-tasking. He's maximizing the bang in every buck by simultaneously raising force capability and his party's prospects of winning elections.

That's hardly unique.

Along with paving roads, spreading defence dollars is a time-tested way to prime the partisan pump.

Still, Conservatives are spreading them awfully thick.

Harper is spending what passes for a summer vacation making serial announcements in political hot spots while Gordon O'Connor is taking special care of Quebec.

With two by-elections coming there, the defence minister is using \$200 million to reopen a Quebec Royal Military College campus Liberals closed.

He's also injecting an estimated \$85 million annually into the local economy of the separatist Saguenay region.

Plans are to create a centre for rapid foreign deployment.

Memory also recalls O'Connor in Quebec City announcing that rather than ridding the army of what General Rick Hillier had previously declared a millstone, Canada will spend \$1.3 billion buying and refitting used

tanks.

That pleases the military pro-tank faction, the arms industry that once kept O'Connor on its lobbying payroll, and those voters willing to accept that all defence spending is wise.

But easy money and old-school politics often mix badly.

Without a firm policy framework, the combination of free spending, Conservative determination to be seen keeping even foolish campaign commitments and the inevitable stress of the Afghanistan mission are creating visible pressures.

Last week Hillier rippled the surface by saying the military isn't interested in creating the 14 territorial defence battalions Conservatives promised. Officially the government and the general are aligned; unofficially the Hillier and O'Connor relationship is just "civil."

One reason is that in May the minister shattered both a public service protocol and the military honour code by publicly humiliating his defence chief over slim funeral compensation for bereaved families.

Another is that O'Connor sees the military through a Cold War prism while the vision Hillier originally sold to Liberals looks forward and was conceived in the context of integrated foreign and defence policies.

Then the common thread was a stronger role for Canada in stabilizing and rebuilding failed states. Now the mantra is: The military manages violence for Canadians.

That isn't necessarily inconsistent with lighter, faster, more modern armed forces. But building and deploying them effectively demands fiscal discipline and a tight focus.

Both are missing in action. Conservatives are asking too much of defence spending in expecting it to rebuild the military while re-electing the party. Worse, they are asking too little from themselves in not forcing offshore policies through the crucible of public examination.

Harper is understandably open and proud of military spending. Only the ultimate purpose is an enigma.

James Travers' national affairs column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Tories to huddle on new policies; They may be 'stuck' in minority position

IDNUMBER 200707300017
PUBLICATION: The Windsor Star
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: B8
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Stephen Harper;
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 429

OTTAWA – Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his parliamentary caucus will confront a dilemma when they convene in Charlottetown on Wednesday for three days of closed-door strategy meetings

How can they engineer an election that almost no-one in Canada wants — including most MPs on both the government and opposition benches — for another crack at a majority government?

With polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals stuck at about 30 per cent popular support each, and with the economy rolling along happily, Harper's dream of a quick minority regime followed by a decisive, second-term majority appears out of reach.

"We might actually find ourselves here for a full term," says a rueful Myron Thompson, the Alberta Tory MP whose hope of retiring to the Rockies before the next election may turn out to be years away.

Tim Powers, a Conservative campaign insider, says no matter how keen Harper was for only a short-lived minority regime, the party leadership has accepted, for now, that people want it to govern.

"This is the reality of our times," he says. "The public at large is comfortable with minority governments right now ... there's no appetite for change, the economy is good, and when the economy is good and there is no single pressing domestic issue, people tend to want their politicians to focus on governing."

But how will Harper focus his government after exhausting the "five priorities" he set for himself two years ago?

"They're going to have to come up with a new plan," says Bill Casey, the Nova Scotia MP expelled from the Tory caucus this spring for refusing to support the budget because of the still-simmering dispute over Atlantic offshore petroleum revenues.

"They need a new set of policies that's going to reflect a direction for the country, because they've used up their five points and they need a plan."

Senate reform, including locally-elected senators, could be one new priority, says Thompson.

He argues the Liberal-dominated Senate's "disgusting" decision this spring to hold up legislation passed by

the Commons gives the Tories the perfect opening to press their case for democratic reform of the upper chamber.

Crime is another obvious political choice. Among the four pieces of legislation stalled by the Senate, the bill to impose mandatory prison sentences for gun crimes could gain public support following this summer's shootings in Winnipeg and Halifax, and the cross-fire shooting of an innocent boy in Toronto.

Tax reform and tax fairness, along with another possible cut to the GST, are also good candidates for inclusion in a new Conservative priority list.

And whether the war in Afghanistan makes the list, the issue is certain to continue creating headlines, and headaches for the Conservatives, through the fall and winter.

Innovative thinking is hard to come by, says Peter McKenna, a political scientist at the University of Prince Edward Island, because Harper so dominates his government and every portfolio.

Tories appear stuck in driver's seat: adviser; Minority needs priorities, not election

IDNUMBER 200707300013
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A4
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 305

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his parliamentary caucus are to convene in Charlottetown on Wednesday for three days of private strategy meetings, confronted by a dilemma: How to engineer an election that almost no one in Canada wants to get another crack at a majority government.

With polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals stuck in a stagnant pool of popular support of about 30 per cent each, and with the economy rolling along happily, Mr. Harper's dream of a quick minority regime followed by a decisive, second-term majority appears out of reach.

Tim Powers, a Conservative campaign insider, says the party leadership has accepted, for now, that people want it to govern.

"There's no appetite for change," he says. "The economy is good, and when the economy is good and there is no single pressing domestic issue, people tend to want their politicians to focus on governing."

But how will Mr. Harper focus his government after exhausting the "five priorities" he set for himself two years ago?

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Crime is another obvious political choice. Among the four pieces of legislation stalled by the Senate, the bill to impose mandatory prison sentences for gun crimes will only gain public support following this summer's shootings in Winnipeg and Halifax, and the tragic, cross-fire shooting of an innocent boy in Toronto.

Tax reform and tax fairness, along with another possible cut to the GST, are also good candidates for inclusion in a new Conservative priority list.

And whether the war in Afghanistan makes the list, the issue is certain to continue creating headlines, and headaches for the Conservatives, through the fall and winter.

Canadians must stay until job is done

IDNUMBER 200707300012
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A3
COLUMN: Don Martin
Colour Photo: Don Martin, CanWest News Service / A Soviettank graveyard near
ILLUSTRATION: Kandahar airfield, created when the Russians failed in their attempt to put down an Afghan insurgency in the 1980s. ;
DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 1026

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan – They're ghosts from a lost war, a 20-year-old reminder that a foreign-led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

Hundreds of Soviet tanks, troop carriers, trucks and artillery guns, perfectly preserved by Kandahar's desert-dry environment, right down to goggles and binoculars, lie abandoned in a gated compound within sight of Canadian base headquarters.

For nine bloody years in the 1980s, the then-Soviet Union tried to prop up a Communist government in Kabul and annihilate the mujahedeen insurgency before the fading superpower ditched its military hardware here in the rush to flee a fight it couldn't win.

To the skeptics viewing Canada's counterinsurgency mission today, this military graveyard could preview our future if we botch the battle to rid Kandahar of the Taliban.

Seven weeks in southern Afghanistan is but an observational blink in a country that's been at war within itself for most of the last 30 years, but as I leave Kandahar today, trends and patterns are possible to detect and decipher. Some are hopeful. Others border on hopeless.

Right off the bat, let me argue that Canada cannot impose a political timetable on successfully ending this military mission.

It's like picking a date before the Normandy invasion for Canada to withdraw from the Second World War, yet we're just 18 months from a House of Commons vote to retreat with no obvious heir to our responsibility for the dangerously volatile Kandahar province. Canadian-assisted progress on redevelopment, political change, army training, police education and humanitarian relief will be terminated for political expediency, not measurable accomplishment. Canadian soldiers will be demoralized by any tail-between-the-legs departure, and billions of dollars worth of upgraded military equipment purchased specifically for the Afghanistan climate and terrain will be left without an active purpose. Perhaps they could be parked alongside the Soviet equipment here as our contribution to Afghan military history.

– Prime Minister Stephen Harper should not revisit Kandahar any time soon.

His sudden wimpiness on the file, replacing unconditional support for the mission with a shrugged surrender to a fix-is-in consensus of Parliament, is seen as inexplicable here.

Soldiers who believed they had a Churchillian prime minister now know he's just another political weather vane, twisting in response to the winds of public opinion.

A return visit would not receive a warm welcome, even in the scorching summer.

– Canada is transferring leadership of military operations to the Afghan army.

While Afghan soldiers only receive rudimentary three-week training and \$100 a month for a paycheque, they are nevertheless improving as a military force. Canadian commanders are giving them considerable say in setting military priorities and targets. During the only combat reporters witnessed recently, Afghans were leading the charge against the Taliban while Canada provided backup firepower. Brig.-Gen. Tim Grant also told me the reason for stranding a huge convoy (and this columnist) atop a mountain pass near Ghorak for almost two weeks was the result of a direct request to refortify the district offices from high in the Afghan government.

– The humanitarian and redevelopment pillars of this mission have become a higher priority in words, if not deeds.

The new base commander, Brig.-Gen. Guy Laroche, signalled as much when he landed on Saturday morning, but the drift was evident long before his arrival. Reconstruction and mentoring teams are being beefed up, and their efforts praised in every second breath from military brass. The Canadian International Development Agency, often under attack for dragging its heels on feel-good projects, appears to have found a firmer footing in health, education and women's projects.

– The war against the poppy is lost.

Even with eradication activity picking up under British supervision, the opium-producing plant is setting record-high harvests. Detection is not a problem — soldiers often remark how beautiful the poppy fields look when they're in full red bloom. But British military officials tell me it's an uphill struggle to convince farmers to switch their illegal crop for less lucrative melons, grapes, or even marijuana.

– The Taliban are not beaten.

The combined air and ground firepower of the joint forces here is a sight to behold. How so much destructive technology can be neutralized by a few thousand religious extremists armed with ancient rocket launchers, last-generation rifles and old anti-tank mines boggles the mind. Yet the Taliban, while no longer surfacing in large military formations, are having considerable success in planting bigger and better roadside bombs to put security forces on edge, slow reconstruction efforts and, most importantly, prevent Afghans from any sense that their lives are returning to normal. And pity the poor villager in the faraway hills of southern Kandahar. Every month or so, Canadian soldiers show up to declare themselves their protector while Taliban watch from the sidelines. But without reliable, well-armed detachments of Afghan military or police based near villages, the Taliban will return the minute Canadians leave.

– OK, so I left the brightest development for last, but Kandahar City is on an economic roll, booming in population and bursting with building activity.

The lineup of truck traffic outside the city's customs terminal is a sight vaguely reminiscent of a Windsor border crossing, albeit with colourful jingle trucks in lieu of 18-wheelers. There are billboards extolling the virtues of a university education over becoming a suicide bomber. It is, veteran observers say, an echo of what

happened in Kabul several years ago when the capital prospered and security concerns abated. If the south's largest city can thrive in spite of chronic security problems, hope springs anew that the entire region will stabilize and revitalize.

But know this for sure: If Canada pulls out in early 2009 as expected, hope for Kandahar will fade. As Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of Canadian expeditionary forces, told reporters yesterday: "I don't think anybody believes the job is going to be done by February '09 from an international community perspective. Nobody's under any illusion that Afghanistan will be self sustaining and self sufficient by February '09."

He won't say it, but that reality makes it imperative that Canadian forces stay here until the job is done, even if the surrender monkeys in Ottawa think it's politically convenient to leave.

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Saving Kandahar's starving children; A key problem is not few resources or even a lack of aid, but illiteracy and a lack of education, writes Don Martin in Kandahar City.

IDNUMBER 200707300010
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A3

ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Don Martin, CanWest News Service / An international think-tank has alleged that the Canadian government does not care about, and will not help, children dying of malnutrition in Kandahar and surrounding refugee camps. While Dr. Mohammed Sidiq says more medicine would help, 'I'd suggest help fighting illiteracy so the mothers know how to care for their child.' ;

BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 753

With crying babies filling every bed, she waits for treatment in a plastic tub dangling beneath a weigh scale, weakly trying to smile.

The reading above the two-year-old's failing body could well be her tombstone: It puts her at 15.4 pounds. The pediatric chart I consulted said the average weight for a healthy female her age should be about 26.4 pounds. The doctors here peg her chances of survival at 60 per cent.

Children are starving in Kandahar and the surrounding refugee camps. And the allegation levelled by the Senlis Council, an international think-tank now branching into humanitarian relief, is that the Canadian government won't help and doesn't care.

Such incendiary accusations must be proven, so the Swiss-funded agency, founded by Vancouver lawyer Norine MacDonald, provided a fast driver and an armed guide so I could tour the darkest underbelly of Kandahar's missing social safety net.

Our day-long trek began at the malnourishment ward in Kandahar's main hospital, where the children's wing is so full, they put two babies to a cot. Sadly, it does not appear overcrowded: These babies, all of them more than a year old, are barely newborn size.

Dr. Mohammed Sidiq tells me the number of starvation cases in his ward has almost doubled to 22 in the past year, but he isn't about to declare a crisis. "It may just be that it's easier to get into the city for treatment now," he shrugs.

Nor is it about a scarcity of food.

"They have food, but don't know how to utilize it. We've found mothers breastfeeding until their child is two years old, and that's not sufficient."

Saving Kandahar's starving children; A key problem is not few resources or even a lack of aid, but illiteracy and a

We move around the ward, each room with a handful of soiled beds and floors puddled with urine. The Pakistan-trained pediatrician is curiously detached as he examines babies clinically near death.

"This one weighs (8.8 pounds) and should be (19.8 pounds)." He pauses

to gently prod the screaming infant's grotesquely distended stomach. "It doesn't look good."

He puts infants on a supplement-laced, antibiotics-enhanced milk feeding program when they arrive to treat multiple health problems.

It takes a week to know if a child can be saved. About 65 per cent survive and are discharged within 20 days.

But ask Dr. Sidiq about a wish list from Canada and he pauses. True, he needs more medication for parents to take with them after their child is discharged, but he's not inclined to condemn Canada or any other country for failing to help enough. "I'd suggest help fighting illiteracy so the mothers know how to care for their child."

Ironically, perhaps, that is a key

CIDA program in the city.

Our next stop is the Marghar refugee camp, 18 kilometres southwest of Kandahar City. My guide nervously fingers the trigger of his AK-47 as we approach the camp, muttering about Taliban roaming nearby.

"Don't worry," he grins, "before they kill you, they'll have to kill me."

Funny. I'm still worried.

An elder waves us inside a mud hut to talk about the 8,000 people living on this rocky mountain slope. They used to be nomads who roamed southern Afghanistan plains to find green pasture for their herds. But as one drought year became six, their livestock livelihood was decimated and their temporary villages grew permanent. Preferring not to accept this sad fact, the national and provincial governments have tried repeatedly to bulldoze the settlements. There is no electricity, schools, health care or sanitation facilities, and only two wells for the entire camp. People work at occasional day jobs in gardens or as day labourers in the city. But the elders say things are more desperate now, more than a year after UN aid stopped coming.

"You could search this entire camp and won't find two bags of flour," says the elder. There are no signs of toys or a single diversion for the children, so I sparked a near riot by handing out pencils, pens and candy.

We end the day on a upbeat note with another Kuchi tribe on the edge of a river, downstream from Kandahar. The children appear better fed, goats wander the compound, and the parents show plenty of affection and concern for their children. The proof is in how they line up for hepatitis B vaccinations for themselves and their children in a pilot project by the Senlis Council.

Even so, the whole day was an unsettling and depressing experience. In a land where life is cheap, the Kandahar region's starving refugees are the fire sale. Thousands are clearly unwanted, denied government assistance and trapped in hopeless, lifelong situations.

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

But the Kandahar pediatrician makes an interesting observation.

Saving Kandahar's starving children; A key problem is not few resources or even a lack of aid, but illiteracy a

"I haven't been to many places, but from what I've read, I don't think we're any worse off than any other Third World country. There are hungry children all over the world."

How sadly true. And that puts Canada in the dilemma of having to pick where it feeds the world from its severely limited financial ration.

NATO to use smaller bombs in Afghanistan

IDNUMBER 200707300007
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A2
DATELINE: LONDON
SOURCE: Agence France–Presse
WORD COUNT: 206

LONDON – NATO will use smaller bombs in its campaign against Taliban rebels in Afghanistan to try to limit civilian casualties, the alliance's chief says.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer acknowledged that the number of civilians killed in clashes between NATO forces and Taliban fighters had damaged its reputation.

NATO was "working with weapons load on aircraft to reduce collateral damage," he told the Financial Times, but noted that it was impossible to entirely eliminate civilian casualties.

Mr. de Hoop Scheffer said that Gen. Dan McNeill, the commander of the 37,000–strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, had told troops that they should hold off attacking Taliban fighters in situations where civilians would be put at risk.

"We realize that, if we cannot neutralize our enemy today without harming civilians, our enemy will give us the opportunity tomorrow," Mr. de Hoop Scheffer said. "If that means going after a Taliban not on Wednesday, but on Thursday, we will get him then."

His comments follow criticism from Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who last month accused ISAF troops of killing about 90 civilians in June, most of them in air operations.

There are more than 50,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, mainly under NATO command, fighting Taliban militants who have waged a bloody insurgency since being ousted from power in late 2001.

Hillier casts doubt on O'Connor's timeline; Afghans won't be able to take over so soon, top soldier says

IDNUMBER 200707300003
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1 / FRONT
BYLINE: Mike De Souza
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 299

Canada's top soldier is pouring cold water on the Harper government's suggestions that Afghan troops are almost ready to take the lead in the battle against the Taliban, allowing Canadian soldiers to move away from deadly combat situations in southern Afghanistan.

Gen. Rick Hillier said yesterday that he doesn't expect his soldiers will be out of danger any time soon.

"Whether we're working to conduct an operation directly ourselves and lead it supporting the Afghan troops, or whether we are supporting Afghan troops in operations and they are in the lead, we are still going to be in a high-risk environment and you cannot eliminate casualties or ensure that they don't take place completely," Gen. Hillier said on CTV's Question Period.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor had suggested last week that Canada's troops could move into a reserve role by the end of the year, once the newly trained Afghan soldiers are ready to take the lead.

But Gen. Hillier said the Afghan army simply wasn't going to be ready so soon, despite a major training effort by Canadians.

"It's going to take a long while," Gen. Hillier said. "We've just started the process, because we've just got the first soldiers in the south in these last few months. But we're at a far better stage now than we've ever been."

Although he stressed that he was on the same page as Mr. O'Connor, Gen. Hillier said it was unlikely the training could be finished by the time Canada's current commitment ends in 2009.

"We'd like to see that it was in that position to be able to do so by next February," he said. "But that would certainly be a significant challenge for them."

Canada has suffered about 50 casualties in the 18 months since it began a new mission in southern Afghanistan to contain Taliban insurgents and rebuild the war-torn region. In total, Canada has lost 66 soldiers and one diplomat since the mission began.

Soviet ghost tanks have much to say; Afghan Withdrawal Decision Shouldn't Be Political

IDNUMBER 200707300097
PUBLICATION: National Post
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: National
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1
COLUMN: Don Martin
DATELINE: KANDAHAR, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Don Martin
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
NOTE: Making kites for films, Page A9.
WORD COUNT: 1034

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan –They are ghosts from a lost war, a 20–year–old reminder that a foreign–led military victory in Afghanistan may be impossible.

Hundreds of Soviet tanks, troop carriers, trucks and artillery guns, perfectly preserved by Kandahar's desert–dry environment right down to goggles and binoculars, lie abandoned in a gated compound within sight of Canadian base headquarters.

For nine bloody years in the 1980s, the Soviet Union tried to prop up a Communist government in Kabul and annihilate the mujahedeen insurgency. Finally, the fading superpower ditched its military hardware here in the rush to flee a fight it couldn't win.

To the skeptics viewing Canada's counter–insurgency mission today, this military graveyard could preview our future if we botch the battle to rid Kandahar of the Taliban.

Seven weeks in southern Afghanistan is but an observational blink in a country that's been at war within itself for most of the past 30 years, but as I leave Kandahar today, trends and patterns are possible to detect and decipher. Some are hopeful. Others border on hopeless. – Right off the bat, let me argue that Canada cannot impose a political timetable on successfully ending this military mission.

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Churchillian prime minister now know he's just another political weather vane, twisting in response to the winds of public opinion. – Canada is transferring leadership of military operations to the Afghan army.

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KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM; BOMBINGS

Conservatives ponder election few really want; Strategy Meetings; Harper Faced With Electorate Not Yet Ready For Change

IDNUMBER 200707300089
PUBLICATION: National Post
DATE: 2007.07.30
EDITION: National
SECTION: Canada
PAGE: A4
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Richard Foot
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 553

OTTAWA – Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his parliamentary caucus are to convene in Charlottetown on Wednesday for three days of closed-door strategy meetings, confronted by a dilemma: How to engineer an election that almost no-one in Canada wants — including most MPs on both the government and opposition benches — for another crack at a majority government.

With polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals stuck in a stagnant pool of popular support of about 30% each, and with the economy rolling along happily, Mr. Harper's dream of a quick minority regime followed by a decisive, second-term majority appears out of reach.

"We might actually find ourselves here for a full term," said a rueful Myron Thompson, the Alberta Tory MP whose hope of retiring to the Rockies before the next election may turn out to be years away.

Tim Powers, a Conservative campaign insider, said that no matter how keen Mr. Harper was for only a short-lived minority regime, the party leadership has accepted, for now, that people want it to govern.

"This is the reality of our times," he said. "The public at large is comfortable with minority governments right now ... there's no appetite for change, the economy is good, and when the economy is good and there is no single pressing domestic issue, people tend to want their politicians to focus on governing."

But how will Mr. Harper focus his government after exhausting the "five priorities" he set for himself two years ago?

"They're going to have to come up with a new plan," said Bill Casey, the Nova Scotia MP expelled from the Tory caucus this spring for refusing to support the budget because of the still-simmering dispute over Atlantic offshore petroleum revenues.

"They need a new set of policies that's going to reflect a direction for the country, because they've used up their five points and they need a plan."

Senate reform, including locally-elected senators, could be one new priority, said Mr. Thompson — who said the Liberal-dominated Senate's "disgusting" decision this spring to hold up legislation passed by the Commons gives the Tories the perfect opening to press their case for democratic reform of the upper chamber.

Crime is another obvious political choice.

Among the four pieces of legislation stalled by the Senate, the bill to impose mandatory prison sentences for gun crimes will only gain public support following this summer's shootings in Winnipeg and Halifax, and the tragic, crossfire shooting of an innocent boy in Toronto.

Tax reform and tax fairness, along with another possible cut to the GST, are also good candidates for inclusion in a new Conservative priority list.

And whether the war in Afghanistan makes the list, the issue is certain to continue creating headlines, and headaches for the Conservatives, through the fall and winter.

"There's no escaping the issue of Afghanistan," said Peter McKenna, a political scientist at the University of Prince Edward Island.

Mr. McKenna said there will likely be at least a small group of protesters in Charlottetown, camped outside the hotel where the Tories are meeting, demonstrating against Canada's mission in Kandahar.

On the subject of a new Tory election plan, Mr. McKenna said, "The problem is that Harper is so dominant over his government, and has his finger in every portfolio," that innovative thinking is hard to come by.

Mr. Powers said the Charlottetown meeting will give the Conservatives a chance to raise their profile -- and hear their critics -- in a region where the party has never been popular, and is in serious trouble now thanks to the Atlantic Accord dispute.

He called Mr. Harper "courageous" for holding the meeting there.

KEYWORDS: PRIME MINISTERS; POLITICIANS; POLITICAL PARTIES; GOVERNMENT; CANADA