

Bloodiest year in Afghanistan acknowledged through sombre Xmas tradition

Tobi Cohen, THE CANADIAN PRESS

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan - It's a military tradition to leave a single empty table and chair to remember those who have died in the line of duty, but at the head of the festively decorated military mess hall, it seemed eerily conspicuous amid the raucous party building up around it.

The Canadian Christmas feast came as what has been dubbed the bloodiest year for troops in Afghanistan draws to a close.

Military padre Maj. Pierre Bergeron explained the Christmas tradition before more than 1,000 soldiers and civilians at Kandahar Airfield tucked into their holiday feast. The table and chair are there, he said, as a tribute to fallen comrades.

"It is here to commemorate their efforts and to remind us that certain members of our profession fell in combat," Bergeron said before a silent crowd. "They are unable to be with us tonight but we want to underline their ultimate sacrifice."

The table bears a simple white tablecloth as a symbol of their willingness to "answer the call to arms of their nation," while a rose represents the families and friends who "keep the faith" by remembering their sacrifice, he said.

A red ribbon tied around a vase signifies their determination, while a lemon represents the bitterness of their fight.

"The salt is an element symbolizing the tears of the family left to mourn," he added.

"The glass is upside down because it cannot celebrate with us. The chair is empty because they are absent."

The war in Afghanistan has claimed 29 lives this year alone and most of the 73 fatalities since the mission began in 2002 are the result of improvised explosive devices.

Visiting from Ottawa to celebrate Christmas with the troops, Defence Minister Peter MacKay later told reporters that many of those IEDs are now believed to be coming into the country from Iran.

"We're very concerned that these weapons are going to the insurgents and keeping this issue alive," he said after dishing out plates of turkey, ham and Quebecois tourtiere to the hungry masses - many of whom were visiting the relatively cushy Kandahar Air Field from far more primitive forward



Defence Minister Peter MacKay serves up Christmas dinner to Canadian troops at Kandahar Airfield, in Afghanistan, Tuesday. THE CANADIAN PRESS/ Tobi Cohen

operating bases.

"We've asked the Iranians to address this issue because it's so difficult to cut the supply lines when you have people in another country giving these weapons to use against Canadian and coalition forces."

Joined by a slate of special guests that included Defence Chief of Staff Gen. Rick Hillier, U.S. ambassador to Canada David Wilkins and Tim Hortons co-founder Ron Joyce, MacKay's message to the troops was one of pride and encouragement.

He also took a moment to single out those from the 22nd Regiment - the Van Doos from Quebec, the province where the war in Afghanistan has been the least well received.

"The 22nd Regiment has distinguished itself again as it has on many other occasions and we in Canada are so very grateful for the important work you have accomplished," he said.

"There are many many people across many miles in our massive country back home whose thoughts and prayers are with you here today on Christmas Day."

Hillier, a frequent visitor to Afghanistan, commended his troops for the "extraordinary" job they're doing for the people of Afghanistan and Canada.

"All the Canadians are very proud of you. They are proud of your work, your devotion, your professionalism and certainly your courage," he said.

"I also am very proud of you and I just want to tell you I'm proud to be your chief of defence staff."

Upon their return from a whirlwind tour of several forward operating bases and Camp Nathan Smith where they got to sit down and chat with some of the soldiers, both Hillier and MacKay said morale is good despite reports that insurgents are gaining ground as troops find themselves fighting the same battles over again.

"(The soldiers) believe in the mission. They know it's going to take a while. They understand the characteristics of a counter-insurgency and right now, I would tell you their morale is strong," Hillier said.

MacKay said Canada has taken a leadership role in helping train and equip the Afghan army and police so they could one day look after security for themselves and that much progress has been made on the development and reconstruction side.

"This is an enormous effort to rebuild a country. To take on a vile and vicious opponent like the Taliban," he said.

"The progress is absolutely remarkable when one takes stock of where we were just five years ago."

MacKay cited the fact that more girls are now going to school, that basic health care is now accessible to about 80 per cent of the population, that the rates of infant mortality are dropping and that infrastructure projects are popping up all over the place as examples.

"There is obviously still need for more security to pave the way to do more of these projects and programs," he added.

While the Canadian commitment to Afghanistan is slated to end in February 2009, the Conservatives are hoping to extend the mission until at least 2011.

Ottawa is awaiting a report in January from former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, and Parliament is expected to vote this winter on whether to extend the mission.

"We do not want to leave work undone. We want to make sure Afghanistan is a fully functional, secure and self-sustaining country," MacKay said.

"That's the mission and we want to complete that mission."

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