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A rotation in review: BGen Denis Thompson reflects on tour's successes

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KANDAHAR AIRFIELD — After nine months in command of Task Force Kandahar, Brigadier-General Denis Thompson has passed the baton to his successor, BGen Jonathan Vance. The ceremonial transfer of command authority, held at Kandahar Airfield on 19 February 2009, attracted a host of Afghan, Canadian and international guests.

"Our mission in Kandahar Province was to increase and solidify the Afghan people's support for their government while at the same time removing the insurgent influence over the people," said BGen Thompson. "During our time here, we strove to do this through operations and activities geared at improving security, governance, and development and reconstruction in the province."

Because the road to peace and development is long, and the insurgency will not be defeated in the short term, in 2008 the Canadian mission in Afghanistan focussed on winning the trust of the Afghan people and building up local government and security institutions.

"Our mandate has been to keep the insurgents at bay in order to give Afghan security and governance institutions a chance to continue to develop," said the outgoing commander.

Rather than take on ISAF and the Afghan security forces using conventional military means, the insurgents shifted to the use of terror tactics against vulnerable targets. Numerous government, tribal, religious, and security force leaders were assassinated, including Lieutenant-Colonel Malalai Kakar, the most senior female Afghan police officer serving in Kandahar Province. In Kandahar City, insurgents on motorbikes attacked 15 schoolgirls, throwing acid in their faces.

While these brutal tactics terrified people, slowed the progress of development and governance, and captured the attention of international news media, they also alienated Afghans from the insurgency, noted BGen Thompson.

"Afghans are frustrated with the slow progress of reconstruction and nation-building, but they are also horrified by the atrocities committed on a daily basis by the insurgents," he says. "They are a strong people, and this strength is exemplified by the fact that every one of the girls attacked with acid in Kandahar City is back in school. They have not been cowed by the terrorist actions of insurgents."

Throughout the past year, Canadians worked hand-in-hand with Afghan and coalition partners, and achieved some notable operational successes. Maywand District, for example, had virtually no coalition or Afghan security presence nine months ago; today, soldiers of 2-2 Infantry — an American battalion under the command of Task Force Kandahar — patrol regularly, marginalizing the insurgents in this district that used to be one of their key logistical nodes.

In Zharey and Panjwayi districts, Canadian troops and their Afghan partners held their own against heavy opposition. Numerous successful operations were conducted, huge caches of weapons and IED components were discovered and destroyed, and new tactical infrastructure was built for use by the Afghan army and police.

Operation SHAHI TANDER 1, conducted in these districts in early January 2009, greatly degraded insurgents' IED capabilities. Surprise searches in compounds of interest led to a hefty find of weapons, equipment and IED components. Night vision goggles, wired pressure plates (switch mechanisms used to trigger IEDs), timing devices, tubes of home-made explosives, and thousands of rounds of ammunition



Girls head to school despite insurgent attacks on their schools, their teachers and their classmates. Afghans in Kandahar Province continue to fight for the right to educate their children.



A Canadian soldier works with three Afghan National Army soldiers during Operation ROOB UNYIP JANOBI, one of Task Force Kandahar's largest operations of 2008.

were found, along with an assortment of weapons including a recoilless rifle, medical supplies, and IED components, including 138 detonators. Each bomb requires at least one detonator, so the seizure of detonators alone took up to 138 IEDs off the roads, where they kill and maim Afghans as well as coalition forces.

The mentoring and training of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police were among the pivotal activities of 2008. By building capacity in their security forces, Afghanistan and its international partners will set the conditions for building up the nation.

"In a counter-insurgency such as the one in Afghanistan today, the people are the prize, and the development of Afghan security forces is the key to protecting the Afghan people, over the long term, from the cruel and repressive ways of the insurgents," said BGen Thompson. "Tangible progress has been made in our mentoring and training of the Afghan National Army and Police this year. One of our ANA Kandaks and the ANA Brigade Headquarters reached Capability Milestone One, having proven they are capable of planning and executing independent operations. These security forces successfully planned and executed a strategy to clear the Arghandab Valley of Taliban fighters and protect the people after the insurgent attack on Sarpoza Prison in late June 2008."

While it is clear that Kandahar Province faces significant security challenges, progress made since 2005, when Canadian operations began there, is not disappearing. The economy is growing, the Afghan security forces are making progress, and improvements to infrastructure continue to be made.

"Hope remains for Afghanistan," said the outgoing commander. "Our soldiers and government partners firmly believe that, and it is evident in the excellent work they are doing here in Kandahar Province. I am incredibly proud of our troops, and I leave Afghanistan with a renewed respect for them."

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