

## Canadian takes command in southern Afghanistan

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — A rising number of insurgent attacks in southern Afghanistan will be countered with a newly aggressive strategy by NATO forces, according to the new Canadian commander for the region.

Major-General Marc Lessard refrained from claiming that security has improved, even as he praised his British predecessor for making "true – and I mean true – progress" during his term as commander of NATO's 12,000 troops in the south.

Despite some positive steps in the last year, Maj-Gen Lessard said, NATO only managed to hold a blocking pattern against rising Taliban attacks.

"The truth is, there has been a 50-per-cent increase in incidents," he said. "So there has been an increase in activities, incidents, but what people forget is that on every occasion the Taliban were blocked."



Major-General Marc Lessard takes command of NATO's Regional Command (South) in Afghanistan Saturday (*Graeme Smith/The Globe and Mail*)

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At the beginning of last year, NATO commanders spoke confidently about pushing the war into more remote parts of the southern region and challenging the Taliban in their enclaves far away from major cities.

They also planned to open up northern Helmand for development of a major electricity project at the Kajaki Dam.

While the Taliban were pushed out of some strongholds such as Musa Qala district, the insurgents re-grouped in new enclaves and forced NATO to defend the urban centres with battles sometimes 10 or 15 kilometres from the outskirts of Kandahar city.

The Kajaki Dam project has progressed more slowly than anticipated, because the roads are not safe enough to transport the necessary equipment.

"We blocked in 2007," Maj-Gen Lessard said. "In 2008, we're going on the offensive."

To explain the rising violence, the Canadian commander used a variation on the "kicking a hornet's nest" explanation that many officers have repeated since early 2006 when the insurgency grew increasingly active. He suggested that the arrival of thousands of NATO troops in the south has caused an increase in fighting, but that it doesn't necessarily reflect a worsening situation.

"I think the situation has evolved," he said.

As the new commander of NATO's Regional Command (South), the Canadian will lead soldiers from Canada and 11 other countries until Nov. 2008.

He replaces Major-General Jacko Page, a British officer.

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