

'Taliban hate our guts': Canada's top soldier

BY BRIAN HUTCHINSON, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 8, 2009



A Canadian-built strong point in Mushan was dismantled during a complex, well-executed coalition operation that ended April 30. The strong point's 64 Afghan National Army soldiers and eight Canadian military mentors were redeployed closer to Kandahar City.

Photograph by: Brian Hutchinson, Canwest News Service

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — Villagers in a Taliban-controlled area west of Kandahar City are applauding last week's drawback of Canadian and Afghan troops, saying the presence of coalition forces in their communities had only complicated their lives.

"Canadian and Afghan soldiers did not bring peace into the area where we are living," said a landowner in Mushan village, western Panjwaii district.

A Canadian-built strong point in Mushan was dismantled during a complex, well-executed coalition operation that ended April 30. The strong point's 64 Afghan National Army soldiers and eight Canadian military mentors were redeployed closer to Kandahar City.

Even though insurgents in western Panjwaii are now "walking around freely and with rifles, (residents) are more relaxed than when the fort was here," the man added.

It's not a flattering assessment, but one that Canada's top soldier accepts.

Chief of Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk told Canwest News Service in an interview this week the Mushan strong point did not have its intended effect, which was to help clear the area of Taliban.

Instead, the installation drew insurgents to Mushan like moths to a flame.

"The Taliban hate our guts," noted Natynczyk. "So if we're in there, the Taliban will come. You have the Taliban who can move into some areas and intimidate people, which makes it very hard on them.

The folks out there are really on the edge. I mean, I think they've been banged up a lot by the Taliban."

The landowner added: "We were living in fear when the fort was there. The Taliban would attack it, and of course the Canadian and Afghan army would react. Civilians suffered casualties."

Panjwaii is a key area of Canada's military responsibility, and officers acknowledge a large portion of it is now overrun with Taliban insurgents.

And fear still pervades the area.

The landowner says he and his family loathe the Taliban but they are afraid of retribution; he requested that neither his name nor a description of his farmland be used in this article.

The firefights and IED attacks that terrorized Mushan have stopped.

"With the presence of the fort, we were not in peace. We were in trouble because of the fort."

Natynczyk said he found it "interesting that (the farmer is) saying that, with regard to the reduced tension."

Made largely of sand bags and lumber, the Mushan strongpoint was built two years ago, in response to persistent Taliban activity in the region.

Two other Canadian-built strong points just to the east also were built in 2007, in the villages of Zangabad and Talukan. They were dismantled last year.

In a briefing Sunday, Canadian officers told reporters that all three substations were constantly under siege. The situation was "untenable," one said.

The Mushan installation was left in place longer than the others, said Natynczyk,

because "we thought it would have a bit more of an effect. There seemed to be some (normal community life) in the area."

Another consideration was that the U.S. 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment (2-2) was deployed just to the east of Mushan, in the Maywand district of Kandahar last year.

The Mushan substation "was kind of a linkage," said Natynczyk, who visited Kandahar Air Field briefly on Thursday with Prime Minister Stephen Harper. "But as 2-2 became much more mature in their area, Mushan lost its relevance."

It was the Afghan National Army's decision to dismantle the Mushan substation and to leave the area, he stressed.

Handing to the Afghans decisions such as the Mushan drawback "is about allowing them the flexibility to actually exercise their command and control, their plans, their initiatives," said Natynczyk.

Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan ultimately will be judged on whether it has left the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police prepared to properly do their jobs.

This may be lost on villagers in Mushan, at least for now. The village and surrounding communities are suffering, thanks to the insurgency.

"We have lost our relatives, we have lost our orchards, houses, the system of agriculture has been deeply damaged," said the landowner.

"If you could see the area you won't find happiness or signs of progress. You won't see many people."

Families with enough resources have fled to Kandahar City, or to more distant places.

"Those who remain are financially weak," said the landowner, who moves between Mushan and Kandahar City, where he was interviewed.

"Most are unable to afford renting (a home) and buying food in the city. They are compelled to live in the villages under any kind of circumstances."

The Taliban now control "not only Mushan but also Zangabad and Talukan," adding he did not know how many Taliban were in those areas.

"They are not staying in one place. They moving around, from one village to other."

Late this week, the Taliban disabled a number of cellphone transmission towers in

western Panjwaii, apparently in an attempt to prevent villagers from reporting their movements to authorities.

Insurgents are believed to use wireless radios to communicate with one another.

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