

THE AFGHAN MISSION: COMBAT CASUALTIES

Numbers of wounded dropped sharply in 2007, military reports

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OTTAWA -- The number of Canadian soldiers wounded in battle dropped significantly last year as direct gun battles with the Taliban appeared to decrease.

The Canadian Forces decided last fall that, for operational reasons, it would provide annual, rather than weekly, reports on military personnel hurt on overseas deployment.

The report made public yesterday showed that in 2006, 180 Canadian soldiers received medical treatment for wounds directly attributable to combat - including those who were injured by improvised explosive devices or hit by friendly fire, and people suffering from acute psychological trauma. In 2007, that number fell to 84.

The military did not explain the decline. But Stephen Staples, the director of the Rideau Institute, an Ottawa-based think tank on international affairs, said there is a general understanding that the Canadian military is doing less direct combat.

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"The other possibility is that they are just relying more on the Afghan National Army and, from what I have heard, they have basically sent those guys in first," Mr. Staples said. It would be interesting, he said, to see casualty figures for the Afghan military.

Parliament is embroiled in a debate about what form the Afghan mission should take when the current mandate expires a year from now. The Conservatives want to keep Canadian troops in a combat role, while the Liberals say they want to switch to reconstruction. The New Democrats are demanding a complete withdrawal.

Much of the opposition to the war effort has been fuelled by the proportionately large number of casualties suffered by Canadian troops.

"The deaths certainly remind Canadians of what we're doing over there," Mr. Staples said. If there are fewer casualties, he said, then the focus of news media attention might shift away from caskets to other aspects of the mission that "could have an impact" on public opinion.

The figures released yesterday also show a dramatic increase in the number of non-battle-related injuries such as vehicle accidents and accidental discharges of a firearm - from seven in 2005, to 84 in 2006, and then to 298 last year.

Karen Johnstone, a military spokeswoman, said this climb is attributable to a change in how the numbers were counted.

In the latter part of 2006, she said, support for casualties was centralized and the description of non-battle injuries was broadened to include those members of the military who had to be sent home from Afghanistan for compassionate reasons.

So the numbers could now include, for instance, cases in which soldiers have had to return to Canada because a loved one was ill or because they are psychologically incapable of performing their job.

CANADIAN SOLDIERS SACRIFICE

A report released by the Canadian Forces yesterday shows that the numbers of soldiers wounded in combat in Afghanistan declined significantly between 2006 and 2007.

	KIA	Non-combat deaths	Wounded in action	Non-battle injuries	Total casualties
2002					13
2003					5
2004					9
2005					10
2006			180		300
2007 27	3		84	298	412

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