



Defence, Foreign Affairs battle over Afghan roles.

BY MATTHEW FISHER, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 4, 2009

KABUL, Afghanistan - Emotions remain raw eight months after Ottawa axed the Canadian military's much praised Strategic Advisory Team here and replaced it with the Foreign Affairs-led Canadian Governance Support Office.

The power struggle, which caused a spat between two federal ministries, was decided in Foreign Affairs' favour, but Ron Hoffman, who is Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan, looked as if he would have rather talked about anything else than why the SAT was stood down here and replaced by a new construct when he met a journalist recently at his residence in Kabul.

"The SAT's contribution was a real one," said Hoffman. "It came in fast. It came in with concrete capacity when the Afghans needed a certain kind of help very quickly. The individuals the military sent were enthusiastic and well prepared and they performed to the best of their ability providing help to a range of Afghan ministers."

So, speaking rhetorically after all these compliments, the ambassador asked himself: "Why in the world did it change?"

"What changed was the world that the SAT found itself in," he answered. "After three years of SAT rotations, the civilian world caught up with the evolving needs of the Afghan government and the number of capacity builders, supporters and mentors, et cetera, numbered in the multiple hundreds over that period. The Afghan needs have become increasingly defined. The Afghans themselves communicated to Canada - and I was personally very closely involved in this process - that they wanted us to adapt to these needs."

The SAT was a personal project of Rick Hillier, the hugely popular former chief of the Canadian military. The unit only existed for three years but during that time it attracted an almost cultlike status among the hand-picked officers who served in it. Comprising several support staff and about a dozen senior military officers, some of whom were financial, legal, transportation and strategic communications experts, it was one of the first western groups to offer counsel to Afghanistan's fledgling post-Taliban ministries and rapidly earned a sterling reputation by working closely with the country's political leadership including President Hamid Karzai.

Getting the military's side of the story was both easier and more difficult. Some former SAT members have not hidden their anger over what happened. But only Serge Labbe, who retired as a brigadier-general soon after ending a one- year term as the SAT's last commander last year, was willing to speak for the record.

"It was a visionary concept that was Pearsonian in its concept. Ten years from now there will be SATs and perhaps sooner than that," said Labbe, who has recently returned to Afghanistan to be a personal

adviser to Zia Mohammed, the minister of rural rehabilitation and development.

“It is not so much what we did but how we did it. That was the difference between us and everyone else in the country. The CGSO has individuals assigned to a ministry rather than members of a team assigned to a ministry which, from my perspective, is better.”

Another SAT member who served in Kabul before Labbe, decried Hoffman's explanation that specialists, rather than generalists were required.

“There are enough specialists in Kabul to shake a stick at,” the officer, who asked that his name not be used, said. “The SAT provided unique strategic advice and had a high profile. Nobody has a clue what the CGSO is.

“There were 100 different ways this could have been handled better. One of the ways would have been to civilianize it (the SAT) over time.”

Sean Maloney, a frequent visitor to Afghanistan who teaches history at Royal Military College, strongly opposed the SAT's closure.

“It wasn't the cocktail circuit that got us credibility in Kabul. It was this group, which was willing to put its ass on the line,” Maloney said. “The Americans, the British and even the Iranians were jealous of us because of the SAT. The American military laughed at us as they backfilled some of the positions that the SAT had had.”

Maloney agreed with those SAT members who said that what had caused its demise was a power struggle that was triggered by envy by individuals in Foreign Affairs who felt their usual role as the primary point-of-contact with foreign governments had been usurped.

Hoffman vehemently denied that the change was the result of envy or spite.

“I have heard from people that this was jealousy of some parts of the Canadian government over the SAT's success,” the ambassador said. “There is a lot of sheer nonsense that is out there over this which I find extremely unfortunate.”

The decision to replace the SAT involved broad consultations with Afghan ministries and came as a result of recommendations that had been made by the Manley panel, he said.

“To suggest that this kind of review that Canada had undertaken, that the cabinet decisions made and the parliamentary direction made resulted in a more targeted, higher impact strategy somehow rested on the shoulders of one individual or a small group of individuals is just not the way the world works,” Hoffman said.

“This was part of a major re-orientation that involved a large number of people right up to ministers - and so it should for something as important as this.”

As for sniping from former SAT members over the fact that the CGSO had lived at a five-star hotel, rather than in a fairly modest house, as the SAT team had done, Hoffman said that this had been “a

temporary measure which enabled it to be stood up and deliver capacity and services rapidly."

CGSO personnel and their office had been temporarily put up in a hotel because of the need to undertake certain security upgrades at properties owned by the embassy, for reasons based on "sensitive information" that Hoffman said he was not able to elaborate publicly on.

Carefully steering a middle course through what is still a political mine field, Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, who is responsible for all Canadian military activities overseas, said in an interview last month that "the SAT was the right formula three years ago, two years, even one year ago. We are now applying a different formula. I think it will take some time for it to have the full effect that the Government of Canada would like it to have. But I think that they have had a good start."

While lamenting the end of the SAT, Labbe was optimistic that something good would come from the furor that has attended its demise.

"This is not about turf. It is about having one Canadian team, one Canadian mission," the last SAT commander said. "Instead of worrying about where we are from, pick the best 200 Canadians. What a great legacy that would be. How very Canadian. It goes beyond what money can buy."

There was "nothing to stop someone" from the military taking a position with the CGSO, Hoffman said, adding that an expert from the military was about to join the new organization.

"We will always be interested in capitalizing on the talents that DND has available," Hoffman said. "It is a question of finding the best people that Canada has available to respond to specific needs identified by the Afghans."

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