

Dahla dam project is potential target: military

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OTTAWA — Canada's reconstruction project at Afghanistan's Dahla dam is a potential strategic target for the Taliban, the military acknowledged Thursday, but Ottawa insists it's wrong to draw comparisons to the nearby Kajaki dam refit that's become a magnet for attacks.

Canada is pinning considerable hope on a \$50-million effort to repair and upgrade the Dahla dam, the second-largest in Afghanistan. It has the highest profile of six development projects recently begun by the Harper government to demonstrate that the costly Afghan mission, which has killed 87 Canadian soldiers, is bearing fruit.

The restoration project has been warmly welcomed, but a recent surge of Taliban attacks across the country during the spring and summer has heightened the Karzai government's concerns about the project, a defence analyst said.

“I was told ... the Kabul government, in light of the various recent major Taliban attacks – whether it was in Kabul or in the eastern provinces – the feeling is that Dahla dam might also become a magnet for Taliban attacks,” said retired colonel Alain Pellerin, executive director of the Conference of Defence Associations.



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One of Canada's signature projects in Afghanistan is expected to be the reburishment of Dalha dam in the northern part of Kandahar province. *(Michel Huneault/CIDA)*

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The Dahla dam is 34 kilometres north of Kandahar City in an area that falls under Canada's responsibility in Afghanistan. About 100 kilometres away, in neighbouring Helmand province, British and U.S. forces have been beset by attacks as they try to upgrade the Kajaki dam.

At an Ottawa briefing Thursday, Brigadier-General Gerry Champagne said it's clear from the NATO coalition's perspective that the Dahla dam "is one of the potential strategic targets" for the Taliban. He said Canadians and other coalition forces are prepared to mount a "surge operation" around the project if needed.

A Canadian International Development Agency official said it's wrong to compare the circumstances faced in the Dahla dam and Kajaki dam projects.

"There's a bit of an apples and oranges issue here," Bob Johnston, director general of CIDA's Afghanistan Task Force, told reporters. "Kajaki is a hydroelectric dam. There is much bigger challenge in removing and replacing relatively large hydroelectric turbines."

Plus, Mr. Johnston said, the geography is different at Kajaki, where coalition forces had to labour long and hard to build a supply road to the dam under attacks from insurgents. "There's a long access road that's proven to be very difficult," he said.

"When you compare that to the rehab of the Dahla dam and the irrigation system ... the repairs are not as extensive."

Canada is hiring an outside organization to refurbish the Dahla dam, a job that will include repairing everything from access roads to equipment to the irrigation system.

Mr. Pellerin, a supporter of the Afghan mission, said Canada must undertake the project with "eyes wide open" because it will be a major benefit to the local population and as a result the Taliban will try to thwart it.

He said he believes Canada can succeed in the project.

"It might take a bit longer than planned and there might be some reverses and setbacks, but I think it can be done."

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