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Afghan Peace Unlikely in Near Future: Ron Hoffman

by Scott Taylor

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan has been rocked over the past month with the deaths of 10 Canadian soldiers during what was supposed to be a quiet winter month of December. At the same time, the American mission is expected to undergo significant changes over the coming months with Barack Obama's arrival in the White House, and elections in Afghanistan this year will prove to be a real test for everyone.

Amidst all of this is Ron Hoffman, Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan. Appointed in September, Mr. Hoffman is responsible for overseeing and implementing Canadian policy in the country.

Embassy columnist Scott Taylor spoke with Mr. Hoffman by telephone on Jan. 9 and the following is the first of two parts of that conversation.

It's great having you on the line. Thank you for doing this.

"We're dealing with a tough situation and nobody wants to white wash anything."

In recent interviews that you gave to the media, you stated that a negotiated peace plan with the Taliban would have "almost no prospect of success." And Canada's been pretty much in lock step with the U.S. in trying to dissuade Hamid Karzai's government from going with this approach. Why, in your opinion, is this not something we should be supporting and encouraging?

"Let me clarify that statement, that's a very important question. There's a tendency in the media to distil a half-hour interview into a three-paragraph report. As a result, some of our messages on policies get lost in the process.

"We do support the Karzai government's efforts to advance reconciliation on a political level. I think in the short term we also have to recognize—and I believe the government of Afghanistan recognizes—that it is not approaching a high-level reconciliation from a position of strength and we think that's very, very important to do so.

"I also don't believe that senior levels of the insurgency or the Taliban or al-Qaeda—because this is a mosaic of enemies that Afghanistan is facing—are likely to consider moving forward the reconciliation process in advance of the upcoming elections. Such a move could potentially strengthen the president's hand, and I don't think that political and security dynamics are right for talks to go forward in any kind of a concrete meaningful way.

"I think some of the strategic-level discussions, such as the role that Saudi Arabia is starting to play, may be encouraging. Saudi Arabia has not been active in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding its influences around the world and its resources, it's been very reticent to play an active or a constructive role in Afghanistan. And the fact that it is beginning to take tentative steps to do that is a positive step, because it does have influence particularly with parts of society in Pakistan."

You've said that you don't see much realistic prospect towards a settlement in 2009, but you also said 2009 would be a decisive year for Afghanistan. Can you explain?

"The government of Afghanistan, with the encouragement of the international community, including Canada, is developing an institutional framework for starting to build political reconciliation at local levels.

"Canada has recognized for some time that the security situation in Afghanistan will not be able to be resolved only through military means alone. Political reconciliation has a number of dimensions. This reflects the fact that the security situation in this country is based on a very complex insurgency. There are multiple levels and multiple groups.

"On a local level, Canada is encouraged by and supported by the Afghan government's intent to roll out a lower level political reconciliation program on a pilot basis in parts of the country with a strong involvement at local levels with regional offices.

"We know from our experience in Kandahar, and others have noted the same thing from other parts of the country, that there are some people who are fighting that are not driven by hardcore ideology. They're getting tired of the years of fighting. They also recognized that they're not making any progress, and we're noticing that there's an interest on the part of some to lay down arms and follow the path of peace. They're motivated by economic pressures, and tribal pressures."

There are a lot of people looking forward to the election this year, and you have said that a successful vote would confirm the legitimacy of Afghanistan's democratic process, and it would be a step forward. Hamid Karzai was appointed in 2001 and was elected in 2004. He's been unable to really bring this thing together. Why would this particular election make that much difference at this point in the process?

"What's key here is that we recognize that this is a democratic process. So whether it's Hamid Karzai or someone else isn't the point. The point is that the insurgency sees the election as the key for the fair-weather development.

"If they can ensure that the election does not proceed, or proceeds in a way that is diminished from previous years and can undermine the legitimacy of an elected government and prevent large parts of the country from voting. If it doesn't move ahead successfully, I think that's also a real blow against the insurgency, which is working really hard to prevent the modernization of democratic development against the maturing of the Afghan society.

"I think the stakes are really high in this election. I think the fact that the Afghan society in general is very supportive of it—both individuals and government."

One of the problems we've got is that the current government cannot extend its influence throughout the entire country. When the [International Council on Security and Development] report came out, you scoffed at the idea that the Taliban has got a permanent presence in 72 per cent of the country. In your estimation, how much of Afghanistan is considered secure, stable and under the effective control of the current government?

"I don't have the hard figure in my hands, but I'm confident that it's more than 72 per cent. The reporting on the ICOS report tended to be very minimalist. Canadians should not take it at full face-value."

One of the main statements made in the ICOS report was that in the capital city itself, three of the four main land routes into Kabul were not secure. Do you agree or disagree?

"In the last three or four months, the transport route has improved. What we're seeing in the security situation in general is a shift and adjustment in tactics. The Afghan government and other coalition forces have taken efforts to improve the security of the road.

"The general statement that Kabul is significantly less secure now than it was last year, I believe that's overly simplistic. If there's good analysis that the situation's getting worse, we should welcome that, because that's important for us.

"In general terms, the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated in 2008. [But] I've lived in Kabul for 18

months. In 2007, Kabul saw more casualties, it saw more bombing, it saw more suicide attacks, it saw a general destabilization of the population greater than 2008. There were significantly less attacks in Kabul in 2008. That's simply a fact."

On a personal note, when we were there, we used to be able to go to the various restaurants and we would see your predecessor dining at the clubs. Are you still able to do that, or has your security been restricted as well, just because of the perception that the security situation got worse? Or are you still able to go out and frequent those establishments on your own in the evenings?

"All of our staff have a list of places that they go to unescorted, no security people, nobody with guns. We take the security situation in Kabul very seriously. I have a staff now that is about 10 times the size than when it opened only four or five years ago. We're approaching 60 Canada-based civilian staff. All of our staff go out every day to ministries, organizations and restaurants and places to unwind with colleagues."

About a year ago, for most of the embassies, Kabul was considered an unaccompanied posting. Is that still the case?

"The situation is largely the same. Canada has never allowed spouses or children and I don't foresee that we're going to change that policy any time soon."

You're on record saying that Canada can achieve our current objective by the announced pullout date of December 2011. Originally, this was to be a two-year commitment in Kabul at just \$200 million. Given the negative progress made to date, what makes you so convinced we can meet this new marker?

"There are a couple of factors that give me confidence. One, I think more than at any time in our engagement in this country, we have a defined, targeted and realistic game plan of what Canada's trying to achieve. Secondly, we've identified the strategic importance of the Afghan National Police."

Next week: Hoffman discusses Canada's casualties, Afghan warlords and the way ahead through 2011 (and beyond.)

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