

ENVOY'S WARNING

'Weaker' Taliban still dangerous

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan says that the Taliban became "weaker and more desperate" in 2007, but he expects the insurgents will try to attack high-profile projects in an effort to undermine support for the mission next year.

"The extremists are trying to target areas of progress," said Arif Lalani, referring to internationally supported projects such as schools and bridges. "Obviously, they're feeling vulnerable; the government is making progress on the issues," he said in a year-end interview.

Despite the threat, the envoy said he is hopeful that 2008 will see a marked increase in Afghan "leadership," noting that the strides made by the fledgling Afghan National Army may inspire other elements within the Afghan sphere.

Better governance overall would go a long way toward building goodwill among Afghans and keeping the insurgency at bay. "There's been some real military successes but there's a long way to go on police," Mr. Lalani said.

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But problems loom. Pakistan is becoming increasingly unstable and critics of the Karzai government say that the Taliban presence in Afghanistan is increasing, not decreasing.

While the security situation remains serious, Mr. Lalani said that not enough attention is paid to the strides being made. "Since I arrived, there have been people trying to tell me that the sky is going to fall every month," he said. "Well, I've been here seven months, and the sky hasn't

fallen."

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