

Canada's Afghan focus changes as U.S. readies troop influx

BY MATTHEW FISHER AND MIKE BLANCHFIELD, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MARCH 26, 2009 6:53 PM



Canadian soldiers from November Company 7th platoon of the NATO-led coalition take a position during a mission in the Taliban stronghold of Zhari district in Kandahar province, southern Afghanistan.

Photograph by: Stefano Rellandini, Reuters

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — Canada's area of responsibility in the Taliban heartland will be cut by nearly half this summer as part of U.S. President Barack Obama's new Afghan strategy, to be unveiled Friday.

But Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan is to retain control of some of Kandahar's most violent areas: Kandahar City and the farming districts to the west of the provincial capital where three-quarters of Kandaharis live.

Canada's army will also remain NATO's point of contact with the provincial governor.

"Canada will be more focused on major population centres in and around Kandahar City, which is exactly where we want to have an impact with our priorities," David Mulroney, the Privy Council Office deputy minister who heads the government's Afghanistan Task Force, told an all-party committee of MPs on Thursday.

Mulroney's comments come the same day Oxfam released a damning report charging that billions of dollars in aid to Afghanistan is being misspent.

Obvious sectors, such as agriculture and rural trade, are relatively overlooked, aid workers who spoke with Oxfam said in Smart Development in Practice — Field Report from Afghanistan.

Several aid workers criticized the multi-tier contracting system used by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington's central aid co-ordinator.

"You have contract after subcontract after subcontract, which just kills everything," said a senior employee of a USAID contractor.

The report said many contractors are widely regarded as "absorbing a huge volume of funds in consultant costs," while delivering a finished product or service that's often of questionable quality or relevance.

However, with Obama's long-awaited review of Afghanistan about to be released, senior Canadian officials were welcoming the increased U.S. military presence, especially in southern Afghanistan.

Obama already has said he would boost U.S. troop levels by 17,000, but his plan also is expected to stress the need for a more integrated diplomatic-military approach; to focus on Afghanistan's volatile neighbours such as Pakistan; and to emphasize the need to strengthen Afghan security forces.

"The most important factor is increasing the Afghan military presence," said Mulroney, who added the growing strength of the Afghan National Army was proven last summer after the Taliban reclaimed parts of the Arghandab northwest of Kandahar City, because they led the mission that drove the insurgents out.

About one-third of the 17,000 additional U.S. troops ordered to Afghanistan are to be based in Kandahar.

American marines are headed to the deserts west of there, while a smaller number of U.S. army troops are to provide combat help to U.S. units already deployed south of Kandahar in areas near the Pakistan border.

At the moment, the U.S. contributes 38,000 of the 71,000 western troops in Afghanistan.

Mulroney deflected concerns by opposition members of the Commons foreign affairs committee that the increased U.S. presence would dwarf Canada's contributions in southern Afghanistan.

He said Canada welcomes the extra U.S. help. "They will be able to be present in some parts of Kandahar where we have not been present."

Other countries that are beefing up their forces in the south of the country include Britain, which is already the second largest contributor of NATO soldiers here with 8,300 troops, and Australia.

Canada's combat forces are slated to leave Afghanistan sometime in 2011. It is widely expected that they will be replaced by a smaller force that may include helicopters, police and army trainers, a provincial reconstruction team and, Canada's fighter pilot community hopes, CF-18 Hornet attack aircraft.

A highly manoeuvrable U.S. army Stryker brigade that was to have been sent to Iraq is to spearhead a new phase, in what is expected to be an increasingly bloody conflict.

It likely will operate near the thinly populated mountain infiltration route from Pakistan, east of Kandahar, that traditionally has been used by insurgents.

While these American troops will not be under Canadian command, their presence could greatly benefit Canada's 2,800 troops. Canadian officers have long believed that four out of every five insurgents their forces face have come from safe havens within Pakistan.

The map for Kandahar is being carefully redrawn so that Brig.-Gen. Jon Vance of Edmonton will retain command of Kandahar's most populous areas, although within a few months, the bulk of the combat forces deployed in the province and across the entire south will be American.

Essentially, with one small exception, Canada will continue to be responsible for areas it has heavily patrolled since March 2006 and the Americans will go to places in Kandahar where the Canadians have yet to venture. A U.S. army infantry battalion that has been based in western Kandahar since last summer is to remain under Canadian command.

In addition to a series of calls to U.S. lawmakers Thursday, Obama telephoned Afghan President Hamid Karzai to brief him on the review.

Canadian officials have had their own briefing and are optimistic that the integrated civil-military approach, as well as the regional focus that extends to Pakistan, will pay dividends.

Mulroney said Canada was working to revive the "Dubai process" that brought together border officials from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"That was suspended last year when Afghanistan suspended its direct relations with Pakistan. We're working away at getting that back on track," said Mulroney.

Obama's nominee for the U.S. ambassadorship to Afghanistan, Lt.-Gen. Karl Eikenberry, told the U.S. Senate foreign relations committee that "we don't have an unlimited amount of time" and that it was crucial for NATO and its allies to "implement a more effective strategy."

There are signs of expanding U.S. influence in Afghanistan.

The most obvious evidence is the large swath of real estate being claimed by American forces at the already overcrowded Kandahar Airfield, which resembles a gigantic construction site.

One of many buildings about to go up is a \$65-million facility to house sniffer dogs that go out with the infantry to hunt for bombs and other explosives buried by insurgents. There are also new landing pads for more than 100 transport and attack helicopters from the 82nd Aviation Combat Brigade from North Carolina.

Every few minutes, giant transports, laden with military gear for the incoming U.S. forces, arrive at the Kandahar Airfield, which is the logistical hub for the war in the south.

With files from Steven Edwards

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