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Afghanistan aid projects a Taliban target

Deputy minister: Enemy will strike in regions previously considered safe

By MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE Staff Reporter

If hostilities eventually give way to reconstruction efforts in war-torn Afghanistan, it's safe to assume some of Canada's humanitarian projects will be at risk of attack, the deputy minister of the Afghanistan task force said Tuesday in Halifax.

David Mulroney said "it would be naive to assume they won't be targeted" at some point during reconstruction.

He said aid work is already going on in Afghanistan and some regions are more dangerous than others.

Mr. Mulroney was in metro to speak with local media representatives and federal government officials. Established in February, the task force was formed to support a special cabinet committee by co-ordinating Ottawa's activities related to Afghanistan.

On Aug. 13, two Canadian aid workers were shot dead when insurgents ambushed their vehicle in Afghanistan's eastern Logar province. Jacqueline Kirk and Shirley Case were killed, along with a Trinidadian-American aid worker and the group's Afghan driver.

"The Taliban have shown a capacity to strike in places where they weren't active before, and that is an issue," Mr. Mulroney said.

Nevertheless, he said, the presence of non-governmental organizations doing humanitarian work in Afghanistan is crucial.

"In the early stages (of reconstruction), there is a risk-management issue," Mr. Mulroney said. "It depends on the region, and in those regions where security risks are highest, you have to approach it differently."

The last time Mr. Mulroney was in Afghanistan was about a month ago, he said.

He said over time it's going to become increasingly important that foreign aid is not the sole source of humanitarian work there.

"It's appropriate that it's not just foreigners who are delivering the aid," Mr. Mulroney told The Chronicle Herald's editorial board.

He said it's important that Afghans do a portion of the aid work because "Afghans can sometimes go places where foreigners can't."

Ottawa started its Afghan mission in 2002. Some 2,500 Canadian soldiers are serving in the country, most of them in the volatile south.

Ninety-three members of the Canadian Armed Forces have been killed in Afghanistan.

In March, Parliament voted to extend the military mission in Afghanistan to 2011, dependent on NATO allies sending reinforcements.

Mr. Mulroney suggested Canada and its allies are making progress in Afghanistan, but antiwar advocates aren't buying the government's version of events. According to the

Canadian Peace Alliance, the Harper Conservatives have been misleading the public at home.

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