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## Afghanistan toll will mount unless new strategy is found

By SCOTT TAYLOR On Target

THE TALIBAN attack in Kandahar last Wednesday that killed three Canadian soldiers and wounded another five is a shocking example of how brazen the insurgents have become in southern Afghanistan.

This attack was not just another roadside bomb but rather a bold ambush by as many as 40 Taliban fighters. It is also believed that the insurgents used a powerful anti-tank weapon, possibly an 82-millimetre recoilless rifle, to penetrate the Canadian light armoured vehicle.

Since the fall of 2006, after the Taliban suffered enormous casualties during NATO's Operation Medusa, the insurgents have been capable of mounting only pinprick attacks using suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices. Although such tactics continue to kill our soldiers, NATO commanders insisted that the Taliban's fighting capability had been greatly diminished.

The latest fatalities, including the death of an infantryman in Panjwaii district on Sunday, bring the Canadian death toll in Afghanistan to 97 soldiers and one diplomat, with at least 750 injured.

As we approach the seventh anniversary of the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, even the most wilfully blind can no longer deny that the security situation is spiralling out of control.

Large-scale terrorist attacks have rocked Kabul several times this year, and 10 French soldiers were killed in an ambush just outside the Afghan capital last month. In July, a battalion-sized force of insurgents practically overran an American outpost in southern Afghanistan. That bloody battle left nine U.S. soldiers dead and 15 wounded.

The most disappointing factor for Canadians is that our troops continue to fight for control of the same territory. After 30 months of Canadian deployment in Kandahar and numerous offensives and counteroffensives, obscure villages like Panjwaii, Arghandab, Zhari and Spin Boldak have become household names in Canada as they are repeatedly heard in newscasts pertaining to the deaths of our soldiers.

This failure to pacify the Afghan resistance in no way reflects on the skill or courage of our soldiers. All the other contingents in the NATO coalition consider the Canadians an elite force, and our disproportionate casualty count speaks for itself in terms of our soldiers' willingness to take risks in pursuit of the mission's objectives. Our allies envy the experience of our senior officers and the counter-insurgency training centre that has been established at CFB Wainwright in Alberta.

It needs to be remembered that Canada is just one of 37 countries contributing troops to the Afghan mission, and our officers are not responsible for waging the overall war. Canadian troops are instead managing security in just one small sector of Kandahar province.

Regardless of our soldiers' localized tactical successes, Canada has very little influence in the strategic decisions that determine the course of the overall mission. For instance, the

Taliban's use of the tribal regions across the Pakistani border as a safe staging area has often been cited as a major cause of the continued unrest. Despite a lot of political posturing on the part of the U.S. and NATO officials, it is clear that the current coalition-of-the-reluctant that is treading water in Afghanistan is hardly likely to start widening the conflict, especially into nuclear-armed neighbouring Pakistan.

Likewise, the U.S. insistence on eradicating the poppy crops without compensating the impoverished farmers simply creates a desperate and disgruntled pool of potential recruits for the Taliban insurgency. Anxious to feed their families, many of those fighting for the Taliban are motivated by the lure of US \$100 bills rather than the teachings of religious extremism.

Errant strikes such as the U.S. air force attack in Herat on Aug. 22 that killed 90 Afghans, including 60 children, and a callous disregard for such collateral damage by other coalition contingents and even private security forces, serve only to inflame the Afghans' hatred for all foreign soldiers, regardless of their nationality.

The Canadian battle group may be capable of maintaining tactical superiority over the Taliban in Kandahar. But unless there is a dramatic shift in strategic direction, the battle for Afghan hearts and minds will be lost, the wider war will remain unwinnable and the casualties will continue to climb.

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