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Lt.-Col. Carl Turenne, the new commanding officer of the Canadian provincial reconstruction base in Kandahar addressed troops at a change of command ceremony. He takes over at a tense time when Taliban militants carry out a campaign of intimidation against locals. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Murray Brewster



## Real and perceived Taliban keeping Kandahar on edge

8 hours ago

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — The two men sitting on the doorstep of a shop in a penniless neighbourhood of Kandahar had a hard look about them - even compared with the other stony faces on the sidewalk.

They were dressed in dark, knee-length Afghan shirts and balloon pants - one's outfit was dyed emerald, the other ruby - with jet-black turbans on their heads and beards as thick as steel wool.

"Do you see those two tough guys over there?" a translator asked a Western journalist as he leaned across the back seat of his vehicle.

"They are most likely Taliban. That is what they look like."

The baneful pair watched everything and everyone around them as passersby went out of their way to avoid eye contact.

On the street, traffic sat gridlocked for hours as Afghan National Police and NATO forces one street over dismantled a 100-kilogram roadside bomb strapped to a bridge - one of two explosive charges planted and diffused that day.

And though it was impossible to confirm whether the pair were genuine Taliban, it would have made little difference to the people around them, whose body language displayed a shrinking deference, as if they had something to fear.

The sense that militants are everywhere, watching and waiting, hangs like a cloud over this battered city that until last summer had taken - at least on the surface - a few tentative steps towards normalcy.

That Kandahar is a more anxious place than a year ago was acknowledged Monday by the commander of Canadian troops in the region.

Brig.-Gen. Denis Thompson rattled off a string of violent incidents that have shaken the confidence of ordinary Kandahar residents, including the spectacular truck bombing at Sarapoza prison last June and September's deadly suicide bombings at police headquarters.

"The skeptics among you might say it's hard to point at some progress," Thompson told over 100 troops and civilians assembled to welcome the new commander of the base for Canada's provincial reconstruction team, located in the heart of the city.

He praised the outgoing commander, Lt.-Col. Dana Woodworth, by saying the "faint-hearted would have thrown up their arms and given up, but that's not what happened."

Thompson's message seemed directed as much at the local Afghans on hand as it was at the Canadian development workers and soldiers who provide protection for the base -and who lost three comrades to a roadside bomb in December.

"You know what sacrifice is," Thompson said.

Last year's series of "spectacular attacks" has left the city intimidated and nervous, but no less secure, said the general, whose tenure is also nearing its end.

"The insurgents have successfully driven down the perception of people's personal security... and intimidated the population," he said following Monday's ceremony.

But the Taliban know only how to terrorize, and do nothing to win over Afghans or "increase their popularity among the people," he added.

Woodworth wouldn't talk to reporters about the tumultuous year he spent in charge of the base, where Canada organizes and stages civilian reconstruction and development activities within an envelope of military security.

His goodbye address was aimed at the troops, civilians and Afghans with whom he'd worked.

It was left to his successor, Lt.-Col. Carl Turenne, to face the media, including a handful of Afghan journalists from whom the first and only question was about what he would do to improve security in the city.

Voter registration for the presidential election, currently scheduled to take place in August, is underway and remains a source of political tension throughout the country.

"I'm going to take it one day at time," Tureen said. "One day at time, one challenge at a time."