

IEDs the frontline in war with insurgents in Afghanistan

By Dene Moore (CP) – 2 hours ago

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Improvised explosive device.

A decade ago, the words had no place in the common Canadian lexicon.

But since 2002, when Canada first joined the international coalition at war with the Taliban in Afghanistan, 67 of the 127 Canadian soldiers who have died there have been killed by IEDs. Ten more have been killed in suicide attacks or in explosions while on foot patrol.

Sapper Matthieu Allard, 21, and Cpl. Christian Bobbitt, 23, of the 5th Combat Engineers Regiment based in Valcartier, Que., were the most recent victims. They were killed Saturday, when they were hit by a second roadside bomb after exiting their vehicle to secure the area following an initial explosion.

While the term IED was certainly familiar within the Canadian Forces prior to the deadly toll they've taken in Afghanistan, the learning curve has still been steep for those who face the deadly reality daily.

"We've always had a certain capability but obviously it's a larger concern since we've been in Afghanistan so you pour more time, more effort into it," said the deputy commander of the counter-IED squadron for Task Force Kandahar, a captain who the Canadian Forces does not want named for security reasons.

IEDs are what they sound like: anything, anywhere, anytime.

The yellow jugs used commonly by Afghans to store everything from water to cooking oil have been popular picks for roadside bombs, but everything from cooking kettles to children's toys have been turned into components for bombs.

They range from the simple - using fertilizer, gas and other everyday items - to more sophisticated remote-controlled devices.

Since arriving in Afghanistan, the captain said Canadian forces have quickly developed their tools and their skills in dealing with IEDs.

They have more rugged vehicles, better equipment for both detection and prevention, and more training in both spotting bombs and disposing of them.

The addition of Griffon and Chinook helicopters has helped to keep soldiers off the dangerous roads, allowing travel and resupply missions in the air.

But to take on the Taliban, troops must still be on the roads, and as coalition troops have adapted, so have insurgents.

"You see a sort of evolution throughout the time that we've been here," the captain said.

"We've been getting better equipment, our vehicles are better-equipped to resist some of the blasts. And that impacted their response: They had to put more explosives in in order to achieve the same results, so that makes it harder for them to hide them."

Canadian troops now have safer vehicles, better robots and improved surveillance, he said, but sometimes the solution has been much simpler.

"They were hiding things in garbage on the side of the roads, so we went out and cleaned the roads to make sure they'd have less opportunities to get close to us," he said.

Culverts were popular hiding spots for explosives, so the Canadians put grates over the culverts.

"So they responded to that. They've changed the ways they were placing their devices, trying to hide them better, trying to react to where we would go," the deputy commander said. "It's a big cat-and-mouse game."

International forces have established a Canadian-led "CSI-style" lab at the base in Kandahar, where they study the devices, gleaned every bit of information they can. They have their own Most Wanted list of insurgent bomb makers, and just in the past few weeks have dismantled at least five insurgent bomb-making "factories."

"Every time an individual does something, he leaves a signature," the captain said. "That signature can be identified... and it helps us in narrowing down how we can catch the guy, or maybe just stop him."

Military officials have estimated that 60 per cent of IEDs are located and defused before they have a chance to kill or maim soldiers or civilians, yet the number of IED incidents in

have a chance to kill or maim soldiers or civilians, yet the number of IED incidents in Afghanistan has increased three-fold in the past two years, according to June statistics from the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization in Washington, D.C.

And the number of attacks could well reach new heights this month, as presidential and provincial council elections near.

"They know that the world is watching," the captain said.

Overall, roadside bombs cause 75 per cent of casualties to coalition forces in Afghanistan, up from 50 per cent two years ago, the organization has found.

However, Afghans are most often the victims of the indiscriminate explosions.

Afghan National Security Forces are far more vulnerable than Canadian or international troops. Lacking as they are in equipment and training, they are targeted often.

To that end, Canadian military and civilian mentors and the counter-IED team have taken on training the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police to better respond to roadside bombs.

But the heaviest toll may be on Afghan civilians. For every coalition soldier killed in a blast, dozens of Afghan civilians have been victims.

Bright flyers handed out by Canadian soldiers warn people in Pashto to stay away from suspect items, and a phone line has been set up for civilians to report possible IEDs. Afghan police then dismantle the potential bombs.

Cpl. Alexandre Fontaine, an analyst for the Psychological Operations team for Task Force Kandahar, said "the overwhelming majority (of victims) are civilians."

He said children are often the victims because they will pick up and play with objects they find.

Tens of thousands of similar flyers are printed every year to be handed out by Canadian soldiers, and they are having an effect, said Lieut. Carl-Antoine Chaktoura, commander of Information Operations.

"They're not used to calling anyone for help," Chaktoura said. "That's another thing we want to sensitize them to."

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