

Peace builders

Canadians are helping construct more than just prisons

By **KATHLEEN HARRIS**, NATIONAL BUREAU

Going from the relative comfort and cleanliness of a Canadian prison to dark, dingy confines in the heart of a war zone was like lurching back in time, says Bruce Megeney.

The veteran Correctional Service of Canada official arrived in December for a one-year mission to help improve Afghanistan's infamous Sarpoza Prison –notorious for its bleak conditions and a spectacular jailbreak last June that released hundreds of Taliban inmates and other criminals.

"It was almost like going back to the Stone Age," Megeney says of his first impressions during an interview from Kandahar.

The prison now holds about 600 inmates in four compounds – one for criminals, another for 'political' prisoners, a special area for women and a separate wing for young offenders. Canadians have helped rebuild the bombed-out front gate and surveillance towers to bolster security.

Cramped quarters built from stone, mortar, mud and grass are a world away from institutional conditions in Canada. But Megeney said there has been much progress as the team works to bring the prison to meet minimum standards prescribed by the United Nations. There's better food and clothing for inmates, more exercise opportunities and work programs such as carpet looming, carpentry and sewing to make their days more productive.

With one stint in Kosovo already under his belt, Megeney understands the job is not to import Canadian standards and practices, but respect and understand cultural traditions while advising on human rights to physical infrastructure.

"They have no beds. They sleep on blankets on the floor – but that's their culture, it's not because they can't get the beds," he said.

Many of Sarpoza's "cells" hold 12 to 14 inmates, but the group setting is also in keeping with the sociable culture, he said. Megeney leads a team of four Canadian corrections trainers/mentors posted to Kandahar's provincial reconstruction unit. Another Canadian is based in Kabul working with the UN.

He is among a small but growing group of Canadian prison staff exporting expertise abroad. Recognized as a model internationally, Canada is helping to build criminal justice and penal systems and improve programs for sexual and violent offenders in both fledgling democracies and developed countries around the world.

BROAD INITIATIVE

As part of the federal government's broader peace-building initiative, CSC has five employees deployed full-time to Afghanistan and eight to Haiti.

Lee Redpath, CSC's director of intergovernment relations, said Canada's role abroad is to provide short-term technical and program assistance, and more recently, to aid in longer-term peace-building work. Usually the department works with Foreign Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency.

In some cases, the role is to share specific expertise in programs where Canada is renowned for its research and program success – like sex offenders and violence prevention.

In other initiatives – such as Kosovo, Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti and Iraq – the role is to start nearly from scratch building a criminal justice system where records – and sometimes entire prisons – have been wiped out. On those missions, Canadians advise on everything from literacy, education and medical care to basic communications and facility design.

Redpath said officers working abroad must abandon notions of "clean living" in Canada and think outside the box – often working alongside military and police. The goal is not to build a "mini CSC" but to work within the host country's culture – and that usually comes down to personality and adaptability.

The volume of requests for Canada's assistance is growing at such speed that CSC has developed a special international unit that has quickly grown from three to 10 employees.

"We treat people with respect. We're not an abusive system. We know the majority of offenders are going to return to the community so we want to make sure the time they're with us they're working productively," said Redpath.

"I think other countries look at us and see that it's very positive."

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