

Canada urged to double troop strength

In absence of NATO reinforcements, Canadian commander seeks brigade of 5,000 to keep Taliban at bay in Kandahar province

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KHAKREZ, Afghanistan — Canada needs as many as 5,000 professional NATO soldiers — double its current force — to hold Kandahar's key districts, a senior commander says, suggesting that previous demands for extra troops are not enough for basic security in the province.

"If countries like Germany and France were not so afraid of committing forces, this problem would be solved readily," Major Richard Moffet, deputy commander of Canada's battle group, said in an interview.

He listed five Kandahar districts and suggested Canada needs to double its current troop strength of 2,500 to keep the Taliban away from those important areas.

"Easily you could have a brigade of 5,000 Canadians here just for Zhari, Panjwai, Arghandab, Shah Wali Kot and Khakrez, because to be honest, we haven't been to a few places in Panjwai yet," he said.



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Malim Akbar Khan Khakrezwal, a former intelligence chief for Kandahar and now a prominent tribal elder, welcomes Canadian Colonel Christian Juneau (right) to the town of Khakrez district centre. (*Graeme Smith/The Globe and Mail*)

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Military officials have spoken more bluntly about their lack of numbers recently, in private conversations and even publicly at meetings with Afghans.

Tribal elders from the mountainous district of Khakrez complained last week that NATO has failed to prevent the Taliban from running amok in the northern part of the province.

Nodding his head gravely, a Canadian officer told the elders they're right.

"We don't have enough troops," Colonel Christian Juneau said.

The frustration among elders in Khakrez district is only the latest symptom of what appears to be a sharp deterioration in security in the outlying parts of the province in the past year, as the overstretched Canadian forces have drawn back into core districts.

The military says Taliban ambushes have decreased in four of 17 districts in Kandahar city, the key zone where the Canadians focused their operations during the latest rotation of troops. But the military has so far refused to give statistics for all types of insurgent activity, including ambushes, and has kept the numbers for the entire province a secret.

A hint of the military's view of the province came during an interview this week with Lieutenant-Colonel Gilles Linteau, commander of the Joint Provincial Co-ordination Centre, a liaison hub between security forces.

"The number of incidents has doubled, if not more, in Kandahar," he told The Globe and Mail, suggesting that this estimate applies to the period since September of 2006.

Asked for clarification of the figures, however, Lt.-Col. Linteau later sent an e-mail saying the military cannot give details.

An average increase in attacks across the province would suggest a markedly worse situation in the villages and suburbs, because most analysts agree that downtown Kandahar enjoyed some relief in 2007 from the onslaught of insurgent strikes that terrorized urban areas in the previous year.

Anecdotes from beyond the city limits seem to confirm the trend; soon after Canadian and Afghan officials climbed out of their helicopters and crunched across the snow to the chilly cement building that serves as the Khakrez administrative centre, they heard a litany of bad news.

"As soon as the snow leaves the ground, the Taliban will come and force people to join them," said Shah Wali, a member of the Achakzai tribe, which usually supports the government. "What should we do?"

The 45-year-old with deep creases in his face said he took a risk by travelling from his village to meet the Canadian delegation, and he will be forced to invent a story to conceal the reason for his visit to the district centre. The Taliban might kill him for merely speaking with representatives of the Kabul government, he said.

The district has also grown dangerous for Malim Akbar Khan Khakrezwal, a former intelligence chief for Kandahar and now a leading tribal elder. His connections with the government have marked him, he said, and it's been impossible to visit the district for the past eight months.

"Six years ago we had only a few Taliban supporters in Khakrez," the retired major-general said. "Now we have a great number of them."

Pointing to white-capped mountains northeast of the town, he declared that the Taliban have camps in that direction where they're preparing insurgents for the next fighting season.

In the same direction, amid the same mountains about 70 kilometres north of Kandahar city, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry established an outpost known as the Gumbad Platoon House in the spring of 2006. They spent several months patrolling the craggy northern reaches of the province, but Canada's regular forces abandoned the place later that summer as all available troops returned to the heart of the province for a battle with Taliban on the outskirts of Kandahar city.

No regular troops have returned to set up outposts in the area. In the meantime, the Taliban are believed to have gained stronger influence in the district, and the local inhabitants seem to have grown deeply skeptical about the government. When the provincial police chief stood in front of the assembled elders and declared they should support the "free and independent Muslim government," there was an uneasy rustling in the crowd, as people coughed and spit, and several men sitting near the front murmured, "No, no, no."

After the police chief's speech, Col. Juneau took the microphone and tried to explain why the district hasn't seen many troops for the past two years.

"The province of Kandahar is very big," the deputy commander of all Canadian forces in Afghanistan said. "We cannot provide security over the whole province at once."

But expanding the NATO presence into districts such as Khakrez will require a dramatic increase in the number of troops, military officials say.

Even more than 5,000 NATO troops may be required for the province, Major Moffet said, because beyond the troops needed for the core districts, NATO would also require forces to intercept the Taliban's supply routes in outlying areas.

Emphasizing that the assessment was only his personal opinion, Major Moffet said he would prefer to see the extra soldiers come from a single major country, rather than piecemeal from several contributors.

Continued increases in Afghan troops levels are also important, he added.

The problem with contributions from smaller NATO countries is that each group of soldiers would come with its own logistics personnel, the deputy commander said.

"If any country says, 'Okay we're going to provide 300 soldiers,' well, okay, how many fighters? A hundred and fifty? No, no, no. Send a battle group."

Germany has thousands of troops in northern Afghanistan but so far refuses to send them into the southern war. France is reportedly considering a major contribution of troops to Kandahar, however, and in recent weeks French soldiers have been increasingly conspicuous at Kandahar Air Field.

Canada has demanded an extra 1,000 NATO soldiers in Kandahar as the price for the extension of the Canadian operation, but the need for additional forces described by Major Moffet and other military officials goes far beyond that request.

More soldiers would mean fewer NATO casualties and less reliance on air strikes, Major Moffet said; air power can help the foreign troops when they're outnumbered by insurgents, but aerial bombings are frequently blamed for civilian casualties.

Having led some of Canada's biggest operations against the Taliban over the past six months, Major Moffet said he's convinced that his call for more troops does not resemble the ill-fated demands for troop increases of the Vietnam War.

"Honestly, I don't have the feeling that we're losing," he said. "All we need is a bit more cohesion at the NATO level and this problem would be solved."

The Department of National Defence was unavailable for comment.

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