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Embassy, June 11th, 2008  
NEWS STORY

## Afghan-Based Civil Servants Ordered to Take Vacations After Few Able to Get Away

Serving in Afghanistan is a hazardous job for Canadian civil servants, but getting away can be even harder.

By Jeff Davis

As Canada's top diplomat in Kandahar since February 2008, Elissa Golberg is no stranger to the litany of dangers that threaten anyone working in the volatile Afghan province. There are suicide bombers, improvised explosive device attacks, insurgent ambushes, and the stress of living in a rules-heavy environment far from friends and family.

"The reality is I have staff that are working in a very intense place," Ms. Golberg says. "It's an environment where there is an active insurgency.... Certainly the day-to-day challenges of working in a conflict environment and a country that's emerging from conflict can be distressing."



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But while rest and relaxation time is a coveted break from the Afghan grind, it's not always easy to get away. According to government documents obtained by Ottawa-based researcher Ken Rubin under Access to Information, civil servants working in Afghanistan used only 30 to 35 per cent of their available vacation time prior to 2006.

To help Canadian civilians stay on an even keel during postings to Afghanistan, the government has developed a special package of mandatory perks to help them cope with the stresses of working in a war zone.

Two new measures have been approved by the government to sweeten the deal for those diplomats willing to wager a risk.

One measure, approved by the Treasury Board in January of this year, approved a "risk and hardship" premium for those serving in theatre.

Civilians serving in Kabul now receive an additional \$8,585 a year for their troubles, while those serving in Kandahar receive \$10,015. In contrast, Canadian soldiers, who face more immediate dangers, receive \$12,000 per year in premiums while deployed in Afghanistan.

In addition, according to the documents Mr. Rubin unearthed, extra mandatory vacation measures were introduced in November 2006 by John Baird, the then-president of the Treasury Board.

Under the new rules, the leave period for diplomats was increased from four days to six days, plus travel time, for Kabul and Baghdad. Those posted in

**Vacation Like a Diplomat: A Look at DFAIT's R&R allowances**

**Allowance Breakdown: Kabul and Baghdad**

Accommodations \$230.27 per night x 6 nights \$1,381.62

Meals/incidentals \$132.24 x 6 days \$793.44

Ground Transport \$50 x 2 \$100.00

**TOTAL \$2,275.06 x 6 trips \$13,650.36**

**Allowance Breakdown: Kandahar**

Accommodations \$230.27 per night x 8 nights \$1,842.16

Meals/incidentals \$132.24 x 8 days \$1057.92

Ground Transport \$50 x 2 \$100.00

**TOTAL \$2,275.06 x 6 trips \$18,000.48**

**Travel allowances: For travel stopovers**

Accommodations \$126.55 x 2 253.10

Meals \$55.16 x 4 \$220.64

Incidentals \$13.60 x 4 \$54.40

Taxis \$50.00 x 4 \$200.00

Extra baggage (for flak jacket and helmet) \$370.47

**TOTAL \$1,098.59 x 6 trips \$6,591.66**



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Kandahar get an additional two days, for a total eight days.

In a series of recommendations to Mr. Baird, a Treasury Board working group on foreign service directives criticized the previous rest and relaxation arrangement.

"This package is not sufficiently flexible to allow for individual coping mechanisms for managing stress," the group wrote in a report on high risk missions dated November 2006. "Canada-based staff are leaving a hostile 'rules-oriented' environment under a strictly controlled R&R package. Once again there is no scope for individual decision-making."

In an effort to get more employees to take full advantage of their away time, the new provisions actually require employees to take their leave.

"For their health and well-being, it is strongly encouraged for employees to utilize all six trips. A minimum of three trips should be taken," the recommendations advise, "It is the responsibility of the Head of Mission to make every effort to ensure that employees take trips."

Leave is granted every two months and "employees may choose any destination, however, the cost cannot exceed the value of a trip to Athens, the closest location representing Western culture."

Those who choose to go further afield must pay extra, and many choose to foot the bill to go elsewhere. Others return to Canada to see family through family reunion provisions.

The total cost for six rest and relaxation trips per year, per civilian posted in Afghanistan, ranges from about \$20,000 to \$25,000. This includes hotel rooms and per diems to cover diplomats' expenses while vacationing.

## **A Stressful Posting**

Despite being civilians, Ms. Golberg says, Canadian government workers in Kandahar have to take the same precautions as soldiers.

"To visit projects and meet with government of Afghanistan officials requires travelling with a military escort," she says. "Obviously the staff are put at the same risk as the Canadian Forces are in terms of

### **Civilians by the Numbers**

- More than 50 Canadian civilian government employees are currently deployed in Afghanistan.

- Among these, 22 are DFAIT officials.

- 12 DFAIT employees are in Kabul, five are posted at the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team, and five more are stationed at the Kandahar Air Field.

- The Canadian Embassy in Kabul

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potentially being affected by IEDs or suicide bombers."

Due to these threats, she says, Canadian diplomats must wear ballistic body armour and a helmet and travel in armoured personnel carriers alongside soldiers.

Canadian diplomats have been targeted by Taliban attacks in the past. In January 2006, Glyn Berry, political director of Canada's Kandahar-based Provincial Reconstruction Team, was killed by a suicide car-bomb attack that also left three soldiers wounded.

The death of the respected 59-year-old diplomat shook the DFAIT community.

With such real threats, few chances are taken.

Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan Arif Lalani says that sometimes diplomats will go for up to three months without a break. The delays he says, are due to visits, events or in response to developing issues. In case of such delays, diplomats get extended leave when they manage to leave the theatre.

Despite the occasional delays, Mr. Lalani says, his staff takes advantage of the much-needed breaks.

"People look forward and they need it," he says. "We want to make sure they get their break. To get out of Afghanistan and take both mental and physical downtime."

As for Mr. Lalani, he says he usually takes his breaks in London. He adds with a laugh that even during time off, he keeps his head in the game.

"I kind of combine work with my R&R," he says. "My idea of some time on R&R is to have some meetings with the high commission and British officials."

Ms. Golberg says an *esprit de corps* has developed among civilians serving in Kandahar that helps keep morale high.

To help blow off steam, Ms. Golberg says she makes sure her staff have time to work out at the gym. The occasional movie night, she adds, also helps give diplomats some down time with their comrades.

Ms. Golberg says that counselling is available to employees who may need it, before after

ranks within the top five missions abroad in numbers of civilian staff

—compiled by Jeff Davis

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and during deployment. Senior officials also told *Embassy* there are priests around who provide counselling, advice and a receptive ear.

"There's counselling available for employees that might need it," Ms. Golberg says. "We're making sure we can deal with all the small things that can become bigger things and make this as supportive an environment as it can be given the circumstances in which they are living."

Senior DFAIT officials, who requested they not be named, say there have not been, to their knowledge, any cases of post-traumatic stress disorder or other serious stress injuries found among returning diplomats.

All DFAIT personnel serving in Afghanistan are volunteers, one official says, something that demonstrates the keen interest of Canadian diplomats.

The officials says that for the first round of postings in Afghanistan, an average of more than 20 volunteered for each position. The interest, she adds, continues once people are on the ground.

"A lot of people are interested and keen," she says. "People who are there just rave about it.

"It's a stressful, difficult environment," she adds. "But you've got really committed people who've gone over. They love their work and they work like stink when they're there."

Mr. Lalani says his staff often request longer deployments, once they get a taste of life in Afghanistan.

"This year, over half of my staff actually wanted to extend. So that in itself is a change and I think a positive sign," he says. "I think they want to extend, one, because they're seeing results from the work. Two, I think they're also seeing that this is a national priority...and they want to be part of it."

When diplomats return, the official says, DFAIT puts them to work speaking to the public about their work in the war-torn country.

"They do outreach on Afghanistan, so they can talk to people about civilian parts of the mission," she says. "They're proud of their work and we need to give them a venue to talk about it."

## **Soldiers Get Similar Deal**

Before and after their deployments, Canadian soldiers are given time off to reunite with their families.

Once deployed, soldiers are entitled to the standard three days per month time off. This totals 18 days leave during a standard six-month rotation.

Most soldiers choose to return to Canada during their down time, and the Department of National Defence foots the bill.

Soldiers with wanderlust, officials at DND say, use their down time to travel to destinations in Asia, Australia or Europe. For these trips, a soldier receives \$2,646 that can be spent on travel tickets for the soldier and one friend or family member.

Unlike Canadian civilian government workers, soldiers must pay for their own hotel and food bills while vacationing.

## **NGO Staff Rough It**

Without military escorts and heavily protected compounds, staff from international NGOs experience a much different Afghanistan than their government counterparts.

And while living perhaps more dangerously, these workers surprisingly seem to enjoy a certain peace of mind. This, it would seem, is rooted in a greater sense of freedom than those cloistered inside-the-wire.

"[Canadian government workers] live under what for me would be very strict security restrictions even inside Kabul and certainly in Kandahar," Norine MacDonald, president of the Senlis Council, who lives in Kandahar, wrote in an email last month.

"They spend their time in the embassy, in their residence. Then when they can go out, it's with security details.

"My life in Kabul is more like a real life," she adds. "I often drive myself, go out at night, have my own house that I live in with dogs, rabbits, a garden, a Russian jeep."

With a surprisingly homey environment, Ms. MacDonald says she rarely leaves.

"I don't actually take vacations," she says. "I don't think to myself that I live in a war zone really, the south is my home and I love being there.... I feel it is a privilege to be able to work there and be accepted in that community."

But she doesn't begrudge the fancier set-up of her government counterparts.

"I have a lot of time for anyone who comes to Afghanistan for work.... It is a human to human thing, so it would feel hard for me to criticize their vacations."

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