

Growing violence in Kandahar 'insignificant,' top soldier says

GRAEME SMITH
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
JULY 13, 2008 AT 4:49 PM EDT

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — Canada's top soldier has dismissed the growing violence in Kandahar as “insignificant,” contradicting all public data and highlighting the growing gap between Canada's upbeat view of the war and the sober analysis from other NATO countries.

General Walter Natynczyk, Chief of the Defence Staff, has frequently claimed troops are making progress, but during a visit to Afghanistan this weekend he offered his first specific comments on the number of Taliban attacks.

“In Kandahar province we're generally along the same lines as we have been the past few years,” General Natynczyk said. “Looking at the statistics, we're just a slight notch, indeed an insignificant notch, above where we were last year.”

Pressed by journalists to back up his claim, Gen. Natynczyk turned to his commander of all overseas forces, Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, who gave a figure that initially appeared to support the general's assessment. A comparison of figures from June, 2007, and June, 2008, shows violence was similar during the two months, he said.



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Gen Walter Natynczyk (second from left), Canada's new Chief of the Defence Staff, addresses soldiers at a forward operating base during his first visit with Canadian troops in Kandahar Province in Afghanistan, July 9, 2008. (*Stevo J McNeil/The Canadian Press*)

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“They're within 3 or 4 per cent of each other, so certainly not a marked increase in any way shape or form,” Lt-Gen. Gauthier said.

The lieutenant-general later corrected himself, saying the comparison was, in fact, limited to the first days of July. He provided no other data. Neither of the two senior Canadian officers explained why they based their assessments on a span of days, instead of following the practice of most security analysts who examine months and years.

Gen. Natynczyk's claim that violence has not significantly increased in Kandahar does not fit any of the published statistics, all of which

snow major increases in Taliban attacks since 2005.

The most recent numbers were compiled by Sami Kovanen, a respected security consultant at Vigilant Strategic Services Afghanistan. Mr. Kovanen has been counting all security incidents in the country since the beginning of last year, and while his figures occasionally differ from similar counts by the United Nations and the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, Western security officials say the trends revealed by Mr. Kovanen's work are closely mirrored by the other assessments.

No matter how the numbers are broken down – for the past month, for the past two months or for the year thus far – the VSSA statistics show insurgent attacks have dramatically increased in 2008 compared with 2007.

A comparison of the past two months against the same period in the previous year shows that insurgent attacks have more than doubled in the current fighting season, from 134 in 2007 to 289 in 2008.

For the year to date, VSSA counted 532 insurgent attacks as of July 6, up 77 per cent from 300 last year.

Canadian military officials have argued that the shifting nature of the Taliban's attacks shows that the insurgents are growing weaker, because they are increasingly relying on bombs, or improvised explosive devices, instead of confronting their enemy in direct combat.

In fact, the statistics for Kandahar don't show a clear trend toward bombs as the weapon of choice for the insurgents. While IEDs were the most common type of attack last year, the number of successful IED strikes was slightly smaller this year than the number of so-called complex attacks – ambushes using more than one type of weapon. Such multi-layered attacks have increased this year by 116 per cent, to 123, according to the VSSA numbers.

When asked why he refuses to acknowledge that the security situation has grown worse, Gen. Natynczyk responded that Canada's control of the Afghan countryside has expanded.

However, over the past two years, Canada's regular forces have abandoned positions such as Forward Operating Base Martello, about 100 kilometres north of Kandahar city, and the Gumbad Platoon House, about 80 kilometres north of Kandahar city, in favour of concentrating troops in the core districts.

Gen. Natynczyk also emphasized subjective signs of stability, saying Kandaharis appear to be conducting their usual business after the Taliban raided the city jail and freed almost all the prisoners last month.

“Kandaharans have returned to their normal pattern of life,” he said.

Lt-Gen. Gauthier added: “We drove through Kandahar city today. In fact we drove through Kandahar city, I think, more than once in the last few days, and it doesn't look like a city that's in shock.”

The Chief of the Defence Staff nodded. “It's bustling,” he said.

In Kandahar city Sunday, a roomful of Afghan businessmen laughed raucously when informed that the Canadian military believes the city has returned to normal.

“Just last night we were sitting outside and a convoy passed by with the soldiers shooting in the air, like cowboys,” said Mohammed Naseem, 34, who owns a coffee shop, an advertising company and the region's largest newspaper. “If things are okay here, why are the soldiers scared?”

People who can afford to leave have evacuated, Mr. Naseem said. He himself has relocated his family to Dubai, and he says he only feels free to speak critically about what's happening in Kandahar because they are safely out of the country.

“There is panic now in Kandahar,” he said. “Everybody is wondering what will happen next.”

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