

THE CANADIAN PRESS



Canadian Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier talks to reporters at Kandahar Air Field in Afghanistan, Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2008. Gauthier, the head of all Canadian soldiers deployed overseas, is warning of an escalation in violence in the upcoming year. He said with the influx of new troops arriving next year there will be an increase in violence as the Taliban will retaliate. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Bill Graveland



Head of CEFCOM predicting escalation in Afghan violence in 2009

8 hours ago

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — "There will be violence."

That, in a nutshell, was the blunt assessment Tuesday of what Canadian troops both in Afghanistan and at home can expect in 2009 as Canada's seven-year-old Afghan mission enters another uncertain new year.

The warning came from Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, the head of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, or CEFCOM, after several days of meetings with military and political leaders in Afghanistan.

With an expected influx of U.S. troops, the year ahead promises to be a rough one, Gauthier - the commanding officer for all Canadian soldiers deployed overseas - acknowledged in a frank discussion with reporters at Kandahar Airfield.

However, with the expected surge in troops and an anticipated uptick in violence will also come clear signs that the situation in Afghanistan is getting better, he predicted.

"There is a sense that the tide that seemed to have turned in a negative sense in the last year is reversible and will be reversed in the years ahead," said Gauthier.

"The sky is not falling. We are making a difference."

As many as 20,000 additional U.S. troops are expected to bolster the American ranks by this coming spring - something that's bound to result in an increase in clashes with the Taliban, he noted.

"I think in the early going, with the large influx of U.S. troops, there will be more violence, just as there was more violence this year compared to last year because we have twice the number of combat troops," Gauthier said.

"I fully expect the insurgents will come out in force in 2009 and we will come out in force in 2009 and there will be violence and there will be a higher level of violence than there was in 2008."

Gauthier said he doesn't expect anything to be resolved in the early going, but predicted better security as more Afghan National Army soldiers join the field and NATO's training mechanisms churn out additional Afghan Uniformed Police officers.

That will give the coalition "traction" in terms of security personnel at the same time as the full impact of the U.S. troop surge is felt, he added.

The Taliban has scored two very direct hits against Canadian troops during the past 10 days.

Cpl. Thomas James Hamilton, Pte. John Michael Roy Curwin and Pte. Justin Peter Jones, all members of the Royal Canadian Regiment based in Gaagetown, N.B., died Saturday when their armoured vehicle hit an improvised explosive device.

Eight days earlier, on Dec. 5, the deaths of Warrant Officer Robert Wilson, Cpl. Mark McLaren and Pte. Demetrios Diplaros lifted to 100 the total number of Canadian soldiers killed as part of the Afghan mission since it began in 2002.

Seventeen Canadians have died as a result of improvised explosive device and roadside bomb attacks this year alone, including incidents involving drainage culverts packed with explosives.

In the immediate vicinity of the last two deadly attacks, two Taliban fighters were spotted Tuesday and killed in an airstrike, Gauthier said.

"Those insurgents are no longer walking this earth, I'm very happy to say, in the very area where we've had culverts attacked."

Gauthier said the Canadian losses are tragic, but described as limited the degree of success the Taliban has enjoyed of late.

"They did get a couple of what I would (call) lucky attacks on us. We've learned from that and will march forward," he said.

"I can't forecast if we will have greater casualties or less casualties. Obviously my hope is we'll have a lot less."

Gauthier said another major goal for Canadian soldiers in 2009 will be to maintain security while Afghanistan goes through its national elections.

"Clearly the insurgents will be intent on demonstrating that we aren't able to secure that stable environment and we won't be able to create it everywhere," he admitted.