

Canadian commander sees Afghan conflict peaking in 2009

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — After years of bloody escalations in the Afghan war, the violence will finally start to subside in 2010, according to an unusually bold prediction by a top Canadian commander.

Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, responsible for all overseas forces and widely viewed as the most experienced military official on Afghan issues, said he believes an influx of U.S. troops next year will bring a new surge in the violence.

But 2009 will mark an historic peak in the conflict, the commander said, and the level of bloodshed will start to decrease the following year as Afghanistan's government and security forces become strong enough to handle the situation.

“There will be decreased violence in 2010, and increased capacity naturally, especially where we're focused,” he said, referring to Canada's zone of operations in Kandahar.

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Many analysts have predicted the Afghan war will grow next year, as thousands of U.S. forces are expected to challenge the Taliban's increasing hold on the country. Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette, NATO's chief spokesman, said recently that he expects greater conflict in 2009.

But the comments from Lieut.-Gen. Gauthier mark the first declaration of Canada's expectations of the results that will be achieved in the next season of fighting. It's a public expression of what other military officials have been saying in private, a “no pain, no gain” philosophy that describes a bigger war as necessary in the short term to achieve progress in the medium term.

“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,” Lieut.-Gen. 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 in 2009 than there was in 2008.”

He continued: “But gradually, over time, as we build capacity along with that violence, those violence levels will diminish. I wouldn't actually see a decrease in violence until perhaps the following year when we begin to gain traction with some of the capacity-building aspects of this.”

Another reason for optimism is that the coming surge of U.S. forces will bring a NATO presence to the outlying rural areas where Canadian troops lack the numbers to maintain any significant strength, the commander said, predicting “a very serious impact in many areas where we have not been able to be, with American forces.”

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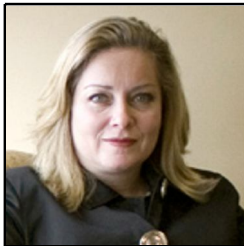
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