

Kandahar dam contract comes with security clause

Company that takes on high-risk project will have to hire its own guards, Ottawa says

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OTTAWA, KANDAHAR — It will be Canada's centrepiece development project in Afghanistan - and a target for Taliban attacks - but Ottawa says whoever gets the contract to rebuild the Dahla dam will be required to hire private security to guard the project and people working there.

That's the stipulation in a request for proposals that the Canadian government released yesterday on the contract to rebuild the dam, located in the heart of Afghanistan's Kandahar province. "The consultant is responsible to provide primary security for the project sites," the bid documents say.

Canadian, NATO or Afghan forces will provide "in extremis" military support - in emergencies, essentially - but soldiers will be working out of a forward operating base 4½ kilometres away, the documents say.

"Close support is the responsibility of the consultant, and the [Afghan] police may be the appropriate responder in many cases," Ottawa's request for proposals says.



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The Dhala Dam in Kandahar, Afghanistan (*Michel Huneault/CIDA*)

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Ottawa has declared the irrigation dam, which is projected to cost Canada \$50-million to rebuild over three years, one of three signature projects it will complete before a planned troop withdrawal in 2011. It is expected to be a magnet for Taliban attacks. Its location is marked on United Nations security maps as standing near a boundary between "high risk" and "extreme risk" areas for humanitarian work.

With only "in extremis" support from the military, the dam contractor will likely need to hire large numbers of armed guards for protection.

The risks involved in dam-building have already delayed efforts to upgrade the Kajaki dam in nearby Helmand province, where workers have been trying to refurbish electricity generators since 2004 and have come under attack from the Taliban.

Stephen Wallace, vice-president of the Canadian International Development Agency's Afghanistan Task Force, played down the significance of asking the contractor to provide primary security protection. Mr. Wallace said the main reason for hiring private security would be protecting "project personnel" and safeguarding the building materials from theft.

He cautioned against overemphasizing the role of private security but he could not say whether soldiers would be stationed at the project site, saying details will be sorted out after the contract is awarded.

"I don't think you should assume anything with respect to what emergency military support might entail; that is an operational decision."

Mr. Wallace said soldiers from the Canadian Forces, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Afghan National Army will be patrolling the region and helping to provide a secure environment in which development can take place. "They'll be providing support for the whole of the valley."

In the recent past, private security hires have often been drawn from Afghan militias, sometimes poorly regulated mobs of hired guns, and sometimes well-disciplined contractors trained by Western security experts.

Canada has invested millions of dollars in programs to disarm and disband the militias that roam Afghanistan's countryside. But most illegal armed groups had only a small fraction of their arsenals confiscated, according to a recent study by Antonio Giustozzi, a researcher at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He cites the example of a militia commander in Uruzgan province named Matiullah, who handed in 264 weapons as part of the disbandment program but then continued to operate his band of armed men.

The Matiullah militia is believed to have renamed itself the KAU and now plays an important role enforcing security on the highway between Kandahar city and Tirin Kot, the capital of Uruzgan. The KAU's pickup trucks full of armed men frequently patrol the road that passes near the planned dam project and a Canadian military base that overlooks the highway.

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