

Welland Tribune (On)

Canadians set example for other troops: Kandahar elders

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Illustrations: Canadian Capt. Kent MacRae leads a sheep purchased among other items of compensation for a Kandahar family whose son was killed by coalition troops, down an Afghan street. Canadians said it was the right thing to do to pay their respects to the family, despite not directly being involved in the man's death.

Chaos created by international troops roaring through Kandahar City on military convoys needs to be reigned in, Afghan elders said Tuesday - and they're counting on Canada's military leadership to do the job.

The elders applauded Canadian efforts to make connections with civilians on the ground, such as a simple yet profound gesture to honour the families of two Afghans killed by coalition troops.

Canadian troops weren't involved in the men's deaths earlier this month. But a presentation made by Canadian soldiers to compensate their families won the respect of several local elders who say Canada should teach other international forces to respect Afghan customs.

"We know that when a suicide bomb hits a Canadian convoy, the Canadians aren't going to start shooting at everyone on the streets," said Kandahar's provincial governor Asadullah Khalid.

"But we must be able to say that of other forces as well."

City elders, along with provincial and national politicians, met Tuesday with Brig.-Gen. Tim Grant, the commander of Canada's current mission in Afghanistan, to discuss ways to mitigate the impact of military convoys on the residents of Kandahar City.

Soldiers are visibly tense when riding through the city, the only route available to reach several of the main highways in the region. Cluttered with traffic, the routes present all manner of potential threats.

The sudden sight of massive military vehicles bearing down on Kandahar's rough-hewn streets sends a jumble of jingle-trucks, donkey-driven carriages and taxicabs down side alleys and into gutters. Still, despite bright-red signs warning locals to stay back, occasionally some do stray into the path of the armoured convoys.

Convoys have been breached by suicide bombers, such as one who struck a Canadian convoy over the weekend outside the city. Four Canadians were injured in the blast.

But sometimes civilians can get caught in the convoy conga lines.

Elders said that's what happened to the two men who were shot dead by coalition troops on July 2.

The official International Security Assistance Force report on the incident says a motorcyclist approached a convoy in a threatening manner and was shot in the ankle.

Locals say the two men were killed in ensuing fire.

The incident is under investigation by British forces, Grant told elders Tuesday, but a spokesman for Regional Command South, the governing body for international efforts in the southern part of Afghanistan, said he was unaware of two civilians being killed that day.

Grant said he had spoken to the commander of the British forces who was both angry and sad about what happened.

"He told me he is being very aggressive with his troops and the soldiers are heartbroken," Grant told the gathering.

As a gesture of respect, Grant decided to present the two families with several items customarily given to those who have had a family member killed.

He said the fact that the incident happened in Canada's area of control meant it was the right thing to do. The military spent about C\$700 on the items, which included bags of rice, tea, sugar and two sheep.

"They were pleased we were making the effort, but still angry because the circumstances were preventable," said Capt. Kent MacRae, an operations officer for the Civil-Military Co-operation Team, who presented the items to the families.

"We are not upset that people help us," said Zaland, an engineer and local elder who goes by his first name.

"But we are upset that people hurt our honour and our culture. We don't want history to get repeated."

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