

General predicts fewer battles with Taliban

Efforts to focus on construction projects, police protection, top Canadian officer in Kandahar says

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- Over the next year, soldiers will build bridges, get roads paved and better protect Afghan police, according to Canada's top general in Afghanistan. He also expects there will be fewer full-scale battles with the Taliban.

Canadian Forces Brigadier-General Guy Laroche told reporters in a briefing yesterday that he sees reasons for optimism after serving in southern Afghanistan's Kandahar province during the past six months. "I've seen progress," he said. The next job, he added, is "to increase the security bubble, if you will."

The inroads made by Canadian Forces, he said, have helped force the Taliban underground. The good news is that insurgents have broken into smaller groups; the bad news is that they are now increasingly seeking to hit non-military targets.

That means the next challenge for the army, Gen. Laroche said, will be to expand outward from military outposts and work to deprive insurgents of any potential targets.

In a separate assessment, the U.S. general in charge of NATO's Afghanistan mission said yesterday that he expects another year of "explosive growth" in the country's poppy fields, a harvest the insurgents will turn into weapons for use against Afghan and NATO troops, the Associated Press reported.

General Dan McNeill said NATO commanders in Europe have told him to step up the counternarcotics fight this year, "and I will."

The past calendar year has been described as the West's worst year in Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion, considering the growing levels of overall violence. More than 900 Afghan National Police have been killed since March, according to some estimates.

But there are some grounds for optimism for Canadian Forces controlling Kandahar. The Vandoos regiment that Gen. Laroche leads has suffered relatively few fatalities to date. Seven soldiers have been killed in action since the Vandoos took over most jobs in August, compared with 23 Canadians killed earlier in 2007.

"Seven is way too many," said Gen. Laroche, who is to return with his troops to Canada by March. But he explained that more is being done to protect soldiers.

First, he said, the arrival of the Vandoos coincided with new armoured vehicles specially designed to protect against roadside bombs.

Second, more Afghan National Army soldiers are in the field, leading operations ahead of Canadian Forces members who continue to mentor them.

Third, stepping up foot patrols and redirecting more troops into the villages is helping the Canadians hold ground, meaning the army is less frequently forced to fight to recapture the same patches of land.

Still, there have been many sobering developments in Afghanistan, including the frequent slayings of police officers. Sixteen were killed last week in area outside of Kandahar where there is no set military presence.

The Taliban have made a conscious choice to go after the weakest security links, Gen. Laroche said. He added that Canadian Forces have built a series of police substations with an embedded military presence to stop that. "Now, because we're with them at the police substations, it's seldom we are attacked," he said.

He regards expanding infrastructure as key. Under Canadian Forces funds earmarked for force protection, a causeway between the Zhari and Panjwai districts is being completed and a plan to pave up to 10 kilometres of roads is about to launch.

Not all assessments of outgoing officials are as rosy. For example, Daan Everts, NATO's top diplomat in Afghanistan, recently told the Al-Jazeera network that a host of mistakes have been made.

One problem he highlighted is that NATO countries have been "basically partitioning Afghanistan into lots," making aid delivery fractured, uneven and inefficient.

"So you have a little German Afghanistan in the north, an Italian Afghanistan in the west, Dutch Afghanistan in Uruzgan," said Mr. Everts, "and a Canadian Afghanistan in Kandahar and so on."

He also said that some Westerners are reaping more out of aid delivery than Afghans are. "It has been a bonanza for consultants," said Mr. Everts. "...So there is this aid industry that descends on a poor nation and runs away with part of the loot, to put it bluntly and with some exaggeration."

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