

## AFGHANISTAN

## It's time to recalibrate Canada's mission

### Which rule of law do we want to restore?

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The Harper government has hunkered down on the issue of Afghanistan - committed to keeping Canadian troops on the front line there until at least 2011. The government has constructed its own sanitized version of events in the country while steadfastly ignoring reality. Tragically, Canadians continue to die in the conflict - 88 soldiers to date - earning us the dubious distinction of the highest per capita death toll of any NATO member in the war.

In January, in response to an access to information request for records from the Department of Foreign Affairs, I received documents that made clear what the Harper government wants Canadians to think about the mission in Afghanistan and exposed its strategy for managing the public relations campaign.

At what are called "message events" where journalists are updated on developments in Afghanistan, officials from Foreign Affairs, National Defence and the Canadian International Development Agency are to present the government line following "dry runs" to make sure the briefing motivates journalists to adopt what is called the "desired sound bite." The sound bite includes a reference to restoring "the rule of law" in Afghanistan as a primary Canadian objective.

The "key messages" the government wants conveyed include: We are making steady progress on the ground.

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Afghanistan is Canada's largest recipient of bilateral development assistance and we are among the top donors in the world with more than \$100-million in annual development assistance and a total pledge of \$1.2-billion until 2011.

In the aftermath of the deadly bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul earlier this month, as well as other developments, Canadians need a reality check to counter Ottawa's soothing message that steady progress is being made.

The Afghan government was quick to point the finger for the murderous assault on India's embassy at Pakistan's intelligence service. Their not very subtle message was sharply denied by members of the Pakistani government.

But the bombing calls our attention to Pakistan's duplicitous role in the conflict. Although Pakistan is depicted as an ally of NATO, Canadian soldiers in Kandahar are constantly being hit by new recruits or refitted Taliban units that can slip back and forth across the border. Although from time to time the Pakistani military undertakes missions against the Taliban, for the most part they leave the Taliban alone in the semi-autonomous regions next to Afghanistan. Moreover, both the Pakistani government and the Karzai government in Kabul have been negotiating with elements of the Taliban to reach their own peace deals.

The truth is, the regime we are supporting in Kabul is not committed to a version of the rule of law that is remotely compatible with our own. Even the post-Taliban constitution of Afghanistan is based on *sharia* law. Under the law, rejecting Islam is punishable by death. Add to that the practice, and the picture becomes much worse. The Kabul government is the author of repeated atrocities against prisoners who fall into its hands. It is riddled with corruption, and its officials have been repeatedly linked by reputable observers to the country's poppy trade, the source of more than 90 per cent of the world's heroin. Last month the Times of London referred to the repeated accusations that President Hamid Karzai's half-brother Ahmad Wali Karzai, who is the head of the provincial council in Kandahar province, is involved in the narcotics business. While the brothers Karzai deny the allegations, they are constantly reiterated in Kandahar, and have even been the subject of humour on Afghan private television.

While Ottawa stresses the amount of aid Canada is providing to Afghanistan, the ratio of dollars spent on the military mission compared with aid is roughly 10 to one. If Canada truly wanted to help educate girls, as Ottawa says it does, there are more direct ways to do this in many parts of the world than by waging war against an insurgency. And the government's constant reiteration of the fact that we are members of a broad coalition in Afghanistan cannot conceal the fact that, as of this week, 83 per cent of the allied casualties have been suffered by the armed forces of only three countries: the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada.

Contrary to the Harper government's claim that the war in Afghanistan is going well, there have been repeated and authoritative assessments that reveal that the opposite is true. In February, the United States' National Intelligence Director, Vice-Admiral Mike McConnell, told a congressional committee that the situation facing the U.S. and its allies was "deteriorating." His assessment was that 60 per cent of Afghanistan was controlled by local warlords and that Taliban insurgents controlled about 10 per cent of the country.

While Senators Barack Obama and John McCain, in their race for the White House, have been stressing the need for a greater emphasis on America's so-called forgotten war in Afghanistan, there is every reason to believe that the fatigue of the American public with Iraq would quickly spread to Afghanistan if the U.S. military deployment was sharply increased there.

Although the Harper government has not yet levelled with Canadians on the situation in Afghanistan, Canada's Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walter Natynczyk, did acknowledge this past weekend that Taliban attacks are increasing and that more troops are needed to counter the insurgency.

When a settlement does come in Afghanistan, and one is certainly possible between the Karzai government and elements of the Taliban, it will not create a country that is firmly on the road to democracy and a regime based on the rule of law and respect for the rights of women as the Harper government would have us believe.

Hasn't the time come for us to end the bleeding of our soldiers in a conflict in which our vital interests are not at stake and the side on which we are fighting upholds values that are remote from our own?

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