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Search is on for New Civilian Envoy to Kandahar

Experts and MPs praise Michel de Salaberry's work in Afghanistan, though their words for the mission overall aren't so nice.

By Lee Berthiaume

The government is searching for someone to take over as the top civilian co-ordinator in southern Afghanistan after Michel de Salaberry ended his six-month term in November.

Critics, however, said the Canadian mission in Afghanistan remains military heavy, despite Mr. de Salaberry's presence, and reiterated the need for more diplomats in the country.

When the respected former Canadian ambassador, who served as head of mission in Iran, Jordan and Egypt, was brought out of retirement last June, the government heralded his arrival as a major effort to bolster diplomatic aspects of Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

It was felt having a senior Foreign Affairs official on the ground would help with decision-making and foster better interaction between Canadian and Afghan authorities, as well as the military and non-military elements of Canada's mission in the south.

It didn't hurt that Mr. de Salaberry was from Quebec and being deployed when Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment was being rotated into Afghanistan that summer. Opposition to the mission has been strongest in that province.

During his term, Mr. de Salaberry's title was changed from "senior civilian co-ordinator" to "representative of Canada in Kandahar," Department of Foreign Affairs Afghan Task Force spokeswoman Lisa Monette said in an email.

"As the ambassador's [Arif Lalani] personal representative in Kandahar, Mr. de Salaberry co-ordinated all our civilian activities in the south, both at the Provincial Reconstruction Team and at Kandahar Airfield."

Ms. Monette said the envoy's term was always slated to expire after six months, and that the government is "currently reviewing applications from candidates for the position of representative of Canada in Kandahar."

"This position would be for one year, beginning as soon as the successor has been confirmed and can deploy."

Better co-ordination between Canadian departments and efforts in Afghanistan has been noted as key to the mission's success.

Envoy 'Constrained' by Military

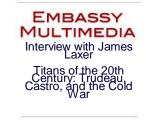
Mr. de Salaberry met civil society officials in Ottawa on Dec. 17 where he presented a mixed

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review of the situation in Afghanistan.

One NGO representative at the meeting who asked not to be identified said Mr. de Salaberry alternated between positive assessments and the feeling that significant challenges remain. One such problem was that the governor in Kandahar is deeply involved in illegal drug trafficking.

"I'm also convinced that he was clearly constrained," the representative said. "The military called the shots."

Bloc Québécois Defence critic Claude Bachand said six months after Mr. de Salaberry's position was created, Canada's mission remains skewed towards defence.

"Our mission is still not balanced," he said, noting while there are 2,500 Canadian soldiers on the ground, there are only a handful of Canadian diplomats and development officers in Afghanistan.

Mr. Bachand said there has been a reluctance to deploy foreign affairs personnel to Afghanistan following the death of Glyn Berry in a car bomb attack two years ago.

The military, Mr. Bachand said, has tried to fill the void by engaging local governors and other Afghan officials.

"They can do it, but it's not like professionals who can do it," Mr. Bachand said. "The emphasis is not on reconstruction and diplomacy, but it's on defence. Unless they bring more people to serve on the ground, it's going on the wrong track."

Liberal CIDA critic Keith Martin praised Mr. de Salaberry and believed the short term he served was likely not an obstacle to his work.

However, he criticized the government's handling of the mission, including failure to deploy more diplomatic and development resources.

"The government has a lot to answer for in terms of aid effectiveness and in particular dealing with the diplomatic initiatives that must occur in order for success to be achieved in the country," Mr. Martin said.

He also said success or failure of reconstruction and diplomatic efforts in Kandahar during his tenure does not rest with Mr. de Salaberry.

"Ambassador de Salaberry is an employee of the Department of Foreign Affairs," Mr. Martin said. "So this cannot rest on his shoulders. It's up to the government to tell the public what they have accomplished in Afghanistan. It's not up to Mr. de Salaberry. And it's not about what he does, not about what one person does."

Successor Has Big Shoes to Fill

Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada praised the work Mr. de Salaberry had done, as well as the government's decision to appoint him to the position.

"From all accounts, Mr. de Salaberry was able during a six-month period to not only provide continuity for the important work that is being done in Kandahar, but also new vigour and new thinking," Omar Samad said last week.

The Canadian envoy was able to expand the number of projects implemented in Kandahar in a large number of sectors, Mr. Samad added, and whoever succeeds him will be "filling some big shoes."

"It's not only a question of experience and long-term diplomatic skills, but it's also a question of being able to see reality as it is and to think sometimes outside of the box, which Mr. de Salaberry seems to have performed very well."

Alain Pellerin, executive director of the Conference of Defence Associations, said he was hard-pressed to identify major changes in Canada's mission over his short term.

"I know soldiers go there for six months, but there's different reasons," Mr. Pellerin said. "I think for somebody who's there in that key position, where it's important to get to know people and get to know the land...six months is not long enough. So if you want to send someone to make an impact, you have to send them for a year."

Still, the creation of Mr. de Salaberry's position was a smart move, and Mr. Pellerin felt it





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2 of 3 11-01-2008 07:24 would be imperative the next envoy in Kandahar be of equal stature. He wasn't confident such a successor could be easily found.

"The department is not used to going to these difficult positions, and not too many volunteers show up for these positions," he said. "What they need to do is get the department of Foreign Affairs more operational in the future, and the same with CIDA."

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