

AFGHANISTAN

PM too bullish on Afghan challenge, critics warn

Harper is out of step with Pentagon's bleaker assessment of the strength of Taliban insurgency, they say

STEVEN CHASE

JULY 10, 2008

OTTAWA -- Talk to the U.S. military's top brass and you'll hear how their highest ranking officer is "deeply troubled" about the challenge in Afghanistan as Taliban attacks intensify.

But talk to the Canadian government or military and instead you'll be told the recent "uptick" in Taliban attacks is simply what's expected during the busy spring-summer fighting season in Afghanistan.

Critics say the Harper government and Canada's top soldier are too rosy in their public assessments of the Afghan war, analysis that is out of step with far grimmer readings from the Pentagon.

"There is a clear disconnect between the Canadian view and the American view," said Liberal defence critic Bryon Wilfert, whose party backed a Conservative motion this spring to extend Canada's military foray in southern Afghanistan to 2011. "I think the Harper government is afraid that maybe people will ask, 'Is this winnable?'"

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The U.S. military has recently registered deep concern about the strength of the Taliban insurgency, but both Canadian Defence Minister Peter MacKay and Chief of the Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk have rejected the notion that the insurgents are making a serious comeback. They say the increased fighting is an anticipated part of the combat cycle.

Retired major-general Lewis MacKenzie said he is surprised Canada isn't acknowledging the extent of the Afghan insurgency problem and is instead sticking to the line that the rise in attacks is merely a seasonal phenomenon.

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"It's wearing a bit thin and I don't think a lot of us are buying into it as the explanation," Mr. MacKenzie said. "It's part of the explanation ... but I don't think presently it's the majority of the explanation."

He believes inadequate military troop contributions from some NATO allies have given the Taliban breathing room to regroup and gain strength, and now the insurgents are "taking advantage of it."

So far, the late spring and early summer have been tough going for NATO forces. June was the deadliest month for foreign troops in Afghanistan since the 2001 fall of the Taliban and the second in a row in which casualties among Western countries exceeded those in Iraq. The number of Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan has reached 87.

Plus, a mid-June jail break by insurgents in Kandahar, Canada's area of responsibility, freed 800 prisoners, including 400 Taliban sympathizers.

A recent Pentagon report on Afghanistan warned that militant forces had "coalesced into a resilient insurgency" and, last week, U.S. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that he's "deeply troubled" by the military challenge in the war-torn nation.

"The Taliban and their supporters have, without question, grown more effective and more aggressive in recent weeks."

But Canada's Gen. Natynczyk rejects the idea that the Taliban are gaining strength.

"There's highs and lows and we're in that period of campaign season where we knew there was going to be additional activity," he said on July 5.

Dan Dugas, director of communications for Mr. MacKay, declined to comment on U.S. assessments of Afghanistan.

Mr. Dugas said his boss and Gen. Natynczyk agree there has been an "uptick in insurgency attacks."

But Mr. MacKay, speaking via Mr. Dugas, said the U.S. experience throughout Afghanistan is different from the Canadian experience in Kandahar province. The United States, he noted, is taking on a bigger fight now against insurgents in east Helmand province.

While U.S. casualties in Afghanistan have been heavy this year, Canada's count so far in 2008 is below the same period in 2007, one Defence official noted.

Queen's University professor Douglas Bland said he believes the Americans are sending a message to NATO allies, warning them to contribute more.

"They're talking to the Germans and the French ... saying, 'Get your ass over here, this thing could fail.' "