

U.S. marine leader worries Afghanistan will become a 'forgotten war'

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
JUNE 1, 2008 AT 5:28 PM EDT

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — The highest-ranking U.S. Marine in Afghanistan is worried he's losing the battle when it comes to getting Americans interested in the war.

"I get concerned some days that, as Americans, we are a military at war, not a nation at war," Colonel Pete Petronzio told Canadian reporters Sunday during a frank and wide-ranging interview at Kandahar Air Field.

"Afghanistan is not a story that's being told as much as it should be," added the 47-year-old marine colonel, who leads the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit. Already dubbed the "forgotten war" by many Americans, the conflict has long been overshadowed by the U.S. military's on-going and much bloodier battle in Iraq.

The commanding officer said that it doesn't help that U.S. residents are currently more captivated by stories about the presidential campaign and rising gas prices.

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Col. Petronzio said that over the weekend, marines were engaged in the heaviest fighting since they arrived in Afghanistan in March. About 2,400 troops are currently in Afghanistan, with the majority stationed in Helmand province, an area along the Pakistani border that remains held by Taliban militants. The province, located in southern Afghanistan, neighbours Kandahar province, where Canadian soldiers are deployed.

Col. Petronzio hopes the marines' efforts have reduced insurgent activity in Kandahar this spring.

"A bunch of Taliban guys used to live where we are right now and they don't live there any more. And as far as we are concerned, they aren't coming back. It's a small gain, but it's a gain," said the colonel, who sports a trademark marine crew-cut. The British military is also stationed in Helmand.

Earlier this year, Canada, which has roughly 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, asked countries belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which oversees the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, to add more troops as a condition to extending its own mission to 2011.

Col. Petronzio rebuffed a reporter's suggestion that the marines had entered Afghanistan to rescue Canada and other NATO nations' efforts in the war-ravaged Muslim nation.

"Absolutely not, have we come to somebody's rescue," he said. "We're a bunch of guys that came here to do a job. And as professionals in the profession of arms we are no different than the Canadians, than the Brits, than the Dutch."

He said that during the Marines first main outing earlier this spring, the Canadians actually came to their rescue by providing assistance after a large convoy hit an improvised explosive device near a Canadian forward operating base in the turbulent Zhari district. Two marines died and two others were seriously wounded in the April 15 attack.

Col. Petronzio said that when it comes to the counterinsurgency, the marines face the same challenges, such as improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers, as Canadians and other NATO countries. He said storied military unit is "attempting to put a stopper in the

bottle as far south as we can.”

He said the overarching strategy is to “clear, hold and build” the area where the marines are deployed, but added his soldiers “may not be uniquely suited to the final “build” phase.

“So there will probably have to be someone who does that for a living, you know, to kind of come in behind us,” he explained.

The marines' tour is scheduled for seven months.

Col. Petronzio wouldn't speculate on whether it would be extended, although he added much more work still needs to be done in the province.

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