

## THE AFGHAN MISSION

# Taliban gearing up for spring offensive

## Canadian injured after contingent drawn into a trap that required substantial planning

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MAY 19, 2008

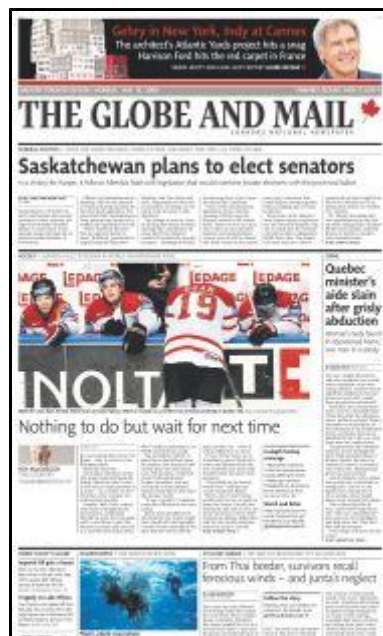
ZHARI DISTRICT, AFGHANISTAN -- Sapper Marc Carignan had just walked inside the compound, when a large explosion erupted near the main door, spraying jagged metal shrapnel several hundred metres and leaving a crater the size of a small car.

Several Canadian and Afghan soldiers were already inside the large mud building, which locals had told them was a possible Taliban hideout. Less than 10 minutes later, another explosion occurred, this time inside the compound, and filled the blue sky again with billowing black smoke.

"That place was a mousetrap," Sapper Carignan, a 23-year-old Edmonton-based combat engineer, said shortly after all the soldiers climbed a wall to escape the attack on Saturday morning. His face and uniform were covered in mud and dust.

Sapper Carignan was the only person injured; he temporarily lost hearing in his right ear.

**Print Edition - Section Front**





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It was the second close call for the Canadian military in recent days, and another sign that Taliban insurgents are readying for an expected spring offensive using every weapon they can get their hands on.

Unlike roadside bombs, which have been one of the most popular tools used by the Taliban, Saturday's attack required substantial planning and effort. The majority of the 83 Canadian soldiers who have died in Afghanistan since 2002 were killed in roadside bomb attacks.

"I haven't seen anything like that before," the warrant officer in charge of Saturday's operation said.

The veteran Shiloh, Man.-based soldier, who was also inside the compound when the blasts occurred, didn't want his name used for fear news of the incident would upset his family.

After the attack, soldiers searched the abandoned compound on the north bank of the Arghandab River southwest of Kandahar and found dozens of improvised explosive devices, including mortars, which failed to detonate. Those explosives, which were wired together by a single strand of copper wire and activated by command detonation, were sequenced to blow up so the soldiers would be trapped inside and killed. They didn't detonate because of faulty wiring.

"That place was rigged to kill everybody," said Warrant Officer Chuck Côté, who was also inside the compound when blasts occurred.

A wire was found leading 600 metres away from the compound, which was surrounded by poppy and grape fields, to a wall, where the person who detonated the explosives initiated the attack.

Four locals, including a teenage boy, were briefly held and questioned by Afghan soldiers, but were released on Saturday due to lack of evidence, even though one had traces of explosive residue on his hands.

An Afghan army sergeant, who participated in Saturday's operation, said there wasn't enough to arrest and detain anybody.

"Everybody in Afghanistan has an AK-47 in their home. Explosive materials are all around us," he said.

The operation had been patrolling areas in the Panjwai and Zhari districts before the attack occurred. The soldiers were on foot.

Security in the two districts is currently so poor, there are some military outposts that are being resupplied by helicopter drops instead of vehicle convoys. Even senior district leaders from the area don't live here because it's too dangerous, although they attend a weekly council meeting on Thursdays in Bazar-e-Panjwai, a small village about 40 kilometres from Kandahar.

Warrant Officer Devin Ramos, who is in charge of one of the small military outposts, said soldiers are "constantly" trying to win the support of locals.

"They want us down here," he said.

However, he added that many residents are afraid of the Taliban, and will sometimes stay silent about possible attacks or even assist them, for fear of reprisals against them or their families.