

Canada's Afghan contribution needs to be seen in proper context

By Bob Bergen

It is absolutely astounding the angles observers and critics of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan will focus upon, what they will ignore and the context they will use to present them.

First the good news: Foreign Minister Peter MacKay has demonstrated – and let's not be shy about saying it – extraordinary political leadership by wading into the quagmire of Afghanistan and Pakistan during his first trip overseas in 2007.

MacKay announced from Afghanistan where he was visiting Canadian troops and Afghan President Hamid Karzai that Canada will contribute \$10 million toward the salaries of Afghan police officers through the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan.

The enabling of officers' salaries to be paid to them by LOTFA directly through banks would not be remarkable to Canadians to whom direct bank deposits are routine and the announcement made few headlines.

Still, in a deeply-troubled state like Afghanistan, that was a crucial step toward building a paid professional police force and improving stability and security because it is widely acknowledged that the Afghan national police force is rife with corruption and incompetence.

The \$10 million builds upon \$7 million previously committed by the Canadian International Development Agency and comes at a time when Canada is poised to double its cadre of civilian RCMP police trainers in Afghanistan from five to 10 in March 2007.

Now the bad news: Largely ignored were announcements made at roughly the same time that Canada would be providing \$1.75 million to UNICEF for Afghan women's health and literacy and another \$11.5 million over two years for provincial reconstruction.

International Co-operation Minister Josée Vernier and Public Works and Government Services Minister Michael Fortier made the announcements in Montreal.

The \$11.5-million contribution to the Accelerated District Reconstruction program is part of a nearly \$1-billion 10-year Canadian commitment to stabilization, reconstruction, poverty reduction and improving Afghanistan's governance.

Unfortunately, the good news about Canada contributing to health and education programs, the building of roads, aqueducts, sanitation infrastructure, schools and clinics throughout Kandahar has been juxtaposed with reports based on excerpts from the Jan/Feb 2007 edition the America-centric journal *Foreign Affairs*.

The article "Saving Afghanistan" by Barnett Rubin, a long-time critic of the American military's conduct in Afghanistan, was seized upon as background context for an argument that Afghanistan is "sliding into chaos" and that a bad end looms over Canada's Afghan mission.

In fact, what U.S. scholar Rubin wrote about is what it would take to save Afghanistan and a key point he made was that the United States all but abandoned Afghanistan after it drove al-Qaeda and Taliban core leadership into Pakistan and failed to consolidate that tactical advance.

NATO countries, including Canada, have leapt in to the breach, but Rubin argued that if America is to succeed in its war on terrorism, it must refocus its attention on securing Afghanistan and stabilizing it through reconstruction.

Obviously Canada is not America and Canadians have different aims in Afghanistan, but that is precisely what the Canadian Forces are doing there.

Rather than the American aim of destroying poppy fields that supply U.S. drug users with 14 per cent of their opium, for example, the Canadian Forces are involved in not only defeating the Taliban and its al-Qaeda supporters in the interest of security, but in infrastructure reconstruction that will enable the growth of alternative crops such as grapes and their delivery to markets.

Canadians don't know much about that rebuilding because it is a journalism truism that "if it bleeds, it leads" and the deaths of 36 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat in Taliban attacks dominated last year's news rather than reconstruction efforts.

Rubin also wrote about Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's duplicitous support of the Taliban in the contested Afghanistan/Pakistan border area which allows insurgents to regroup, retain, re-arm and slip unchallenged back and forth between the two countries.

Musharraf claims to be the west's ally against the Taliban, but he is anything but that.

The fact MacKay was headed straight from Afghanistan to Islamabad for talks with Musharraf over the porous border that perpetuates the insurgency in Afghanistan is of vital importance.

In the end, the issues of Afghan security and stability are much bigger than American versus Canadian aims, they involve the success or failure of North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a collective security body.

NATO is admittedly faltering right now with a number of its member nations not willing to provide combat troops when and where they are needed in the most volatile Afghan regions – including Kandahar where Canada operates – and political leadership is required.

As MacKay's overseas trip amply demonstrates, the Canadian defence and development commitments in Afghanistan have given the foreign minister the credibility needed to take on a meaningful diplomatic leadership role on the international stage.

That lesson that the three are inter-related should be lost on no one.

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