

Vital New Parliament Internet Report Informs Canadians on Afghanistan Mission

Canadians have an unprecedented opportunity to understand the complex Canadian Forces mission in Afghanistan by reading a new parliamentary report that is available for free on the Internet.

The report *Canadian Forces in Afghanistan* prepared by the Standing Committee on National Defence was presented to the House of Commons on June 18.

Simply stated, the daily news reports on Canada's Afghanistan military mission are to the report what a snap shot is to an encyclopedia.

Those who are willing to invest the time to read the 160-page report will come away with a far deeper understanding of the history, the mandate, the missions, the command structure, the operations, the provincial reconstruction teams, the Afghan-Pakistan border problem, the narco-economy, the status of women, the detainee handling and transfer issue and Afghan national security forces than has been possible before by reading just one document.

Here is its bombshell: not one person the committee spoke to expects the military problem in Afghanistan to be resolved by February 2009, the expiry date of the parliament-mandated Canadian Forces mission.

As a result, the most politically-loaded recommendation the report makes is that a Parliamentary debate be held in 2008 on whether the mission should be extended past February 2009.

The report goes a long way to explain why Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared at a press conference last Friday – four days after the report was presented to the House of Commons – that he would seek an all-party consensus before extending the combat mission.

Were those code words for the end of the mission as some claim and as the New Democratic Party and others have called for?

Not necessarily. The report is critical of the government for setting a time-line for Canada's involvement in the first place.

It says in language most Canadians will understand: "Approving an operation for a specified period of time is like saying we will come home after one period of hockey, no matter what the score."

It goes on: "Parliament should debate strategy, not the timeline."

Further, one message rings out clearly: despite the gloomy news reports, Canadian diplomatic, development and military personnel are unanimous that they are clear on what they have to do, that good progress is being made and now is not the time to waiver.

What the committee feared most if the North Atlantic Treaty Organization coalition pulls out of Afghanistan before the Afghan national army and police are deemed capable of providing adequate security enabling democratic governance is a return to a feudal Taliban regime, a medieval standard of living and an absence of human dignity.

Make no mistake, the challenges facing NATO – set out in the report in great detail – are legion. Interestingly, the report notes that the Canadian military effort faces three general threats.

The first is the obvious threat to the troops from guerrilla tactics, suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices, ambushes and the like.

The second is the mix of corruption, the narco-economy and warlord influence outside Kabul.

The third threat is found at home: "...our own national impatience with the pace of progress in Afghanistan."

It argues Canadians – parliamentarians, the public, the news media – simply don't understand the mission's complexity, in part because the media's reporting on it has been unbalanced, focusing on combat operations and the repatriation of soldiers killed.

Importantly, the report is not simply the Conservative government's line on Afghanistan.

The MPs who sit on the committee come from all parties and included in the report is a supplementary report from the Liberal Party and dissenting reports from the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democratic Party.

The one issue that the Standing Committee didn't address was the bogymen of "operational security" which military commanders used to restrict some of its activities to some degree in

Afghanistan in the same way commanders restrict what the news can and can't report for operational security reasons.

Operational security restricts what Canadians can know about the war and is a subject fit for much greater public scrutiny.

Hopefully at some point in the future the committee, Canadian Forces commanders and news media executives will address this critical operational security issue.

In 1997, the Report of the Somalia Commission of Inquiry after the Somalia scandal called for greater oversight of the Canadian Forces by civilians elected to Parliament in accordance with legislated statutes.

Known as civil-military relations, scholars who study the field could not foresee or predict how civil-military relations would work during war.

Is this the last word on civil-military relations during war? Not by a long shot.

But, with this report, the Standing Committee on National Defence has gone some distance to provide such civilian oversight.

To their great credit, the parliamentarians have done their job. Now it is time for Canadians of all stripes who have opinions on the war – and more importantly those who don't – to read this vital report out of pure civic duty.

It can be found on the Canadian government website: www.parl.gc.ca by following the links to the list of reports by the House of Commons national defence committee.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or Donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org