



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

FAAE • NUMBER 024 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, October 25, 2006

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Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): Good afternoon.

This is the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, meeting number 24. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are meeting today to receive a briefing on the situation in Afghanistan.

I begin today by thanking our Minister of National Defence for making himself available to appear before our committee.

The foreign affairs and international development committee is focused on the study of democratic development and how we can better help those around the world enjoy the benefits of democracy that we enjoy in our nation. The nature of our committee is that when issues arise, including the Middle East this summer, the situation in Darfur and others, we try to deal with them as a committee. No other issue has had a higher profile on our radar screen than the efforts of our brave men and women in the Canadian armed forces in Afghanistan.

We have a special briefing on the situation in Afghanistan today. The Honourable Gordon O'Connor, Minister of National Defence, has made himself available to personally bring us up to date and to answer questions on Canada's contribution in Afghanistan.

Mr. Minister, we thank you for appearing.

Accompanying the minister today, we have the Acting Deputy Minister, Rodney Monette, and the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier.

We welcome you to our committee. We thank you for appearing.

As you know, the committee is set up so that you can make your opening remarks. We will go into the first round of questions immediately following that. The first round is a ten-minute round. We look forward to your comments, and we trust that you look forward to our questions.

Thank you, Mr. Minister. The floor is yours.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence): Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, last week I had the opportunity to speak to your colleagues on the Standing Committee on National Defence about the progress we are making in Afghanistan. It's a pleasure for me to appear before this committee and discuss the mission and the fine work that Canadians are performing every day.

Today I'd like to put our involvement in the Afghanistan mission in context, because it's important for Canadians to understand how conflict and disorder on the other side of the world affect us here in Canada. I also want to outline some of the successes that Canadians have achieved in Afghanistan, the vital milestones we have helped the Afghan people reach.

I'd like to begin by reminding this committee that our world has changed since the end of the Cold War. Threats to peace and security are no longer contained by borders. The attacks of September 11, in which 24 Canadians amongst about 3,000 people died, have changed the way we see our world forever. Canadian security is no longer threatened by mass armoured formations striking through the central plains of Europe. We no longer fear waves of nuclear armed bombers attacking North America by way of the Arctic. The real threat now comes from terrorism, from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and from failed and failing states.

This new reality has fundamentally changed the way we conduct our operations. Whether it's in Somalia, Sudan, or Afghanistan, peace support operations no longer resemble the classic model of peacekeeping. The image of an unarmed peacekeeper standing between two enemies to help implement a peace accord does not reflect today's reality, or the forces' experience in recent years. New threats to security have required a new type of response. The presence of Canadian diplomats, RCMP, municipal police officers, and development officers alongside the military in Kandahar speaks volumes about how things have changed. Today's operations are more robust, more complex, and they include a wide range of players.

Previously, soldiers were typically the face of operations. Now they are part of a team that delivers a multi-dimensional response. Increasingly, this new integrated approach forms a key part of larger international efforts. We aren't the only country threatened by terrorism. Global security is a collective responsibility. In this world of borderless security challenges, Canada has a duty to act. Canada is in Afghanistan, for example, with more than three dozen other countries. Each country is contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. I'm proud to say that among those nations, Canada is playing a leading role.

We are in southern Afghanistan, the most challenging area of the country, with brave men and women from countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Romania, Estonia, Denmark, and countries such as Poland, whose recent commitment of 1,000 soldiers who will assist in eastern Afghanistan fills an urgent need. But the challenges posed in southern and eastern Afghanistan should not, and cannot, be borne by a few nations alone. That is why I will continue to encourage other members of NATO to help share the burden.

Canada is also in Afghanistan because we believe in protecting our values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We have a duty as members of the United Nations, of the G8, and of NATO. We're in Afghanistan at the invitation of the Afghan government, and we're in Afghanistan to help Afghans.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Life is extremely difficult for Afghan citizens. They have little opportunity for education, health services are inadequate, housing is of poor quality and the people are subject to violence, injustice and poverty on a national scale.

Life expectancy in Afghanistan is among the lowest in the world. Mortality rates of this country's women in childbirth and infants are among the highest. Afghanistan has an extreme dearth of resources. Stability cannot be attained as long as these conditions persist. And changing these conditions is one of our greatest challenges in Afghanistan.

[English]

We've been reminded in the last few months of just how dangerous the job of the men and women of the Canadian Forces is. I've spoken to the families of the fallen soldiers, and I am humbled by their dignity and grace. Despite their grief, they acknowledge and support the purposeful work that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and airwomen are doing.

If Canada and its coalition partners abandon Afghanistan now, the Taliban would infect Afghan society once more. Could Canadians stand by while the Taliban ban women from the workplace, leaving thousands of families without an income? Could we again allow them to shut down girls' schools and colleges, to thoughtlessly destroy cultural institutions and monuments, and to use sport stadiums for public executions? Could we turn away as Afghanistan civilians were summarily executed, as houses were burned and private property was destroyed? Could we wait in fear as al-Qaeda got settled in again, making a home for itself from where it could again haunt the world?

The answer of course is no.

[Translation]

As the Prime Minister indicated in his United Nations speech, success in Afghanistan cannot be attained by military means alone. That is why the Canadian Forces constitute only a part of an integrated approach to ensure that Afghanistan never again falls in the hands of the Taliban or other similar people.

Afghanistan is a country with immense untapped potential. Reconstruction and development are our principle objectives in

Afghanistan and they remain the first priority for Canada. We have given Afghans the opportunity to rebuild their country, in accordance with the Afghan National Development Strategy.

Our armed forces support these objectives by establishing a secure environment, which is an essential condition for effective and sustained development.

[English]

But as Afghan President Hamid Karzai stressed during his visit last month, a democratic nation is not built overnight, nor in one or two elections.

We have made significant progress in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has held its first multi-party elections. Millions of refugees have returned home. Children are in school. Thousands of armed insurgents have been demobilized. The Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are taking real and positive steps forward toward gaining control of security within their own country.

We're not finished yet. Our goal is simply articulated. When Afghanistan and its government are stabilized and it's able to independently handle its own domestic concerns, when the terrorists and their local support networks have been defeated, and when these things are irreversible, we will know we have succeeded.

Canada has been integral to Afghan success so far. Canadians should be proud of our reconstruction efforts. We've truly broken new ground in our approach to development. Provincial reconstruction teams, also known as PRTs, did not exist in 2002, when we first arrived in Kandahar. Today, however, the PRT network is really at the core of what our Canadians are doing in Afghanistan. Yes, combat operations are still being carried out to help stabilize the region, but reconstruction is our focus and our goal.

Our progress in the Kandahar region over the last six months has laid the groundwork for continued improvement. Operation Medusa is just one of our recent successes. This last summer, the Canadian Forces provided the necessary security and assistance for our allies, the British and the Dutch, to deploy in southern Afghanistan. Without Canada's support, NATO expansion into southern Afghanistan could not have happened as quickly.

We are now patrolling and conducting combat operations in areas previously considered Taliban sanctuaries. Our operations in the Pashmul and Panjwai areas have also planted vital seeds of development. We are building Afghanistan development zones in strategic areas, pockets of development from which future renewal can spread.

We are also helping to build up the Afghan National Army through our work in the Afghan National Training Center and through joint combined operations with the Afghan authorities, such as the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

Daily, Canadian men and women are meeting ordinary hard-working and peace-loving Afghans. They are conducting meetings with elders, delivering development aid, and making a difference in the everyday lives of Afghans. For instance, the Canadian PRT donated computers and constructed a water distribution system for Kandahar University. They have distributed more than 6,000 donated school kits to children around Kandahar province, and 100 bicycles to the Ministry of Education for the end-of-the-year awards. All this builds Afghan domestic capacity and helps us to move closer to our ultimate objective of a fully independent and stable Afghanistan.

I've visited our troops in theatre twice now, and I've seen the good work our men and women in uniform and their civilian counterparts are doing, and the results they are achieving.

● (1540)

[Translation]

Foreign Affairs continue to play an active role in transforming Afghanistan into a stable, safe and self-sufficient state.

Delegates from the Canadian Embassy meet regularly with their Afghan and international counterparts, as well as with President Karzai. They provide wide ranging advice on important subjects such as improving governance, promoting and protecting human rights, reforming the security sector and establishing national judiciary institutions.

[English]

CIDA is working hard to assist the Government of Afghanistan, and has delivered on Canada's aid commitments to Afghanistan in Kandahar and across the country.

[Translation]

CIDA development specialists also pursue commendable projects in other regions of Afghanistan. It is very difficult to work in Kandahar because the challenges there are greater than elsewhere in Afghanistan, but we manage to make progress.

[English]

The RCMP are building the capacity of the local police. Canadian police are monitoring, advising, mentoring, and providing much-needed training for their Afghan counterparts. President Karzai called the international community's work in Afghanistan a cooperation of civilizations, a partnership that extends from enhancing security to developing rural areas to providing education and health services to needy people. He named Canada as a leader in this international partnership.

Through our team's work and outreach efforts, our PRT is helping to create an atmosphere of stability and trust. Canadians are helping to rebuild a healthy society and are helping to make it impossible for the Taliban to gain a hold again.

This summer when I visited our troops in Afghanistan, I asked how we could support them better. What they asked for was more equipment and more personnel. To ensure that our vital stabilization and reconstruction efforts continue, our government immediately took steps to enhance our military task force in Afghanistan. We are deploying an additional infantry company and a tank squadron, as

well as armoured recovery vehicles, armoured engineering vehicles, and engineers to the Kandahar area. We are also providing our forces with a counter-mortar capability, including a radar system to locate enemy weapons. We're seeing to it that our troops get what they need to do their jobs.

Ladies and gentlemen, in many offices of National Defence Headquarters, you can find strategic maps of Afghanistan. They indicate the locations of all the nations that are working hard to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. As a Canadian, I'm proud to see our flag prominently pictured on those maps. It shows us taking a rightful place in the world as a leader in ensuring that Afghanistan never again becomes a haven for international terrorists to threaten global security. We owe a great debt to our Canadian Forces. They are among the very best in the world, and they are making progress in one of the most volatile regions of Afghanistan. Canadians are united in pride and gratitude and are behind them.

Mr. Chairman, this government is committed to ensuring a safe and secure world for Canadians. We are committed to helping Canada meet its international responsibilities, and we are committed to help the Government of Afghanistan rebuild and re-establish a stable society for its people. In short, we are committed to this mission.

I would now be happy to entertain your questions.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister O'Connor, for your comments.

Mr. Patry, please. You have ten minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will share the time I have been allotted with Mr. Martin.

[English]

Thank you, Minister O'Connor, Mr. Hillier, and Mr. Monette, for your opening remarks, and welcome to our committee.

Your visit is very much appreciated, because when we have soldiers at war as we do in Afghanistan, there is nothing more important for the Canadian population than having an update on the situation without putting the mission in danger, and this on a regular basis.

In your remarks, you stated that success in Afghanistan cannot be assured by regular force means. You also mentioned the reconstruction and development goals.

I have two questions. Recently, Lieutenant-Colonel Simon Hetherington, the commanding officer of Canada's PRT, the provincial reconstruction team in Kandahar, told the Canadian Press that the Canadian Forces members previously dedicated to PRT have been assigned to combat duty rather than their original duty of being assigned to Canada's development goals in Afghanistan. What is the reason for that?

Secondly, last Monday Brigadier-General Howard told a Senate committee that the PRT is ready to proceed with civil projects, but cannot because it is still awaiting cash from CIDA. As he said, there are a few funding glitches and there are number of projects where we are just waiting to get additional money, understanding that the military has been using \$1.9 million to fund the development project.

Can you tell us what projects were put aside by lack of funding? Do you know if a portion of the \$30 million envelope provided last week by the CIDA minister in Kabul is also for the Kandahar region and will fill what is missing over there?

Thank you.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Patry, I'll try to answer your first question clearly.

When I arrived in Afghanistan most recently and I found the situation on the ground, I realized that the intensity of operations was at such a level that the infantry typically defending the PRT, most of them, were being pulled away to go into operations to try to suppress the Taliban. This again took a lot of the security away from the PRT, from their work. But that had to be done at the time, because the important issue at that time was to suppress the Taliban so they didn't encircle Kandahar. That's what they were trying to do at the time.

To counteract that, what we're doing as a government, on the recommendation of the military, is sending in an infantry company from the Van Doos. I think they're starting to stream in there now over the next month. About 125 infantry are going in and will be dedicated to protecting the PRT. That then allows the remainder of the infantry and the armour and the artillery to devote their efforts to the battle group to keep suppressing the Taliban.

We're also, at the same time—because I said at the time, and I'm on tape saying it, that I wanted more projects produced—sending, and have already started to send, military engineers into the PRT from Canada to help manage and implement more projects. That process has started. So you're going to see, over the next few months, a substantial increase in the amount of development effort coming out of the PRT.

With respect to the comment of Brigadier-General Howard, I can deal with that part. I can't deal with the other parts. I believe that what he was referring to was the difficulty, the challenge, of having CIDA instituting projects in the Kandahar area, because they have to get the agreement of the Afghan people, the government, they have to hire a lot of the local labour, and it's a challenge at the moment, with respect to the security situation, to try to get enough labour to do the tasks. I believe that's what General Howard was expressing about those projects.

With respect to those other questions, I can't answer the CIDA portion. You'd have to ask the CIDA minister.

•(1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister O'Connor.

We'll go to Mr. Martin.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Minister O'Connor, General Hillier, and Mr. Monette, for being here today. I think on behalf of all of us at this table, we'd certainly like to extend our deepest gratitude to the men and women who serve in our Canadian Forces, who serve our country so nobly, and their families for the sacrifices they make in enabling this to happen.

Minister, we're not winning in Afghanistan. Taliban control in the region is up, militant activity is up, unemployment is up, opium production is up, and our death rate is up. The Taliban of 2006 is not the Taliban of 2001.

I think there are four conditions for success. One is security. Second is the training of Afghan security forces, including the police, which are a major problem on the ground, as you know. Third is the development of poppy eradication and crop replacement. And last is dealing with the insurgency coming from outside Afghanistan.

My questions are really twofold. First, when your government extended our commitment to 2009, what were the troop commitments by our NATO allies at that time, and are those troop commitments there today? Could you tell us specifically what those troop commitments were, by country?

Second, unless the insurgency coming from outside Afghanistan is dealt with, this will be a war without end. So could you tell us what you're doing to deal with the insurgency coming from outside Afghanistan?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Minister O'Connor.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Martin, it's going to be rather difficult for me to try to pull off the top of my head the precise troop commitments of the 26 countries of the NATO force. But when we extended the commitment for another two years, NATO, and also the United States because there was still Operation Enduring Freedom at the time, had committed to providing certain troop levels, and these troop levels are still increasing. Individual countries are still increasing their numbers, and this process has not ended.

I think the commander of ISAF, that is, the commander of the NATO forces in Afghanistan, has identified, beyond what he has today, that he wants about two more battle groups, a few thousand more soldiers, and those negotiations are still going on.

Hon. Keith Martin: Can you table that information to this committee when you have an opportunity, please?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Yes. You want the numbers when we extended, is that correct?

Hon. Keith Martin: Yes, when you extended: what were the troop commitments from our NATO allies at the time of the extension, and the troop commitments that are coming from our NATO allies today?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Yes.

Hon. Keith Martin: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister O'Connor.

Did you also deal with the insurgency from outside?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: First of all, we are not responsible for the whole of Afghanistan, and some parts of your premise I disagree with. If you look at all of Afghanistan, I may have the number off by one or two, but there are about 34 provinces in Afghanistan. If you look at the 34 provinces, in about 24 or 25 of them you have relative stability. Every once in a while you have an incident, but you have relative stability. Where the increased insurgency has occurred in the last year or so is in some of the provinces in the south and in the east, in the five or six provinces.

Because we're in Kandahar, the reports we get are from the Kandahar area. We don't get to see the whole of the country. But I'm saying the majority of the country is relatively stable and is starting to improve.

In the south, the insurgency has increased in the last six months or so. One of the reasons is that, for instance, when we got into the Kandahar province we didn't sit in the camp in Kandahar; we started to move out and to clear the Taliban out of the villages throughout the province. We're trying to make sure the Taliban don't take over the province and impose their authority on the various tribes. We have been out there, in the Kandahar province, flushing out the Taliban, and of course when you flush them out they fight back. That's a large part of this increase you're seeing.

It's the same in the Helmand province, beside us. The British did the same thing. The British went in there and have started to root out the Taliban. The Dutch have just about stabilized in the province north of us, and you're going to start to see more and more engagements by the Dutch in the north—and the Americans, of course, to the east of us.

What we're trying to do is to root out the Taliban. So it may not be that in absolute terms there are more Taliban in the south than there were before. But we're not sitting in the camps just letting them take over the countryside; we're moving out to try to suppress them.

• (1555)

Hon. Keith Martin: But the real problem is Pakistan.

The Chair: Mr. Martin, your time is up.

We'll go to the Bloc Québécois. *Madame Barbot, vous avez dix minutes.*

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Minister, General Hillier and Mr. Monette.

This mission is problematic to us. The reason we insisted on your appearing today is that we cannot see our way clear with regard to what is happening in the field, i.e. the war, and the humanitarian aspect.

Some people, especially in Montreal, are currently organizing to ask the population to protest the war. That is not the position my party has taken, I want to make that clear. However, while we must respond to those people, we have no reliable information on what is happening over there.

What is the status of the mission? Is it true that we are losing? If not, what gains have been made? Does humanitarian aid reach the people?

Minister Verner repeated that, thanks to support and reconstruction provided by Canada, we are gaining the hearts and the minds of the Afghan people. On the other hand, several NGOs say that, in their opinion, that is not the best approach. Indeed, we have our troops fighting on the one hand while humanitarian aid should not serve to seduce the Afghan people but rather to make concrete steps towards helping the Afghans' situation progress.

With regards to stabilization, you have stated that the greatest part of the country is stable. If that is the case, how is it that the Minister was not able to visit certain areas and that she had to be content with meeting people in the Embassies and a few Afghan government officials?

An old principle of neutrality was repeated by Mr. Watson from CARE Canada, "You can't take sides in a conflict".

As parliamentarians, how can we interpret that since, on the one hand, we are a party to this war yet we are told that we want to work on development? To what point are we in fact able to implement development in the field? Are conditions favourable for development? If not, when will we be in that position?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barbot.

[*English*]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Thank you very much for those questions.

First of all, we have chosen a side. We've chosen the side of the government. The Government of Afghanistan asked us to be there; the people of Afghanistan asked us to be there. We're not neutral with respect to the terrorists, so yes, we have chosen a side.

The other thing is that in the south and in the east—but I'll talk about the south because we're in the south—there's a serious insurgency going on. We have to do two things at the same time: we have to try to suppress the insurgency and we have to try to make the lives of people better. We have to do both operations at the same time.

As for those people who suggest that somehow, if you pull the military out and just leave the NGOs there, life will go on and all these development projects will go on, I cannot accept their suggestion.

In the north that may be possible. In the west it may be possible, where it's relatively quiet and where NGOs can operate relatively quietly. But in the south, until the insurgency is brought under control we have to maintain—NATO has to maintain—substantial military forces to suppress and hopefully eliminate the Taliban. But at the same time we have to get involved in humanitarian efforts.

When you look at the humanitarian efforts, the Government of Afghanistan itself sponsors a number of projects through the country, including in the province of Kandahar, which we talked about. They have projects and the United Nations has projects going on in Kandahar province, the United States' aid programs have things going on, our military has projects going on, Foreign Affairs has projects going on, and CIDA has projects going on in the thing.

The job of our military and security component is to try to protect all of those agencies. They're not just protecting the Canadian aid program; they're trying to protect all the aid programs. They're trying to bring the insurgency under control.

From my point of view and in my assessment, we are making progress. What the Taliban most recently—in the last month or two—have tried to do is isolate the city of Kandahar. They came in from the west, they tried to go in to the south, and they were going to try to isolate Kandahar city. They made the fatal mistake of concentrating, and between 500 and 1,000 of them concentrated to the west of the city. That's what Operation Medusa dealt with.

We and our NATO allies were quite successful in dealing with them as a threat so that they will not threaten Kandahar city, in any sense of blocking it or cutting it off. What they reverted to is their typical tactics, suicide bombers and IEDs or mines put under roads. That's what they've reverted to, because they have found out they cannot defeat us militarily.

We're continuing, and all the NATO nations are continuing, to try to suppress the Taliban, but at the same time we have to conduct humanitarian operations.

I don't know if I answered every one of your questions or not.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: We are told that the ratio of humanitarian aid to military forces and action is 1 to 9. What are your comments on that? Is that correct as far as Canada is concerned?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: You're saying 9 to 1, and I don't where the basis of 9 to 1 is. Are you talking about dollars, or...?

[Translation]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Yes.

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Dollars. Well, the ratio is nothing like 9 to 1, if you talk about the dollar cost of operating the military operation in Afghanistan versus our own aid. But what I've tried to remind you is that our military's not only there protecting the Canadian aid; it's protecting the U.S. aid, the Afghanistan aid, the United Nations aid. We're trying to protect a lot of aid effort going on in that area, beyond just the Canadian portion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

You have another two minutes, Madame Barbot.

[Translation]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Would it be possible to get a real picture of the Canadian military's action? You tell me they protect all humanitarian aid. Would it be possible for you to draw up a balance

sheet of this aid and to send us a written report on the role of Canadian soldiers in protecting what portion of humanitarian aid?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll hand over to the chief. It's possible, but I'll hand over to the chief.

Gen R.J. Hillier (Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Madam, what I would say is that we establish the stability and the security required in the area so humanitarian assistance can be delivered to people who so desperately need it. We can't do that without helping the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police—their country's legitimate security institutions—to actually start taking on the security burden themselves.

You can't do that by standing around an aid deliverer and helping them move down a specific road. What you have to do is remove the Taliban threat to that region so that the aid communities, the aid organizations, can get to where the people live, do it with a relatively low risk, and be able to help them get their lives back together, rebuild their families, rebuild their communities, and become part of a sustainable province.

We do it directly, ourselves, immediately following an operation or close to where violence is occurring. So during Operation Medusa, for example, Canadian soldiers from the provincial reconstruction team were in the immediate vicinity of where the Taliban were attacking us. They were concentrated solely upon helping people in that area who had been driven from their homes by the Taliban attacks and by the Taliban occupation of that area. They were solely focused on making sure they had food to eat, water to drink, or an opportunity to move away from the area of violence or move back into their homes when that violence had subsided.

Parallel to that, CIDA has developed a longer-term program to make sustainable development a reality in a more secure area, and at the same time, numerous international agencies work in the area because some security has been provided. There is a cost to doing that, but from the military perspective, we believe the security really will cost what it costs. Without it, none of the humanitarian assistance will be delivered. The Taliban will control the area, they won't permit it to occur, and they certainly wouldn't permit it to occur if you were trying to deliver it to female adults or children.

• (1605)

The Chair: You have another 20 seconds, if you want to sum it up.

[Translation]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: We are told it is working and that there is humanitarian aid. I would like to know what humanitarian aid got through to each part of Afghanistan. That was my question.

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Okay, you have 10 seconds, I think.

Gen R.J. Hillier: A Newfoundlander can't even say hello in 10 seconds.

The Chair: All right, then don't.

Gen R.J. Hillier: I'll leave it to the next questioner.

The Chair: Mr. Goldring, you have 10 minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Gentlemen, Mr. Minister and General Hillier, I want to first of all congratulate you and the men and women who are serving over there. They certainly are doing a superb job, and they've gained international respect for the work they've been doing too. It's people like Corporal Grant Wagar, who's with the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders, who's over there serving now. He's really on his third tour, although this is the first time in combat.

That leads me to a question that has been raised by the media lately too, about taking troops from other positions, whether from the air force or from other units of the army, and retraining them for military combat.

Going back to my own experience in the sixties, I was in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and Canada wasn't involved in Vietnam, but I sure wanted to go. At that time the Commonwealth had a process of transferring from one military to another. So it really is not that unusual to take people from certain other jobs and retrain them if they have a willingness to serve in other missions.

Could you comment on that, and whether that is a concern or whether that will satisfy some of the short-term shortages, and how that fits in with your overall strategy?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Minister.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I think I gave the outlines of it in Parliament, but I'm going to ask the chief to explain the concept in detail.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Sir, there's been a lot of discussion around what we are trying to do, which is essentially to use 100% of the Canadian Forces to do 100% of our deployed missions, specifically focused on the one in Afghanistan because that's where most of our deployed people are. The deployed missions are the ones with the most stress, the most demand on our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and airwomen and their families. The intent is first of all to have a better tasking mechanism across the Canadian Forces. In the past ten years we've probably used a total of 40% of our Canadian Forces to do 100% of those missions.

We've not been as effective as we need to be at reaching right across. When we need logistics people, or military policemen and women, or intelligence officers, or signallers, or all the supporting enabling trades, we need to reach right across the Canadian Forces and use them for operations also. It has always been the same people in the combat units who have carried the burden, and what we want to do is be much more effective and much fairer in using everybody.

We want, first of all, to use them in their primary roles, and that's a key part right there. So we're reaching right across the Canadian Forces. In part, we can't do that because during some of the financial cuts that we've taken in the past, which were pretty brutal to us.... For example, we took a lot of money out of our posting budgets, hundreds of millions of dollars. We posted people to combat units, posted people to headquarters or training schools, and we thought it would be a good thing that they would stay there longer than in the past. It was good stability for their families, good stability for them. Over ten years, we've realized that the negative implications of that

are enormous. That is to say, those folks posted in combat units carry all those deployed burdens on their shoulders, and we don't have the money to facilitate the exchange of people, put the lessons learned from the operations into training schools, take the people who have had training school deployments or employments and put them into our combat units. That's only part of it.

Secondly, we're looking at a way to take care of those precious infantry men and women, combat engineers, gunners from the artillery, and of course I would be remiss if I didn't say the crewmen and crew women from the Armoured Corps, who really are at the point of contact with the Taliban. What we want to do is use everyone we have across the Canadian Forces to fill out the units, so we don't have to ask people to go back more than once unless it really is an urgent need.

In other words, sir, we look at taking them out of National Defence Headquarters, taking them out of other headquarters, other training establishments, and putting them back into the combat units and backfilling in those spots where we absolutely need to—we'd actually like to slice a little bit off there—with navy or air force personnel to pick up some of that slack. We look at our recruiting pool, how quickly we are recruiting people for those combat trades, and are there people in the recruiting system right now that we could, for a two-year period, put into some of that combat training to train them completely as infantry men or women and use them for a period of time before they go on to where they want to go as a primary MOC. We're using reserves and offering men and women in the reserves, many of whom you mentioned—that's the example you mentioned, sir, from the regiment in your area—who desperately want to go on this mission because they believe in it, giving them a better opportunity to sign up for a longer-term contract, or do a very quick component transfer into the regular force.

In short, we're doing a plethora of things. I've only named probably about 5% of that. We're looking at how we share the burden completely across the Canadian Forces, so that no one man or woman has to carry an inordinate amount of it on their shoulders.

● (1610)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: To confirm the main point that I made in Parliament, we're not planning to take sailors and airmen and make them infantry.

Gen R.J. Hillier: No, sir. What we would do, for example, is take a bunch of sailors and train them to run our convoys—first, to run the convoys in a benign scenario, and then so they can handle them in a more high-risk scenario, and take some of that load off some of the combat armed soldiers we've had doing that job, which is not their primary responsibility, and put those back into the combat units. That kind of demand, first of all, is very exciting to the non-combat, non-army folks around the Canadian Forces.

Mr. Peter Goldring: But it's still primarily because of the shortage of capacity to be able to do otherwise in the military over the years. It's not an unusual thing to do in the short term.

Gen R.J. Hillier: We've done it in our history. We've done it numerous times, including recently for the Balkans, and it is because we have not manned our units to the full status over these past years.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I have a question in another area too—and it might be difficult for you to comment on but I would like you to try. We've been working on a study of governance and democracy development. Seeing that the elections have been fairly recent in Afghanistan, have you detected following the elections...? You would have been interacting with some of the political people who have been elected in the specific provinces and areas. Would you feel that there is a role there for continuing government assistance to help develop their political parties from a community level, through more of an understanding on how best they can serve?

I would think that after this number of years of not having a democratic government, there's a whole learning process of not only the politicians themselves but also the people they serve, and indeed the people themselves, to understand what their politicians can do. Can you see a role there that would help in the future governance of Afghanistan?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goldring.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I don't think there's a role for DND. That's not DND's function. You'd perhaps have to speak to people at external affairs or some other part of the government.

The only area in which DND gets loosely into what you would call governance is the strategic advisory team that's in Kabul. There are about 15 officers in Kabul who are advisers to the president. They assist in organizational matters in the government. One of the big challenges the Karzai government has is that they have next to no civil service. As you know, ministers can make decisions, but if they have no civil service to implement the decisions, then nothing happens at the other end. That's a challenge for them.

I'll ask the chief to speak further on our strategic advisory team and explain what they do.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Sir, the basis for your question is absolutely logical and sound. The ability of President Karzai or his key ministers, extraordinary leaders all of them, to turn their visions for their country, through policy, into a plan, and to implement that plan with a civil service, is extremely low. The Taliban either killed all those bureaucrats or drove them out of their country. They're living in the United States or Canada or western Europe.

So any help they can get at all is incredibly valuable. It allows their capacity to be built to actually govern effectively their country better than they can do now.

They have numerous agencies helping, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, the Asian Development Fund, and the United States Agency for International Development. We have put in a small strategic advisory team, as the minister referred to, composed of about 15 military officers who are simply planners. We have the advantage, I believe, of being the only institution in our country that spends a long time in training, educating, and developing people to plan—from the strategic right down to the tactical in terms of how to take a vision and bring it down to implementation.

They are working for the president's chief of staff and his policy action group, under the over-watch of our ambassador there, to actually help those people turn their vision through a process, just through a process, into something that they actually get an effect from. They're actually walking through how they plan and set up something to deliver their vision, and articulate it clearly in that plan, to put money against it and then deliver it.

We have had incredible feedback on that plan from the Afghan government, from President Karzai himself, with whom I've discussed this numerous times when I was the commander there, and from our NATO allies, who say it's one of the most novel things they've seen, perhaps the most valuable thing they've seen, in the last couple of years in that mission.

So we think we've made a small impact there with planners who simply help plan.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, General Hillier.

Madam McDonough.

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, gentlemen, for being before the committee today. I want to say at the outset that I was extremely impressed, when I had the brief opportunity to visit Kandahar and Kabul, with the professionalism, the competence, and the courage of our troops there, as well as by the people I met in Kabul who were doing important strategic task force work.

Having said that, I have a lot of concerns. My time is very brief, so very quickly, before I go to the question of the really shocking and worrisome reports of children starving literally within a few miles of the Kandahar base, and trying to reconcile that with your claim, Mr. Minister, that humanitarian aid and reconstruction are at the core of this mission in Kandahar, I want to go to another point.

I'd like to give you the opportunity, I guess for the benefit of the committee, to clear up some confusion created by your testimony last week before the defence committee. There you were perhaps unable to remember, but I'd like to bring to your attention and ask you to comment on some briefing notes supplied to you—I'm sure they're voluminous—signed by General Hillier, to the effect that they're in fact an addition to the obvious capacity being deployed in Afghanistan.

I'm now quoting directly from those briefing notes: "The second task force that includes approximately 1,200 personnel and forms the basis for contingency planning for other possible missions the Government may wish to consider." Before the defence committee, Mr. Minister, you indicated that you were simply not aware of that. I believe you indicated, General Hillier, that no such troops in fact existed. I wonder if you could reconcile the contradiction here.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Yes, which one do you want me to answer, starving children, or...?

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Please answer just briefly to clear up the record on this business about the 1,200 troops that the briefing notes clearly said were available. Last week you indicated, as did the general, that they weren't.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I have no recollection of getting a briefing note that said there are another 1,200 troops available.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I'm sure you'll get a chance to clarify this, since it was raised and became a controversy at the—

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: It's not a controversy in my mind.

The Chair: Madam McDonough—

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'm just saying to you that the reality right now is that we cannot afford to undertake a major land mission for a few years, until we rebuild the army.

Right now we can keep our commitment in Afghanistan going to the end of February 2009, and depending upon decisions, we could keep it going into the future. But what we can't do right now is undertake another major mission. The 1,200 troops is a major mission because it has to be sustained; we can't do that. When I entered the department, the military briefed me very quickly that we couldn't do such things.

I'm wondering if the briefing note you're talking about may have been given to the previous minister, Minister Graham. I don't know, because I didn't get such a briefing note.

Madam, with respect to the other question you raised about starving children, in fact I quickly contacted our people in Kandahar because I saw that report by the lady who made the statement. In recent times, we fed about 8,500 people in the area, down in the Panjwai. Our military staff went around the whole area looking for people and giving them food and blankets, etc. Either they were unfortunate and missed some group on a road or something, but they're not aware of any substantial number of people in their area who are starving.

What I would appreciate is if the lady who gave that evidence could tell us precisely where she's talking about, then we would make sure that our military go there and give them food. We have been giving food and blankets out to people on a regular basis.

• (1620)

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I think it's extremely important, and perhaps we could have some testimony before this committee from Norine MacDonald, a Canadian woman and a lawyer from Vancouver, who heads the Senlis Council and presented this yesterday with very disturbing footage of children who clearly looked like pictures we haven't seen since the Biafran famine. She personally visited there and was told that they'd never had a single morsel of food from the Kandahar base, which they could practically

see from where she was standing. They never had any supplies or emergency relief of any kind.

To clear this up, I hope we can come back to it, but I take it as a serious gesture on your part, Mr. Minister, that you want to get to the bottom of this.

If I could pursue this line of questioning a bit, it's very difficult when you make the assertion that humanitarian reconstruction efforts are at the absolute core of this Kandahar mission, when in fact every bit of information that we've been able to glean through every possible attempt would indicate that for every dollar spent on the humanitarian and reconstruction effort, nine dollars are being spent on the military effort. I'm wondering if you can shed some light on this.

Specifically, I know you can't be expected to have all these statistics in your head, but I wonder if you could supply to the committee a breakdown of the numbers of personnel currently deployed in Kandahar, and within that, the breakdown between how many are in the PRT units, both regular and reservists, because my experience was that there were more reservists in the PRT teams. I'd like to know whether that in fact is the case.

Also, you've made repeated references to the numbers of humanitarian agencies in the area, and yet we've heard many NGO reports that they have simply felt it absolutely necessary to evacuate the area, because they feel that the manner in which the effort is being conducted makes it simply too unsafe to deliver that humanitarian aid. They feel the lack of safety is generated by the militarization of aid formula. Nobody questions the need for a multi-purpose, comprehensive approach of development, diplomacy, and defence, but there have been many concerns raised about how out of balance this is and how much danger is actually created by the approach that is now being taken.

I wonder if I could ask you to elaborate on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam McDonough.

Just to clarify one of your points, it's my understanding that the testimony of Madam MacDonald is happening right now at defence committee. So even as we meet here at foreign affairs, we can hope that some of these questions will be answered as she appears before the defence committee.

Minister.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I've said in the defence department that our hard-core function in the Kandahar area is reconstruction. The PRT is the key for us, from a military point of view. The battle group is there to try to create a security environment so that PRT can be at its highest level of efficiency. We're moving in 125 more infantry to protect the PRT, so they can get on with their activities. Beyond projects, they also meet all the elders and try to keep in contact with the various tribes. So we're putting an extra infantry company in to protect them. The battle group, which will be reinforced by a tank squadron, will be there to try to create enough security for the PRT to operate. But the PRT is the key. It's the key to it all. We have to make the lives of the Afghans better.

• (1625)

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Minister, are you advising Canadians, through this committee today, that Canada has ceased the aggressive combat search-and-kill mission in Kandahar?

The Chair: Madam McDonough, your time is up.

But you can finish, Minister.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I don't accept the way you characterize our military operations. We have to suppress the Taliban. If they attack us with rocket grenades and mines and everything else, we have to deal with them. This is not a peacekeeping operation. We can't just go around and put our hands up and say, "Please stop". They don't follow the rules. They will throw suicide bombers against us. They will use conventional warfare and IEDs against us. Our battle group has to deal with all these things, and it is absolutely necessary while the Taliban is at the current level of activity.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Casey.

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Thank you. Welcome to the committee. It is a pleasure to have this opportunity.

Minister, you commented on the parents or the family members of fallen soldiers. It struck me that of all the surprises in our experience there, perhaps the greatest is the incredible support the families have shown for the soldiers. In my riding we've had four fatalities, so we've had more than our share. These people either live in the riding now or grew up there.

My understanding is that some of the NATO countries restrict where their soldiers can serve in Afghanistan. Is that correct? If so, how does it happen that some countries do this? Can this committee do anything to apply pressure to these countries to get them to share the burden?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Various nations under NATO make military commitments to Afghanistan. Many of them make the commitment of a specified number of troops, but they also put what they call caveats on where and how they can be employed.

This has been a challenge for a few years. The NATO Secretary General, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, the commander of ISAF—all are aware of it. Over time, some of the caveats have been removed by some nations. Our country and other countries in the south and east are continuing to apply pressure to get more countries to remove these caveats, so that the commander of ISAF has freedom of movement of the forces.

In the Kandahar area, we've got the challenges we've got now, and the countries in the south and east will come to our assistance if we need them. Also, the countries in the northern and western regions provide us with enablers, which is a military code word for equipment such as fighter aircraft or helicopters.

So NATO is pulling together. It's just that we want them to pull together a little tighter.

Mr. Bill Casey: From one democracy to another, is there anything you can see that we could do as a committee to appeal, maybe, to a foreign affairs committee in one of the other NATO countries? Would that be helpful?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I don't know whether it would be helpful or not, but I can assure you that our government is working on this, as are other governments. It's not a quick fix; it will take a while for this to happen. It's just continuous pressure, and you find over time various countries relent and keep changing their caveats.

• (1630)

The Chair: Also, we should mention that this committee has on occasion done specifically that. When we have met with committees, there have been occasions when we have encouraged them to take back the message the minister has made reference to, of needing more resources there.

Mr. Menzies, do you have a one-minute, very quick...?

Mr. Ted Menzies (Macleod, CPC): Yes, I will be very short and concise in my comment.

Mr. Minister, I want to tell you about a meeting. I had lunch with the Aga Khan and a group from his foundation today, and what Mr. Casey was just saying was his main point, which he wanted to drive home. They themselves are doing a lot of development and reconstruction work in Afghanistan, but he encouraged us, in whatever manner we can as parliamentarians, to make sure we engage more of the NATO countries in this. So we're absolutely on the right point, and if you have any suggestions for us, we would certainly appreciate them.

I have one quick question for you. Can you describe the road we're rebuilding? I know DND has been working on this. My understanding of the need to pave or hard-surface that road is that it's to get away from the insurgents' being able to plant bombs or landmines inside it. Is that the main purpose? And what's the purpose of the road?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Menzies.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I am going to hand that over to the chief. He knows it in detail.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Sir, it's a route we call Route Summit, about four kilometres that comes down to the Panjwai-Pashmul area, which is about 25 to 30 kilometres to the west of Kandahar city, right in the middle of what Afghans themselves called Taliban country back in the summer.

There are about 10,000 people who live in that area. They earn their subsistence livings—they keep their families alive—by farming. They grow grapes, and they grow citrus crops in particular. There are no roads in that area. They have great difficulty in getting their produce out to any kind of market, and great difficulty in getting themselves out to Kandahar city, for example, for medical treatment. In short, they have great difficulty in doing anything, because there is no road.

We realized that when we first got to the area and helped clear the Taliban from that portion of the country. We realized that the families returning desperately needed something to help them reach for a better lifestyle ahead. We also realized there was an awesome opportunity to make an impact on those families we were there to help and to bring some development. So we started the construction of the road, using local labour and some local contractors in addition to our engineering resources, and with us providing the security.

Sir, you referred to casualties a little while ago. Every one of them hurts, but you know, these last six have all been taken while directly securing the reconstruction or the construction of a road, the development of that part of Kandahar province. That's a pretty sad commentary, I would think, upon the tactics the Taliban use there.

We want to build that road so that it lasts, and that means we want to pave it. Yes, this does help reduce the chances that improvised explosive devices can be planted there. It doesn't eliminate them or remove them completely, that's for sure, because the Taliban are a crafty enemy, without doubt. But it does give us the enduring road that the folks there need to actually build their lives and maybe see a bit of light at the end of the tunnel, so that life for their children will be a heck of a lot better than it is for them, or has been for them in the past with the threat that the Taliban continues to bring.

The Chair: Thank you, General Hillier.

Mr. Bernard Patry: Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

The Chair: A point of order?

Mr. Bernard Patry: Yes. I know you want to close, because it's already 4:30, but can I ask our witnesses and the minister if they would be willing to stay another four minutes, just to let one of my colleagues ask a final question, please?

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Then we will go to our colleague Mr. McTeague.

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you for that, colleagues. It's good to be back in the committee.

And thank you to both of you. I say so not just because you're here, but also I know the personal touch both of you give to our wounded and our injured soldiers and their families. I had the misfortune of having one of my own family members hurt, so I thank both of you. I know how deeply committed you are to our troops.

On the subject of training, which Mr. Goldring raised a little earlier, I was a little concerned. I didn't know if either one of you was on the same page with respect to your comments, General Hillier, about the re-rolling of people in the testimony you gave before the defence committee last week, and of course, Minister, in your comments made in the House of Commons on Monday. I understand there has been an attempt here to clarify them with that question.

I still have concern. This question is to both of you. How would you perceive, then, and how would you handle the issue of training? We know it takes quite some time to train personnel to bring them up to combat level, unless we're drawing from reservists or have a number who are trained right now who are maybe navy or airmen who are now going to be deployed for infantry reasons. How long do you think it will take to get these individuals up to speed to meet your commitments over there without having to fall back on redeployment?

I guess that brings up the question, what is the percentage of reservists you have there now?

• (1635)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll try to answer part of this, and then I'll hand it over to the chief.

It will soon be 2,500. If you look at the commitment to Afghanistan, you find that once the new organizations arrive, about half of them are the battle group or the fighting forces; the other half are either in command and control roles or support roles, etc. As the chief alluded to about 20 minutes ago, the idea is that we will try to draw upon air bases and navy bases to fill out some of the spots on the non-fighting side of the commitment.

On the fighting side of the commitment, we have to look at the numbers, but let's say we have some crewmen who are available for a certain time who could be re-rolled into the infantry. They'd have to get some infantry training, etc. But there is no concept of taking sailors or airmen and turning them into combat arms.

I'll let the chief answer the rest of it, and about the reserves too.

Hon. Dan McTeague: That I think is the concern. How do we get from the training to the ones that the general has proposed? People who are currently training may now be trained for combat purposes. I think the committee will certainly want to hear about that. There seems to be a gulf between the two. I understand what you're trying to say, but it seems to me that either it's going to be a long time to train them or there may be a chilling effect on recruitment in Canada as a result of what the general has announced.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Sir, let me just say there is no gulf between us. We have a unity of thought on this one that is absolutely complete.

Kids are flocking to our recruiting centres across our country. There is twice the number so far this year as during the same time last year. We have connected with the Canadian population. We'd like to do a little bit better with the minority communities across our country. We are trying to establish a relationship with them, but we know that is long term.

The overall point, sir, is that those young men and women who wear a uniform and go into Afghanistan will be trained to do the job. We're taking no shortcuts whatsoever. This is real business in every way and in every respect, and we're doing the training.

Secondly, you have to remember we're working now to 2008. The planning is done. The forestructure is working to come to full fruition for the rest of this year and for 2007. We're now actually looking at the first half of 2008 and being better able to share the load. So we're not asking somebody who has just come out this summer to go back in. We're looking a year and a half out for men and women coming out of recruiting systems from being a basic recruit. We have 252 people right now in our recruit school in that early stage. We have a year and a half to train them to be infantry soldiers.

We always use reservists on our operation. Habitually, we have about 20%. But the reality, sir, is that when they go on the mission, they have received exactly the same training as a regular force soldier, say, an airman or airwoman, has. In fact, we have them for a period of about of two years. In short, we almost have them as a soldier for that time. So we make sure they're trained.

We're going to look to those reservists much more as a way of building our regular force, as a way of doing this job, and as a way of helping some of these missions.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank Madame Bourgeois for this motion that allowed us to have the minister and the general with us today. Thank you very much.

And to our Minister and to General Hillier, thank you for coming today and for availing us of this briefing. We appreciate your openness, your frankness, and the information that you brought. Thank you.

I ask the committee to stick around. We will be dealing with some committee business in the next hour.

● (1635) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1645)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. We want to deal with committee business.

We have three notices of motion that have been placed before the committee. The first notice of motion is from Alexa McDonough, but she is not present.

Actually, there is no one present to deal with any of the motions that have been placed here.

Mr. Gerald Schmitz (Committee Researcher): They're in the press probably.

The Chair: Some of the committee members are going to have to decide whether they want to get their picture on television or deal with committee business. This is the time when we really want to deal with committee business.

Is there anyone here with the motions?

● (1650)

Mr. Ted Menzies: I move we adjourn. We have better things to do than wait for people.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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