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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, I call to order the 16th meeting of the Standing Committee of National Defence, dealing with our Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on May 16 dealing with the study of Afghanistan.

I just want to remind the committee that this motion included: That the Committee examine the various aspects of the mission of Canadian troops in Afghanistan, such as its duration, the state of the personnel and materiel, the relationship between the mission's combat operations and its efforts to help reconstruct the country, and the criteria for assessing its effectiveness, with a view to determining whether it is possible to complete the mission successfully while still meeting Canada's other international obligations.

Today, we'd like to welcome the Honourable Gordon O'Connor, the Minister of National Defence, along with Chief of the Defence Staff General Hillier and Deputy Minister Elcock.

As usual, Mr. Minister, we'll give you some time for opening comments. Then we start a 10-minute round, as has been laid out previously. I'll turn it over to you for the comments, and then we'll move on.

Mr. Minister, go ahead.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence): Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, it's nice to be back here at the committee again, in the War Room. I think it's quite an appropriate name for a defence committee.

This is my second time appearing as Minister of National Defence, and I welcome the opportunity to provide this committee an update on the progress we are making in this important mission.

Let me say a few words about why this is so critical for Canada. The reasons have not changed since the beginning of this mission. On September 11, 2001, terrorists crashed four aircraft, killing about 3,000 people, 24 of them Canadians. They forever changed the way we see our world. Subsequent attacks have reminded us of the threats that terrorists continue to pose to society.

Although we may feel safe here in Canada, we must remember to whom we owe much of that security. The Canadian Forces are in Afghanistan conducting military operations to protect Canadian interests. They are in Afghanistan rooting out those who harboured and supported the perpetrators of the attacks of September 11. They are working to protect us from suffering a violent attack in our own communities.

As you are fully aware, the Afghan mission is about much more than that. It's also about fulfilling Canada's international responsibilities. We aren't the only country threatened by terrorism; it's a global threat. NATO countries have been working together to defeat terrorism at its source, and Canada is playing a leading role.

I was pleased to note at a recent meeting of NATO defence ministers that Poland has pledged to increase its contribution in Afghanistan. I've also been encouraging other members of NATO to do more in southern Afghanistan, to share more of the burden. And we are looking for our allies to contribute more troops and to remove the restrictions on the forces they have already committed.

But we are also in Afghanistan because we have a duty as citizens of a rich and prosperous nation, a free nation, to help those around the world who do not enjoy the same advantages. We have a duty as members of the United Nations, of the G8, and of NATO. We have a duty because our government wants to restore its reputation as a leader and a dependable partner in defending freedom and democracy in the world.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Canadians like to lend a helping hand when they are asked. This is a tradition that has existed for generations.

[English]

We are in Afghanistan at the invitation of the Afghan government. You know that life for children born in Afghanistan is hard from their very first breath. They face inadequate medical care, poor housing, dismal education opportunities, institutionalized violence, injustice, and poverty. These are a few of the challenges almost every Afghan child has to deal with. That, ladies and gentlemen, is one of the big reasons why we are in Afghanistan.

This mission isn't easy. I know the price Canadians have paid. I've spoken to the families of the fallen soldiers and I've looked into the eyes of those who knew and loved them best. When we are faced with the news of a Canadian casualty, it's important to remember why Canada is making such a sacrifice. We cannot allow the Taliban to return to their former prominence, to take over Afghanistan and resume their regime of terror and tyranny, to flaunt their disregard for human rights, to punish and terrorize their own people, to murder innocents, to harbour those who would threaten us and our families at home and abroad.

[*Translation*]

As the Prime Minister mentioned, however, in his United Nations speech, success in Afghanistan cannot be ensured by military means alone. Reconstruction and development are our main objectives in Afghanistan and they remain an absolute priority for Canada.

This is why the Canadian Forces and the other government departments are taking a cross-jurisdictional approach to helping Afghanistan rebuild.

Their intent is to provide Afghans with an opportunity to rebuild the country under Afghanistan's National Development Strategy, in cooperation with the international community.

[*English*]

Our military is supporting these objectives by providing a safe and secure environment, an environment that will, in turn, accelerate the pace of development and aid delivery, prerequisites for effective and long-lasting stability. As Afghan President Hamid Karzai stressed during his visit last month, a democratic nation is not built overnight or in one or two elections. So as I've said numerous times, we will know we have been successful in Afghanistan when the country and its government are stabilized, when the terrorists and their local support networks are defeated and denied sanctuary, and when the Afghan security forces are well established and under the firm and legitimate control of the Government of Afghanistan.

When it is clear that these developments are irreversible, then we will know we have reached our goal, but we have made measurable progress in Afghanistan. I know you've heard of some of the bigger, well-publicized successes. Afghanistan has implemented its first multi-party elections, millions of refugees have returned, children have started to return to school, armed insurgents have been demobilized, and the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police force have been stood up.

But I also want Canadians to be more aware of our recent successes. Ladies and gentlemen, despite great challenges, we have taken concrete steps forward in the last six months. Our progress in the Kandahar region has laid the groundwork for continued improvement. Operation Medusa is but one of our recent successes. This past summer the Canadian Forces provided the necessary security 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 this soon.

In July the Canadian Forces, working under the NATO umbrella, took command of operations in southern Afghanistan, and we are now patrolling and conducting combat operations in areas previously considered Taliban sanctuaries. Daily our Canadian Forces men and

women are meeting ordinary hardworking and peace-loving Afghans, they are conducting meetings with elders, delivering development aid, and making a difference in the everyday lives of Afghans. We are helping to build up the Afghan National Army through our work at the national training centre and through joint combined operations with the Afghan authorities, such as the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

All this builds Afghan domestic capacity and helps us move closer to our ultimate objective of a fully independent and stable Afghanistan. Our operations in the Pashmul and Panjwai areas have also planted vital seeds for development. We are building an Afghanistan development zone in strategic areas, pockets of stability and reconstruction from which future renewal can spread.

Change, though, takes time. Here in Canada we don't always appreciate the impact of what is going on so far away. We miss the smaller but critically important steps forward that are happening every day, projects like the water distribution system that Canadian PRT members constructed at Kandahar University, or the positive effect that a simple donation of Canadian medical supplies and bed linens has on an Afghan hospital, or the women's wellness sessions our PRT members have provided—concrete steps Canadians have taken to improve the quality of life for Afghan women. These projects, in many ways things that we take for granted here, result in a lasting gratitude of the Afghan people for the work of Canadians.

I've seen the good work that our men and women in uniform and their civilian counterparts are doing and the results they're achieving, but Canadians are not just conducting combat operations. The Canadian Forces are there to help to create an atmosphere of stability and trust where, frankly, it will be impossible for the Taliban to again take hold.

I visited Afghanistan nearly two months ago to see with my own eyes how our troops were doing. I wanted to talk to the men and women on the ground about the challenges they face. At the end of my visit, I said Canada could do more—and we need to do more—and I asked how we can support our forces better, and what they asked me for was new equipment and more personnel.

To ensure that our vital reconstruction efforts could continue, our government immediately took steps to enhance our military task force in Afghanistan. We are deploying an additional infantry company to protect the provincial reconstruction team, along with engineers to manage construction projects. As well, we are sending a tank squadron and armoured recovery vehicles to provide support to our battle group. We are also providing our forces with a counter-mortar capability, including a radar system to locate enemy weapons. This government is seeing to it that our troops get what they need to do their job, and this commitment is about a 450-troop increase in the area.

Ladies and gentlemen, Canada knew from the beginning that this mission would be difficult, but the Canadian Forces are among the best in the world and they are making progress in one of the most volatile regions of Afghanistan. We are proud of them.

● (1540)

Ladies and gentlemen, if Canada and its coalition partners abandon Afghanistan now, the Taliban would regain their power over the Afghan people. They would again ban women from the workplace, leaving thousands of families without an income. They would shut down girls' schools and colleges. Cultural institutions and monuments would be thoughtlessly destroyed. The soccer stadium would again be used for weekly lashings and executions.

We would have to stand shamefully by as Afghan civilians were summarily executed, as houses were burned, as private property was destroyed. We would have to wait in fear as al-Qaeda got settled in, making a home for itself from where it could again haunt the world.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, there is no doubt that the work accomplished in Afghanistan by our soldiers, sailors, and men and women of the air force is of national interest.

There is no doubt that that is what we should be doing. Their efforts are helping to protect Canadians against terrorism. Furthermore, the military are helping Canada to assume its responsibilities on the international scene. They are helping to improve the lives of people who are fighting to gain the rights and privileges that numerous Canadians take for granted.

This is why the government is determined to continue this mission to the end.

[English]

I would now be happy to entertain your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

We'll open it up for the first round, which will be 10 minutes. We're going to start with Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Minister and General Hillier, for being with us today. Clearly, this is a very important issue, and we all support our troops and the purpose of the mission.

I have two or three questions. Hopefully, we can get through them in 10 minutes.

Mr. Minister, in May the government clearly wanted to have a debate and a vote in Parliament on the extension of our mission in Afghanistan, but once the government committed to taking that step, you would agree that the government had an obligation to provide Canadians and parliamentarians with the kind of information you may have been working with in deciding to extend that mission for two years, or at least placing that motion before the Commons.

One assumes the Government of Canada had access to intelligence from DND, from Foreign Affairs, from NATO, and from allies about the situation in Afghanistan at that time, information about such things as the strength of the Taliban resurgence; the cross-border flow of the Taliban from Pakistan to

Afghanistan; the sanctuaries in Pakistan; the issues of government corruption in Afghanistan, and how that was inhibiting the reconstruction and the development work and the training of the forces; the lack of commitment from other NATO allies in terms of troop strength and, in fact, substantial national caveats; lack of reconstruction taking place at that time; and of course, the severity of the poppy crop and the attendant problems therewith.

The government, if I can recall, Mr. Minister, said absolutely nothing about any of these issues during the debate in terms of the intelligence the government had with respect to these issues.

The government's propensity for withholding information continues. Your department has refused this committee's request for biweekly briefings. We have been told by your bureaucrats, under your stewardship, to essentially get lost as a committee of parliamentarians, and I don't believe that's acceptable. It is, in fact, reprehensible.

Let me get back to the issue. By rushing to extend this mission with a brief debate and a vote, without sharing the basic information with Canadians about what the government knew or ought to have known, do you not believe the government actually perpetrated a fraud on Canadians?

● (1545)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll try to answer that complex question as simply as possible. Yes, we had a debate in May for the extension of the commitment to Afghanistan, and during that debate you had a chance to ask questions and try to determine those questions from your point of view. But let me remind you that May is only three months beyond the commitment made by the Liberals. The Liberals moved that battle group and that PRT into the Kandahar region effective in February. What did the Liberals know? What did your government, of which you were a member, know about the Taliban and all those other issues you brought up to me?

In those three months, nothing essentially had changed from what your government knew and our government knew. So no, I don't think we're committing a fraud upon anybody.

Let me try to answer your other question, because you've asked multiple questions there. You can have before this committee any official of our department, and any other department, I assume, that has an interest in defence. All you have to do is ask for an official to come forward. So you will never be short of information. I, the CDS, the deputy minister, and any of the members of our department are on call to come and testify to this committee, so there is no hiding of anything. All the information you need that will be provided by officials of this department.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Mr. Minister, not to belabour the point, but the fact is that you knew at that time that the Taliban were going to be more resurgent than before. You didn't put that before the House. Whether or not I knew isn't the issue. The issue is whether Canadians knew. Maybe the people in cabinet knew. Did Canadians know? The Minister of Defence, before you went across the country making speeches as to the issues we might face in Afghanistan...but no information came from you.

Let me just move on to the next question, which is with respect to the Taliban. In fact, we find out, of course, from the public statements that General Hillier recently made, that he has spoken openly of the Afghan government's ongoing negotiations with the Taliban, Taliban leadership included. Recently when you were asked about this, sir, you admitted that you didn't know about the state of negotiations and implied that you didn't need to know because—and I'm quoting your own words here—about the Afghans you said, “It is their insurgency.”

Mr. O'Connor, as a former general, you know how deeply we've invested in Afghanistan. The fact that you would say you did not know it was their insurgency—and in fact, General Hillier was much more open in terms of sharing the information that the Afghans are talking to the Taliban leadership, most of whom are moderates according to General Hillier—disturbs me, because you are the steward of this mission, along with the Prime Minister.

We want to know several things. How thorough and how extensive are the negotiations that the Afghan government is conducting with the Taliban? Who are they conducting negotiations with? Are they conducting negotiations with the same people who were trying to kill yesterday or might try to kill tomorrow?

The other more important question is that the definition of Taliban is evolving. We don't know how many Taliban fighters we're facing in Kandahar or in the country at large. I would like to know how you would define Taliban in today's world in Afghanistan, and how many Taliban fighters are we facing with our 2,000 troops.

• (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Minister, there are just under three minutes left.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Well, again, there are multiple questions.

I've said in Parliament, and I'll say here again, it is the responsibility of the Afghanistan government to negotiate with the insurgency. If they are negotiating, it's their responsibility. It is not the responsibility of Canada to participate in any negotiation with the insurgents.

Canada is also part of NATO, as are some other friendly countries that are there in Afghanistan, numbering more than 30 countries. The ISAF commander and the ISAF headquarters deal on a regular basis with the Afghan government, and it's their responsibility to manage the whole insurgency in the country with the Afghan government. They would probably be in contact with President Karzai and his ministers to talk about any negotiations, if they're going on at all. But it's not the responsibility of the Canadian government or the Canadian troops to get involved in negotiating with the Taliban. We have our clear responsibilities and we are staying within that area.

As to how many Taliban there are or any other details about the Taliban, I'm going to turn to General Hillier and see if he can answer the question.

Gen R.J. Hillier (Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Minister, perhaps I could just say first, negotiations or encouraging defection—I didn't say that anybody was negotiating with the Taliban. That would presume that you were talking with them about what they would accept and maybe that you would hand over southern Afghanistan to them, etc. None of that, to

my knowledge, is occurring anywhere, certainly not from the Government of Afghanistan.

What I talked about was a program they have, which is called peace through security, in which they encourage people to come out of the Taliban, defect to the political process, and use words in Parliament instead of bullets in Kandahar to achieve their ends and purposes. They have had some success with that program, and we have been on the periphery, on the margin, of seeing some of those things occur, and that's a very positive thing for the benefit of Afghanistan.

To define the Taliban we use our intelligent sources. We know where their commanders are; we know who they are; we know which units they have; we know where they're operating. And in southern Kandahar there is a very clear delineation of the Taliban from a variety of other groups that might be in the area or not. Those who are attacking us we have defined clearly as Taliban by that intelligence process, while working with the Afghans, working with the international community. As we look at the numbers in southern Afghanistan, they vary. And that's not to try to avoid your question or not answer it whatsoever, but they vary. They vary depending on whether they're trying to get more fighters into Helmand province or whether they're focused on Kandahar for a period of time.

During the operation that we called Operation Medusa in the Panjwai, we faced anywhere up to 1,000 Taliban fighters in that area. They augmented that number by coercing and forcing young men in the area who had no jobs, who had fear of the Taliban, who didn't want them there, to come and pick up a weapon and sometimes fight for them. We believe the number would be somewhere plus of 1,000 in the southern part of Afghanistan where we are. How many of those are exactly hard-core fighters? You simply can't determine.

But truly, we're after their leaders in that region—the folks who direct them, who facilitate them, who get them money, who get them weapons, who get them ammunition, and who direct them first of all at killing other Afghans and then at trying to kill our soldiers.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move on to Mr. Bachand for 10 minutes, then to Ms. Black.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Welcome to our guests.

Mr. Chair, you opened the meeting by reading aloud the Bloc Québécois motion adopted on May 16, which dealt precisely with duration, equipment, etc. You did not mention, however, the motion tabled by the Bloc Québécois on October 4. In it we requested briefings every two weeks.

Indeed we expected a senior official from the Department of National Defence to come every other week and tell us where the troops had got to, what the plans were, what took place the week before and what would probably happen the next week. This is not what the department has told us, though.

I wish to recall the arguments underlying the committee's statement concerning the briefing motion. Here they are: Canadians do not have information from their government at the time we are speaking; Quebeckers do not have information from the federal government about what is happening in Afghanistan; members of Parliament do not have any information about what is currently happening in Afghanistan; and worse yet, the members of the Standing Committee on National Defence do not have any information about what is currently happening.

We are told that Lieutenant-General Gauthier will come and see us and that Brigadier-General Benjamin has already been, but they each have their own jurisdictions and do not go beyond them. So we do not get a real briefing when General Benjamin comes as we just talk about the arrangements made so that the troops will not be short of munitions, food, and this and that.

General Gauthier, in turn, will tell us about the arrangements made to increase the troops and perhaps add an infantry company or some tanks for some reason or another. This is not what the committee wants to know, however; it wants to know what is happening. Since this government has always been in favour of transparency, this type of answer is very disappointing. That is my first question.

Before you answer me, Mr. Minister, I wish to tell you that, if we lose the information battle in Canada, we will lose the battle in Afghanistan. That is how it has always gone. The battle in Vietnam was lost on American territory, not in Vietnam. It is the same thing for us, since we are now headed in the same direction. This is why, with the responsibility incumbent on us, we want to have this type of information. I do not see why you want to keep it from us.

Mr. Minister, did you agree to have the Standing Committee on National Defence kept in the dark?

Are you linked to the decision whereby we are only sent to visit the bases or we get to listen to generals who visit us from time to time?

Is this your personal decision or did your department staff make this decision?

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Thank you very much.

I saw the request and I made the decision because I understand that you want details of what's going to happen. You will not get details of what's going to happen, because these are military operations. I am not going to endanger the military in Afghanistan by providing information to this committee ahead of time about what's going to go on in the Kandahar area.

At any time, you can have any official from the defence department, any military officer, who can explain to you what has happened or give any details you want to know about the defence department. But I'm not going to come here, and I'm not going to have people come here, to tell you what's going to happen next week or the week after in Kandahar.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Mr. Chair, this is not what the resolution says. It says that the committee will be informed every two weeks as to the state and progress of the intervention.

I understand that you do not wish to place the military in danger by telling us a week in advance, perhaps before a large gathering of journalists, that we will be at such and such a place to conduct a secret operation. I know that you cannot do that. However, every other week, you could provide us with information on the progress of the situation. At present we are learning absolutely nothing.

What we do learn, Mr. Minister, is very worrying. You know the three Ds, which are in English: security, development and governance. Well, I think that the three Ds are being turned into: diversion of the mission, departure from the mission objectives and disaster in losses of life. Soldiers are dying every week, and we do not know exactly what has happened these past two weeks. Nor do we understand the progress of the mission. So when we shift from the three Ds, security, development and governance, to diversion, disaster and departure, I think that there is a serious danger that you absolutely have to do something about.

And please tell me what you think of the statement by General Richards, whom I myself met in Kabul. According to him, if things do not improve in the next six months, 70% of the population will give its support to the Taliban. We will lose the battle. And to win the battle you have to inform Canadians and Quebeckers of what is happening so that they can see that there is a certain progress and that the sacrifices imposed on our soldiers are not in vain. If you do not do that, we will see each other in six months and see how much things have deteriorated.

So I would like your reaction to these comments.

● (1600)

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: First, with respect to General Richards' comments, I think he is trying to communicate to NATO and the public that NATO needs to make a greater effort in Afghanistan. But when General Richards starts making comments like six months, that's his own choice, his own judgment.

I can tell you that the problem will last a lot longer than six months. There's nothing magic about six months. Whether or not substantial progress is made in the next six months, it isn't going to mean that 70% of the people in the south are going to go to the Taliban. That is General Richards' way of expressing the need to have more NATO troops in Afghanistan and have the restrictions taken off the troops, so we can employ them.

That's his style of announcing this need to the public, which, by the way, we agree with.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: All right.

You have already stated, Mr. Minister, that a solution based on defence alone will not lead us to victory. This is my last question.

Do you still think that? I would also like you to talk to us about the information battle. Do you think that you can go on for long keeping not only Parliament but also the Canadian people in the dark?

I congratulate the journalists, though, who often have the courage to go there and cover events. They are the ones who bring us back the information, not the Canadian government. Do you plan to correct that? Can you review your position, on the basis of my earlier argument?

We do not want to know where the troops will be next week. But in our bi-weekly briefings, we will see what they did in the past two weeks, and parliamentarians, along with Canadians and Quebeckers, will see how fast the mission is progressing for now.

Would you be ready to reconsider your decision, on the basis of briefings being about the past two weeks, rather than on what will happen in two weeks?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Minister, there are two minutes left.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Yes, Mr. Bachand, I do believe in the three Ds. Our government believes in the three Ds, and we haven't varied from the original commitment in the Kandahar area. All three Ds are in operation—security, development, and governance—and our country is making efforts in all three areas, not only Afghanistan-wide but in the Kandahar area.

Now, with respect to information, as I said before, you can have anybody before this committee you want to get any information that we can provide from the department. But I'm willing to reconsider your motion, given that my understanding was that you wanted to know what was going to happen. As I think we agree, that wouldn't be appropriate for our troops. So we'll have a look at your motion, and I'll get back to you on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

Ms. Black, and then on to the government side for 10 minutes.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you very much.

And thank you to all three of you for appearing at the committee today.

I want to get right into my questions. I only get one round, so I'll be as brief and quick as I can.

There are a range of different groups—different tribal allegiances—in Afghanistan, particularly in the southern region. Some of them are interested in peace and security; others have an interest in increasing and continuing the violence. I'd like to ask how you distinguish between these groups in your combat operations and how you ensure that our operations in Kandahar province are not driving people to the insurgent side?

• (1605)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Ms. Black, I'm going to have to turn this over to General Hillier. I think he'd be able to answer that question better than I could.

Gen R.J. Hillier: We do that first of all by supporting the Afghans, because we are in their country; it's their political process.

They've built the political process based on the constitution they developed and they're working through it. As the President works through the Governor of Kandahar, with the Government of Kandahar province specifically, they help define those who are coming into the political process and those, like the Taliban, whatever tribe they may come from or whatever region they come from, who don't want to go on the political process and want to use violence. By working with the Afghan National Army, a most professional organization being developed at a very rapid pace, and picking up a possibly increasing percentage of the security duties; by working with the Afghan National Police, but specifically by working with the government institutions in Afghanistan, we help support them in the delineation of who is helping build the political process and who is coming at it violently. If somebody is coming at it violently, we help them mitigate that threat, neutralize that threat, reduce that threat, and at the same time assist in accelerating parts of the reconstruction and the development of government capacity.

We are always extremely careful during combat operations. First, we don't conduct operations unless there's a need to. Second, we don't conduct them unless there is a very real threat to life and limb for Afghans, us, or other members of the international community. Third, when we do them, we do them with a very precise targeting, in conjunction with Afghan forces, to make sure that collateral effects—driving people away from their homes, destroying homes, etc.—are reduced to the absolute minimum, and we only have to do that kind of thing or even get engaged in it if the Taliban forces it in a region.

As an example, during Operation Medusa in the Panjwai, the destruction that was caused in some of the villages there, and the folks who were forced to leave because they did not consider it secure enough to stay, that occurred because the Taliban came into the area, used violence—

Ms. Dawn Black: But there's much more there than the Taliban; there are more allegiances there that are similar to the Taliban.

Gen R.J. Hillier: That's all fine, and that's why the elected government of Afghanistan, with their leaders, walk through that... and we support the security process and the reconstruction part, but they walk through those complex relationships with us supporting them, as opposed to our walking through them.

Ms. Dawn Black: Earlier this year, DND signed a contract with General Gulalai in Kandahar for some base services. Is this the same General Gulalai who was named as a warlord by Reuters and a UN human rights organization? I'm wondering what real assurances we have when we're signing contracts with people in Afghanistan, that we're not contracting with warlords.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Afghanistan and the parliament of Afghanistan have people you would categorize as former warlords. They also have a lot of women and the parliament is quite a mixture of their society and their culture. So it's not unusual to have to deal with people you call former warlords. That's the way it is in Afghanistan.

Ms. Dawn Black: Do we have any assurances about General Gulalai?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I don't know what assurances we would have to be given.

Ms. Dawn Black: His activities now, I suppose.

Gen R.J. Hillier: I should take that on. I don't know the individual personally; I don't know what contract we have with him right now, and I certainly don't know what his present activities are. That's a level of detail that gets run through a new country.

I would say, in support of what the minister just said, we're dealing with a country that was destroyed and brutalized over 25 years.

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes, I understand that kind of position.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Everybody in that country was involved in the violence at one point and everybody is described from one angle, agenda, or perception or another as something else: either as a warlord or as a good guy or a bad guy, etc. So some of those descriptions are in the past, and many of the people who were engaged and called warlords in the past have come into the political process. Many of them play a very positive part. So it's not all bad.

Ms. Dawn Black: The previous government bought the M777 howitzers and the Excalibur munitions for use in Kandahar. I'd like to know what the precise cost of each shell is, if you could get that to me. Do you know that?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: No, I wouldn't, off the top of my head. We'll get that number for you.

Ms. Dawn Black: It has been denied to me when I've asked for it.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: It has, has it? The price of a shell?

Gen R.J. Hillier: Actually, you're asking the price of the Excalibur round.

• (1610)

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes.

Gen R.J. Hillier: It's an expensive round.

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes, I know that.

Gen R.J. Hillier: I don't have the precise dollar figure at hand, but as the minister has said, we'll provide the minister the information on it.

Ms. Dawn Black: Thank you. I'll look forward to getting it.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Could I just say that it's an expensive round because it's a precision round. Going back to the question you asked about making sure we're not driving people away from the government, etc., because of things like collateral damage, this is one of the things we want to precisely use against those who are bringing violence against us or against Afghans only, and therefore it's a very expensive round. I'll provide the minister the cost information.

Ms. Dawn Black: Thank you.

General Hillier, last year in the middle of the election campaign you signed a detainee transfer agreement with the Afghan minister of national defence. Putting aside the appropriateness of that, I would like to know if former Minister of National Defence Bill Graham approved that agreement. And did he give you the authority to sign on behalf of the Canadian government?

Gen R.J. Hillier: In fact, I think the Government of Canada did. It absolutely wasn't something I was going to go off and sign myself, I assure you. We were all in agreement that this was the right move.

This was Afghanistan—this was the Afghans' country—and certainly we were in full support, from Foreign Affairs and the Department of National Defence, that this was the right thing to do.

I acted as the agent in part because of the trust the minister of defence in Afghanistan had in me personally from previous acquaintance and because I was there on the ground at the time when we were ready with the agreement to be signed.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: First of all.... There are two parts to it. One is that there's an expectation that NATO countries are going to add to the number of troops we have in Afghanistan, and when the previous government committed our troops to the Kandahar area, I think it was under the understanding that those troops who were under Operation Enduring Freedom would eventually transfer to ISAF. Then, part of the concept was that eventually the final part of Operation Enduring Freedom would join us too, so that we would have all the troops there under that thing.

But I guess, knowing that they had the caveats, we still had the expectation and have the expectation now that these caveats will be removed over time. NATO's basic premise is that we all are in Afghanistan together and that if we were theoretically in trouble, other countries of NATO would have to come to our aid. If the reverse arises and somebody in NATO is in trouble, we go to their aid. We're fully confident that over time these caveats are going to be removed.

Ms. Dawn Black: My final question is on the issue of danger pay and the soldiers who have been injured in Afghanistan losing that addition to their pay when they are injured and are sent home. It seems to me bizarre, and I'm wondering whether there is not some way we could call it something different when they come home—"recuperation pay", or something—so that these injured soldiers are not financially penalized when they return to Canada injured from their work in Afghanistan.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: We are going to correct it. I have said that publicly. The Chief of the Defence Staff has said it publicly. We are going to correct it; we are going to make sure there is no injustice. It's just that at the moment, the way the high-risk allowance is set up, you have to be in a high-risk area, and when we have a serious casualty and they're evacuated out of the area, then they're not in a high-risk area.

We are going to move as quickly as possible, and I've said that—but in bureaucrat terms, that's still a few weeks—to correct the situation so that no wounded soldier is going to suffer financially because of this. We will come up with some other allowance that will make sure nobody loses any money.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Black, right on schedule.

We'll go over to the government now—I believe it's Ms. Gallant—for a question and then to Mr. Hawn.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Yes, I'm sharing my time with Mr. Hawn.

I think back to the safety of soldiers, as best we can, given the theatre of operations. Given that tanks are a defensive platform to protect our soldiers in Afghanistan, what must Canada do to ensure that we have sufficiently trained personnel in order to man the tanks?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'm going to hand that over to General Hillier.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Ms. Gallant, I would be banned from the Armoured Corps—I am a cavalry officer—if I said the tanks were only a defensive weapon. They're there to help us achieve success in the mission of helping Afghans get enough security so they can rebuild their nation, and at the same time, to have that very valuable characteristic of lending greater protection in some of the very specific missions to the great Canadian soldiers who man them. They're on the ground now. We have certain workups to do before we'll actually employ them in the region, but we'll have that capability ready for them within several days, to be used by the commander in theatre as he deems fit.

We've actually got the process down. We've focused all the tanks in Canada in one unit in western Canada. That has resulted in the great synergy of being able to do training more efficiently and more effectively and generate the tank crews and the tank troops and the tank squadron necessary to go on a mission like this, rather than have it spread across the nation in three different units. We have focused the initial crew training on tanks out in western Canada, using the great training area at Wainwright, Alberta, in which we sank a lot of money to make a world-class training area that can actually replicate the kinds of situations such as Afghanistan, so we can prepare our soldiers to go in and do their job there. In fact, we're executing all of that right now. The tank crews were ready to go. We wanted to give them mission-specific training before we did send them in. That was the only reason we had about two or three weeks after the announcements were made and the approval had been given to us to go ahead with the mission. We started moving the tanks right away.

The training part—to deliver those crews to match them up with the vehicles that have had the latest modifications and upgrades done to them—was all done before they went in and has actually worked very smoothly in this case and was something that we were prepared to do.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, gentlemen, for joining us.

My first question is for the minister.

Minister, there has been a lot of talk in Parliament and other places about balance, or a perceived lack of balance, in Canada's position in this mission. I'm going to make a statement or suggestion and ask for your comment. We're part of a coalition of 36 or 37 countries that as a group, as a coalition, is carrying out defence, development, and diplomacy. Is it fair to say that because of where we're geographically situated in the country and the particular capability of the force that we have there, we are providing more of the defence than the development and the diplomacy, but that the mission is balanced in terms of the overall coalition? After all, it's the overall coalition that's going to accomplish the aim.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I agree it's the overall coalition that's going to achieve the aim. For instance, when it comes to drugs or the

poppy trade, Canadians as such have little involvement in it. It's the responsibility of the U.K. and some other countries. In the south in Kandahar province we have responsibilities, and we are involved in all three—security, development, and governance. But you might not forget our effort in Kabul. We have the strategic advisory team of 15 officers in Kabul who work for the President and provide the President and his government organizations advice on how to organize—how to solve problems, how to get instructions from ministers to people in the field. They're helping to building a governance model there.

In the Kandahar area, similarly, our PRT is there. In the PRT we have people from Foreign Affairs and CIDA, and RCMP and military personnel, who are working on development and in governance in the Kandahar area. They're helping the Governor of Kandahar. Of course the main organization we hear about and see on TV is the battle group, because the battle group is out there offering security. It's not only offering security to our development efforts. You must remember that the United States has aid development programs going on there. The Afghan government has programs going on there. Then we ourselves have programs, as do CIDA and Foreign Affairs. Our battle group is trying to provide security along, with the Afghan police and the army, to the whole of the Kandahar province to keep all this development going.

• (1620)

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So the mission of the coalition is balanced?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Yes.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: One of the parts of that, of course, is to train the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. I'd like to ask for both the minister's perspective and the CDS's perspective, because they're perhaps closer to what's happening on the ground. There are different challenges in training the Afghan army and the Afghan police. What are some of the most difficult challenges there, what are we doing to meet them, what are our expectations of success, and when do we expect to achieve success?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll start with the army. One of the challenges is that even though a nation has been given primary responsibility for it, there are three or four other countries involved at different stages. Even Canada is involved in training Afghan soldiers into company groups in the Kabul area. One of the challenges is that the three or four countries involved may have different ways of operating. It's a challenge for the Afghan army to make sure that from top to bottom they have a common doctrine and common procedures.

I think the United States is ultimately responsible for the training of the army, so they have to be talking to us, the French, and some other countries working with the Afghan army to make sure it stays with one doctrine.

The other challenge for the Afghan army is equipment. They use old Soviet-style equipment. Some of their weapons and vehicles are decades old. NATO is moving quickly right now to provide them with more recent weapons of the old Soviet style. As the former Warsaw Pact members who have joined NATO are getting rid of all their weapons, they're going to migrate them to the Afghans.

The challenge with the police is really serious. The army gets paid on a regular basis, so the soldiers get paid, but the method for paying the police goes through the various provinces, and it's intermittent. Some police get paid on a regular basis and some don't, and that causes a challenge. If police don't get paid, they have to get paid some way or other, so sometimes the police are not.... People don't necessarily run to the police for help in some areas. That's a challenge.

The other thing is that the police don't have much in the way of equipment. You see them running around in Toyota trucks in ribbons. But they're brave, I have to tell you. The soldiers and the police are very brave individuals. They go into firefights with basically next to no protection. They do a very fine job.

I'll hand it over to the CDS.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Minister, thank you.

Mr. Hawn, I would say that the Afghan National Army commencement and development is a story that we now want to repeat with the Afghan National Police commencement and development.

I know how difficult it is simply to change a small thing in an army or the Canadian Forces, let alone build something from a basic white paper. In three and a half, almost four years, they have accomplished a miracle.

The United States has been the lead on that. Nobody else could have done it. We are engaged now in the southern part ourselves specifically with several *kandaks* that have just arrived in Kandahar province, and what we want to do is to help train and develop and support them so that they become the most capable *kandaks* or battalions in Afghanistan itself.

At the four-year mark, they have accomplished miracles with about 30,000 soldiers. The challenges that they have are immense.

One, there's a 60% illiteracy rate in the country, and so taking a young man and training him to be a soldier in a complex operation when he is illiterate is a difficult thing to do.

Two, they want that army to reflect Afghanistan, so they're recruiting from all the tribes and bringing them into multi-ethnic or multi-tribal battalions. When they move those battalions around the country, that now becomes a challenge for those whose families are in another part of Afghanistan. Given that their mass transportation system is essentially non-existent and their ability to get pay to those families is non-existent, you get an attrition from that.

Thirdly, they've been in constant operations for three years, ever since they've been built, the first battalions, and of course that has caused an attrition in numbers, as people are tired of being away from their families. Some of the wounded and killed and the losses that they've taken have been significant, and so they have now, in the

short term, reached a small plateau where they really need to rebuild the present units they have and then carry on upwards in the development of the army.

But despite all the challenges, including the equipment one that the minister mentioned, this is an incredible story. Hats off to the United States of America on how they've done it, and hats off to the Afghans for the way they're doing it.

As to the Afghan National Police, in my view, right now we are in development with the police across Afghanistan where we were two and a half years ago with the Afghan National Army. Now I think the recognition is clearly there that all of us have to pull together to make the Afghan National Police the kind of sustainable security force that a country needs as part of a long-term development.

Huge money is being invested by the United States. In this last month, I think \$1.2 billion was committed. We have a significant role in the southern part ourselves in helping train the police in Kandahar province for all the great reasons we need to do this, helping equip the police and helping mentor the police. We expect, actually, to take more action in that area as they bring more police in.

The last part I would say, going back to the Afghan National Army, is that we had this last year a small but important contribution that has had a great effect. We have a training team of 15 of our officers and NCOs and young soldiers who run the national training centre for the Afghan National Army. After the various countries have helped them bring together a battalion of trained individuals—officers, NCOs and soldiers—our team takes them for about three or four weeks and runs them through a complete battalion exercise, starting at section level of 10 men, live fire, all the way through to battalion exercise, and validates them before they go out into the field anywhere in Afghanistan. That effect has been incredible, and we have received nothing but praise for the great work of some young majors, sergeant-majors, and NCOs and officers who have been doing it for us.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hawn.

That concludes our first round. Now we start a five-minute round with Mr. McGuire, and then back over to Mr. Calkins.

Mr. McGuire.

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, I would like to iterate our support for Mr. Bachand's request for you to reconsider the motion. I don't know how that could have been misconstrued, because we're just asking for the same courtesy that past governments gave to past defence committees so we can do our job. So I'm glad that you have agreed to look at that again. Hopefully we can have our regular briefings, and as you say, we'll be able to be more informed and be able to do our job in a better way.

I have two questions. One has to do with the deployments.

We have, I think, six-month deployments, and you yourself, Mr. Minister, said we're probably going to be there for quite some time. Given the small numbers that we have in our armed forces, how fair is it to send our troops back five or six times, which is probably going to happen? If the past teaches us anything about that part of the world, it's going to take quite a while to get to the position where the local government and the local armed forces and police can actually take over.

It must be terribly hard for anybody to be in that situation that often. I know our guys are tough and they're doing a great job, but there has to be an end to this. How are you going to address that particular problem in our commitments to NATO, given our small numbers in the armed forces?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll try to answer this in part, and then I'll pass it over to General Hillier.

At the moment, our commitment is to the end of February 2009. We've made no judgment beyond that. As a country, we have that commitment to NATO. We may be longer—who knows?—but I think government will make that decision somewhere in 2008.

Regarding the commitment we have right now to the end of February 2009, we are trying as best as possible—given that we're trying to increase the military at the same time—to ensure that most people don't go back to Afghanistan, to the combat area, within that timeframe. That is, for those who started in early 2006, we should have enough people—there are exceptions in some support trades—if we do our recruiting right and reassign people in the armed forces, to get us through to the end of February 2009 without committing large numbers of troops back in that zone again. I don't anticipate anybody being there five or six times. There could be some exceptional person, but I don't think that's very likely.

I'll hand over to CDS.

• (1630)

Gen R.J. Hillier: Sir, after having worked in Ottawa for the last two years, I'd volunteer to go back to Afghanistan anytime. It's less complex and less intense, and I'd probably enjoy it a whole bunch more. I'll tell you that truthfully.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Gen R.J. Hillier: Let me say something, sir. First, our deployments are moving to condition-based, not strictly time-based, and we're doing a lot of work to make sure we get this right. Some of the deployments may be slightly longer. With those in senior command appointments, such as General Fraser, you simply cannot have a rapidly changing face. If you're going to develop a relationship with the governors of the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Oruzgan, and all the folks engaged there, you've got to have a bit more time. So condition-based is where we're going on our deployments.

Some of the more intense deployments may be less than six months. We'll judge that as we go through this, and we'll be prepared to respond and shape it for the best effect out the door. So condition-based is one part there.

Secondly, we have to grow the force. Many of our units are hollow units. We need to be able to proceed with the recruiting with

the necessary financial resources to be able to pay for all that, and grow the force and get those units—particularly right now, the combat units, the infantry, but not just—grown to their capacity back here in Canada.

What happens now is this. Let's say we have a requirement in the battle group that goes out with three infantry companies. In order to get three infantry companies—because they're not manned at the 140 or so that we need them manned at, they're manned at 90 or 95—we actually have to squash together four, five, or even six companies to build three of the right capability to go out the door. We have to grow the force, and we're turning our attention to that in a very precise way.

Sir, we have to use all of the Canadian Forces to do the missions. Over this past 10 years, all of us have been busy, but deployed operations have been the most intense and most demanding on people. I don't have the exact numbers, but I believe in my heart that for 100% of the deployed operations, which we have run over this last 12, 13, 14, or 15 years, we have used 40% to 45% of the Canadian Forces to do them.

I'll give you an example of how a decision made 10 years ago impacts us now, and we only see the implications of it. We received some huge financial cuts back in 1994-95. Part of the way we saved money, as we slashed the Canadian Forces, and slashed our equipment and our people—have I beaten on that enough?—was to take it out of posting budgets.

So we took what was \$500 million to \$600 million—where we move people around the country for the best blend of training, experience, and balance in what they're doing—out of operational units into a training establishment where perhaps life would be more predictable. We took a huge amount of that money away. We locked people into units, which we thought was a great thing, because stability is important. It is important, unless you're locked into a combat unit that's going back on operations every 18 to 24 months. So that signaller in there, that young engineer, is the same person doing all the missions, and the ones in the infrastructure in the training system.... Because we didn't have the money to put them back in those units, we ended up with some guys and gals with medals out to their elbow and some with none.

So we have to balance and better use that one. We are going to make sure we put the focus on where the most intensity is for the specialties and have as many of those...so we rotate people through as little as possible. My ideal is that for each person going to Afghanistan, between now and the end of the mission in February 2009, it will be for the first time. We know that's not going to be possible, but we aim to do so as much as we can.

We will re-role people who are in the training system right now, designed to be something else. We'll say for the next two or three years, you're going to be infantry, and then you'll go back to your primary MOC. We're going to go out to the reserves and see how many people we can attract to do component transfers for a longer-term period, or else for longer contracts with us, and give them all the training and work them up. In fact, we'll use every single asset we have.

Most importantly, we'll look after the people we have doing the job with a whole variety of measures, including fixing the allowance discrepancy that was talked about earlier. And equally important, sir, we're going to look after their families in a whole variety of ways that we have never done in this past decade and a half.

The Chair: Thank you, General.

I allowed that to run over a little bit, because it was a very important intervention, but time is up.

It's over to Mr. Calkins, and then back to Mr. Bouchard.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Minister, and the Chief of the Defence Staff, for appearing here today. Mr. Minister, I think your responding so quickly in getting back to this committee is a testament to you, and the fact that you've now appeared twice on this same topic. I'd like to thank you for it.

You may recall, Mr. Minister, that the very first time you appeared before this committee I asked you a question about the Nyala vehicle, because it was something fairly new to me. Now that we've had an opportunity to evaluate the Nyala vehicle in its operational theatre, I would like to know what the assessment has been of the use of the Nyala vehicle, and whether the Canadian Forces plan to continue to use this vehicle in operation—and not only in Afghanistan. Is it going to be a significant piece of kit in the future? I am hoping you can elaborate on the efficiency of the Nyala and how its operational effectiveness has been so far.

• (1635)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Again I'm going to make just a few comments and then hand it over to General Hillier, who has more details about the Nyala than I have.

The Nyala is a superb vehicle for the roles we have it in now in Afghanistan. The Nyala was built to, where possible, defeat mines. It certainly can defeat a single mine. Sometimes the Taliban pack three or four mines in a row, and so you could have a four-mine explosion. But we've only had one incident so far with the Nyalas where we had a soldier killed, and in fact we're investigating that now, because it was a very odd circumstance.

They have been very good vehicles. As you know, there was a second buy of Nyalas, and most of them will be streaming into Afghanistan as soon as possible for the troops.

I'll hand it over to the CDS.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Sir, I would say we're delighted with the Nyala vehicle. There are Canadians who are alive today who would not be if we did not have that vehicle. It's not a perfect vehicle, but no

vehicle ever is. You always balance the advantages and the disadvantages for it.

We have bought a sufficient number; we have more being delivered now. It is exceptionally good in convoy use on trails and flat terrain, if not in the really rugged, deep-trenches kind of terrain. It's not really built for that.

So it's exceptional in that area. It is functional in extremely rough terrain, but not the kind of vehicle you would want in that rough terrain all the time. We bought it to provide more protection from the improvised explosive devices and the suicide bombers we encounter. It has been marvellous in that role.

We did have one young soldier, Trooper Wilson from the Royal Canadian Dragoons, killed on the Nyala. We've already taken steps—I would not say what they are, because we have some operational security concerns on it—that we believe would prevent in the future that kind of death, or reduce its probability. You can never be sure 100%. We continually evaluate the vehicle to see whether we can make some improvements to it that can just make it an even better vehicle.

I think by the end of this month we'll have close to 100 Nyala vehicles. They're going to be with us in the mission in Afghanistan, and obviously, if we go elsewhere around the world or out of Afghanistan, we would use those we have until they run out. We're walking through options now to come forward to our minister with to say whether it is a vehicle we want to get a lot more of, or whether we need another type of vehicle. We'd like to be at the cutting edge of technology on those vehicles that defeat explosive devices, defeat suicide bombers, and still do cross-country manoeuvre, and still allow us to dismount in a hurry when we have to do it.

I had a chance to drive the vehicle, to try it at the remote weapons station, to be a passenger in it on the 50° days across country. It's not very comfortable when you have eight troops crammed into the back of it and it's 50° outside, but it's something people put up with, because it is a good vehicle and they have confidence in it.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you very much. That's good to hear.

I've always considered the troops' safety as very important. When the troops were initially deployed up in the Kabul region and we lost the soldiers early in the operation when they were operating Ilitis jeeps, I was absolutely horrified that we didn't have equipment like this. It's good to see, and I'm very happy that we're moving forward with getting better equipment for the soldiers there.

Keeping with the same line of questioning, then, with the deployment of the Leopard tanks over there to add to the kit that's there—the Nyala vehicles, the LAV IIIs, the G-Wagons—is there any other piece of kit on the ground right now that the CF could use on the ground and that they're asking for and we should be examining?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Every time there's an incident over in Afghanistan, the Canadian Forces quickly evaluate the conditions to see what caused the incident and in what ways we can ameliorate that kind of condition in the future. That includes looking at every vehicle we use over there and modifying them to improve their safety. It also means we look at any of the fleets of vehicles we have back here to see whether they could also be employed.

We have been doing destructive testing of a number of vehicles. We simulate suicide bombers and things like that on our various vehicles to see which vehicles and what types of machines withstand these attacks better than others.

I don't know that I want to go any further than that.

•(1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to go over to Mr. Bouchard, then back to Mr. Hiebert, and then over to Mr. Cannis.

Mr. Bouchard is next, for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Also, thank you, Mr. Minister, for being with us this afternoon, in the company of the general and deputy minister of National Defence.

Before I ask my question, I must tell you that I was very happy to hear you say that you are prepared to reconsider your decision to inform the committee regarding progress of the mission in Afghanistan. We are very interested in following this progress. As an MP, I am often stopped and asked by my fellow citizens about what is happening in Afghanistan.

So here is my question, Mr. Minister.

Is Canada going to deploy its F-18 fighter planes in operations with NATO countries or with the Americans? We know that in Canada we have two bases with F-18s, which are combat, fighter planes, namely Bagotville and Cold Lake. Is there a preparedness plan, should the F-18s be called on to take part in operations?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Bouchard, at this moment there is no plan to deploy fighters to Afghanistan. I will never say never, but at the moment it's not even on our horizon. If the situation changed, we'd have to look at it again, but at the moment a number of countries are providing fighter cover in Afghanistan, and they're sufficient—but we maintain plans to deploy CF-18s. We have a commitment to NATO that in the event of a crisis, we would dispatch six CF-18s to NATO. We maintain that plan and the resources to implement that plan.

That's the situation at the moment with respect to fighters.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Thank you.

Canada is taking part with the NATO countries to combat terrorism.

Mr. Minister, I expect you have many discussions and conversations with NATO defence ministers.

Could you tell us what these defence ministers' concerns are? Have you also talked about the timetable or the duration of the mission? If so, could you tell us what they say regarding the duration of the mission in Afghanistan?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: The basic challenge for NATO defence ministers and chiefs of defence staff is that helping to rebuild a society like Afghanistan is a great challenge.

We've said a number of times that we're trying to help rebuild a country from a governing point of view, trying to make the lives of people better, and trying to offer security. The great challenge is always an issue at NATO. I may have it wrong, but I believe the population of Afghanistan is estimated to be somewhere around 26 million or 27 million people. We have a GNP of 119 or 120 times theirs, and we have about the same population—we have 33 million people—so you can see how far back they are. It's a great challenge for NATO, but none of the ministers ever question whether, ultimately, we're going to succeed. There's general confidence that we can do it, because we are among the richest countries in the world.

As to the timeline, there are timelines out there. The Canadian timeline at the moment is the end of February 2009, but there are timelines based on agreements in London and agreements in Germany. In 2010 there are certain things to be achieved, and in 2011, etc. There are times out there.

Although you may hear people on the news and different people with an interest in Afghanistan comment that this problem will go on for a long time, there is no set time in NATO. NATO isn't saying we're going to be there until 2012 or 2015 or whatever. NATO, at the moment, is committed to try to achieve the conditions that I mentioned earlier in my speech: we're trying to create a level of governance that would allow the central government and the provincial governments to deliver services to their people; we're trying to get roads and bridges and schools, etc., rebuilt so that society can operate again; and we're trying to suppress the insurgency to a level at which it doesn't interfere with the day-to-day lives of most people. That's what NATO is trying to do.

•(1645)

The Chair: Thank you. The time has expired.

We move over to Mr. Hiebert, and then back to Mr. Cannis.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for being here today.

During your opening remarks you commented that to accomplish success with this mission there are three objectives we have to accomplish: a stable government, terrorists who have been defeated and denied sanctuary, and Afghan national forces that are well established. I'm wondering if you could inform the committee as to the progress we're making on all three of these areas.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I have to start at the national level first. What we see on TV everyday is because, of course, our national press are oriented to us and what we do, and it's important to them, and Canadians want to know what we're doing. But you have to understand what's happening in the whole of Afghanistan. I may have the number wrong, and maybe the chief or the DM can correct me, but I think there are about 34 provinces in Afghanistan. Of those 34 provinces, the insurgency is a great challenge in maybe six or seven. In the remaining provinces you have, in Afghan terms, relative stability. That's why you don't hear of many incidents in the north or the west of Afghanistan. Even in parts of the east of Afghanistan you don't hear of regular incidents. Once in a while you'll hear about a suicide bomber in Kabul, etc., but in the rest of the country, except for about six or seven provinces, you have relative stability.

The challenge right now is primarily in the south, and the two most challenging provinces are Kandahar and Helmand, where the British are, and to varying degrees, the provinces that surround them into the east. That's where the focus of NATO and the NATO commander is right now in trying to suppress the insurgency in those provinces. In the provinces where it's relatively quiet, the various NATO nations and the government and even NGOs get on doing what they have to do to improve the quality of life for people.

In the provinces in the south and in our province, Kandahar, we have a great challenge. We are trying to suppress the insurgency and, at the same time, trying to make people's lives better.

Also, even if you look at development in the province of Kandahar, we're not alone there, as I mentioned earlier in one of my answers. The United States aid program has many projects operating in the Kandahar province; the Afghanistan government has projects going on; and we—the Canadian government in various forms—have projects going on there. But in some of the areas they're greatly challenged.

Recently, as you all know, tragically, we lost six soldiers trying to build a four-kilometre road because the Taliban don't want us to build this road. It will connect one community with another community, and they'll be into the main highways and will have a better life. In our area particularly, and the British area in Helmand, development is very, very difficult.

But even that being said, we are progressing and developing. We are building roads and we've built schools. I've named a number of things we've done so far. We are about to launch a relatively large number of projects over the next few months in the Kandahar area because we're bringing in another company. One of the Van Doos companies will be coming into the Kandahar area by the end of November. It is going to be dedicated to protecting the PRT. Right now, because there's so much insurgency going on, a lot of the protection for the PRT has to go from time to time to deal with the insurgency.

When the Van Doos company gets there and goes into Kandahar and protects the PRT, they will be dedicated to protecting the PRT, and that will allow the battle group and the tank squadron that is streaming in at the same time to deal with the insurgency. This means that we will have more ability to protect our development.

We'll be able to do more. Not only is it a matter of money and will, but we will actually have more protection to carry on development.

• (1650)

The Chair: You have half a minute.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I have a quick question.

A few weeks ago Professor Sean Maloney testified before this committee that it was his belief that the reason four soldiers were killed on September 17, just prior to the return of Parliament, was because the Taliban were trying to manipulate the Canadian media to sour the Canadian public on our mission in Afghanistan. I was wondering if you could quickly tell us what's your view of the media coverage that we've received so far. Is it too focused on the casualties and not enough on the successes? Do you think the Taliban are manipulating the media?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I don't believe in any conspiracies. To have a conspiracy, you really have to put a lot of effort in. I haven't seen any conspiracy.

The central organization of the Taliban, of course, is quite astute. They do try to manipulate public opinion; they not only want to affect public opinion for their own people in their own area, but they also want to affect public opinion in NATO countries and other countries. They want to always give the message that they're somehow succeeding and we're failing, so that our people back home will get the impression that we're not succeeding.

Yes, the Taliban manipulates, but I would not attest to the fact that four soldiers were killed because the Taliban was trying to send a message. They try to send a message every day.

The media coverage is pretty good. We have embedded media in Kandahar, and they report fairly on what's going on. It's just that I'd like to see them report more than just action; I'd like them to report more of what's going on in the society. Before I visited Afghanistan the first time, I saw Peter Mansbridge on CBC. He actually went into Kandahar City, and I actually got a look at Kandahar City and the life there because the media were there, whereas previous to that all I ever saw was vehicles blown up on roads and two soldiers standing off in the distance somewhere. That was my impression, as a person who hadn't been to Afghanistan, of Afghanistan.

The media are absolutely fair. They report what's going on and they report it relatively accurately; I'd just like to see them show a little bit more of the rest of the life.

The Chair: Thanks.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Mr. Chairman, do you mind if I say a word to that one? On the media side, I had a very specific prejudice, if you will, both good and bad.

The Chair: I think the committee would welcome that. Go ahead.

Gen R.J. Hillier: I was just crumpling up my recommendation to the minister for the deployment of F-18 fighters....

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Gen R.J. Hillier: But actually, I agree exactly with what the minister said. We have no need to make any recommendation to him on anything to do with aircraft.

Sir, I'll come back to your question.

Let me just say on the media that we have seen some very balanced coverage that talks about this complex mission and all the dynamics of it in an incredible way. We've seen some of Lisa LaFlamme's reporting, and reporting from Christie Blatchford and a variety of others who have been balanced and complete and have been out there with our soldiers, have been on the reconstruction projects, and have been with Afghans.

I've seen some of the other stuff. All they do is stay inside the wire. I had at a bunch of journalists when I was there 10 days ago. I talked to them and asked if they had been outside the wire. Most of them said no, or very little. They all desperately wanted to go out; they had the opportunity to go; head offices back here in Canada in some of the major media outlets were refusing to permit them to do their jobs. They worry about casualties, obviously. They are worried about insurance rates, certainly, and perhaps other things.

We have been encouraging those head offices to change that policy.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Cannis and then back over to Mr. Hawn.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me open by saying maybe the media is also frustrated that they're not getting adequately briefed so that they can present the fuller story. But on that, I too want to welcome the minister, a former member of this committee, and General Hillier as well.

I want to thank the minister, first of all, for his candid response that it was his decision in terms of the request that the committee put to him. I personally appreciate that very much.

That said, Minister, I want to put you at ease on behalf of everybody. We in no way intended to ask for confidential planning, future planning, and so on, because you first and foremost as the minister, General Hillier, and all of us have in mind the safety and security of our men and women, especially when they're abroad in this type of theatre. But I use the example of the Kosovo conflict. On an ongoing basis, Parliament and parliamentarians from all parties were continuously being briefed, upon request and even before requests, so that we as parliamentarians, and on behalf of our constituents and Canadians as a whole, were able to respond to their many questions.

As a matter of fact, and I put this as a suggestion to you, Minister, through you to the Prime Minister today, that there were members of the opposition sworn in as privy councillors, who were also briefed on an ongoing basis. Given, of course, that Prime Minister Harper has said that we are in a state of war, I find no better time, then, for the Prime Minister today to reach out and follow the same type of tradition that has been done in the past.

The other comment I have, before I ask two brief questions, is that you said this government is seeing that our military is getting what

they need to do their job. I'm very pleased with that, because one thing I found so rewarding in this committee, which I formerly chaired and you were a member of, and even under the tenure of Mr. Pat O'Brien, was that we were all on the same page. We all had one issue, how to support our military, even under difficult times during program review and as we moved forward to do the best we could, with your support and others.

But for the record, I would also like to remind the committee, and members and the audiences that are listening, that in the 2005 budget, Minister, you will recall very well that there was close to \$13 billion allocated by the previous government, which you, General Hillier, I recall, on television were praising in appreciation of the new funds that were coming to support our military—and I thank you for those comments.

Minister, you said terrorism is a global threat, and we all agree. The question I'm getting from my constituents—and I believe Canadians right across our beautiful country say this—is if it is a global threat, as you rightly pointed out, why is the rest of the world not engaging? I know you were in Slovenia and you worked very hard to try to get the other ministers on board. I thank you for that. But today they're not responding. There are these so-called, as you described them, caveats. Well, there are no caveats when it comes to protecting our society. They should be, whether they are in Poland, or in Italy, or in Germany, or anywhere else in the world. We're fighting global terrorist activities, as the general has put it in the past.

So I ask you why, as General Hillier said, we are in fact players... and I don't want to quote him exactly, but they're listening to us in NATO. This committee was at NATO headquarters, and I was so proud of how they looked upon us as a military presence. Today, why are we not forcing them and saying, hey, we made a decision, we're there, where's your participation? Terrorism isn't restricted to North America, for example. What else can we do, Minister, from your point of view, as a country, to get rid of these caveats and force the rest of the international community to join us in fighting terrorism?

• (1655)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: When I was in Slovenia—and I think I may have mentioned it to you because you were there—I got together with the countries in the south and we talked about our mutual challenges. The short version is that I asked them to lobby other NATO members who weren't in the south or the east to remove their caveats and to think about contributing more troops. Since that time, the Chief of the Defence Staff has been talking to his fellow chiefs of defence staff. He hasn't finished that process yet. I have started a process of talking to ministers of defence to see, as I advocated for the other people in the south, if we can get these other countries to remove their caveats and to provide more troops.

There is a meeting in Riga in November. The heads of government will be at Riga. I'm hoping that, by that time, these problems will have come to a head and will be resolved or partially resolved.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

I'm afraid that ends your time, Mr. Cannis.

We're going over to Mr. Hawn, and then back to Ms. Bennett.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Thank you, Chair.

This is for the CDS. We've talked about hearts and minds. It's a catchphrase. A Canadian soldier is probably accepted as being better, perhaps, at the hearts and minds game than soldiers from some other forces. How are we dealing with the very fine line between doing the hearts and minds side without giving up the security side, for our own folks or for the Afghans we're protecting?

Gen R.J. Hillier: That, sir, is a tough issue. It really is. And occasionally you don't get it 100% right, as we found out tragically when we had a platoon in a village handing out school supplies, trying to deal with a bunch of little kids who just wanted to get on with life. We had four of them killed because of the mission they were involved in that day.

It's a constant balance. I don't do it from back at National Defence Headquarters, because I don't have the kind of situational awareness and understanding that allows it to occur. We put in place superbly trained, prepared, and supported commanders, right down to the junior non-commissioned officer level. On an hourly, daily basis they judge that balance: when you're in an armoured vehicle, buttoned up, moving quickly through an area, talking with nobody; when you are dismounted, going through a village, and dealing with people there; when you take your helmets off, and take your sunglasses or the ballistic glasses off and take a risk there so that you can actually make eye contact. They do those judgments on an hourly and daily basis.

In support of that, we give them an enormous amount of materiel, or put materiel right behind them, so as not to force them to make those decisions unless they really need to. And sure, they can sweep through an area, ensure there are no Taliban around to the best degree possible, help the Afghan national forces clean out the area.

Then we have our CIMIC teams moving right directly behind them to start developing the relationship with the village elders, finding from them what they most desperately need for the population of that village or that small district and then delivering it right away, because we probably know 50% of what they immediately need before we arrive there, so we have it right ready. We have found that combination works best.

Getting to it a little more aggressively was one of the reasons we had recommended to the minister, and then got government approval for, the enhancement piece—specifically the company to give the CIMIC team security when they deploy out, because that's where the real issue was. We were certainly securing the PRT compound, but to be able to put out a significant number of CIMIC teams each day with those kinds of capabilities and resources and the ability to meet with folks, you need some security. That's why we asked for the extra company, to improve that.

So it's a combination of things, Mr. Hawn. It's never perfect. We learn every single day. The minister referred a little while ago to the “lessons learned” process. If something happens, we have a team within two hours on the ground where it occurred, who analyze what it was and take immediate lessons from it. Within two to four hours past that, we'll have those lessons throughout the entire organization in Afghanistan. In 24 to 36 hours we have those lessons back here and we start a process then to say, how can we now become better on those things? So a constant learning process would be the third part of it.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Good. Thank you, sir.

Minister, at a recent debate in Parliament on Sudan, there was a statement made that there was a memo on the desk of the Minister of National Defence that said we have—and they used different numbers—1,200 or 1,600 extra troops that could be sent to Sudan. Could you comment on that, please?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'm not aware of the memo. I don't ever remember receiving such a thing. We do not have the capability, except in the most extreme case, to start sending troops of those numbers anywhere else in the world and we certainly couldn't sustain them. I don't recall ever receiving such a memo.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Perhaps it was a different Minister of National Defence?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I don't know. It could be.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: General Hillier, you don't recall ever—?

Gen R.J. Hillier: Mr. Hawn, I do recall: I've never sent such a memo. Not only that; I can categorically say that we don't have 1,200 to 1,600 troops. I just went through the greatly detailed process of what we're doing to make sure we can pragmatically, with common sense, handle the demands of the mission in Afghanistan, and that leaves no room for a significant mission elsewhere—at all.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Okay, good.

This is for both of you gentlemen.

[*Translation*]

Is there one thing more important than all others to ensure the long-term future of the Canadian Forces? .

• (1705)

[*English*]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Is there one thing more important than the other to ensure the success of Canadian troops?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: In the long term, beyond the mission: the long-term future of the Canadian Forces.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: For the long-term future of the Canadian Forces, I believe it is a coherent plan and the money to implement the plan. The Canadian Forces need long-term investment. For many years they were underfunded, and this has basically hollowed out the military. The CDS was alluding to the fact that sometimes when they want to put infantry companies together, they've got to get two and put them together.

We're got a great re-equipment challenge, and we have a manpower challenge to increase the size of the forces. It will take a long time and a lot of money for Canada to have the very effective armed force that it deserves as a G8 country.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you with my French.

The Chair: You caught us all a little by surprise there.

Ms. Bennett will end the second round. You have five minutes.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I think you know that Canadians still aren't sure about what we're doing there and how it seems the nature of our assignment has changed, particularly around the three Ds. I want to know if there is a plan to engage Canadians in the decisions that need to be taken in terms of how much of it is development, how much is....

We thought we were there to protect the schools, yet hundreds of schools are still being blown up. We seem to be doing something other than what we thought we were there for. That would be my first question. How do you, as a government, make a decision as to whether you spend more on the military or more on development? How will Canadians be involved in that decision?

Second, I want to know if every soldier is tested for PTSD on return, and are they treated and looked after before they are even considered for redeployment there?

Third, General Hillier had asked...in terms of looking after the soldiers, I understand that soldiers are treated on the base, but families are waiting two years to get a family doctor in town. You are still not treating families as families. In situations like PTSD you are at a huge risk of domestic violence, and it seems extraordinarily unsupportive of our troops for us not to be able to treat our military families as families.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll try to answer as quickly as possible.

There is actually no change in the plan. It is actually the same task and the same original plan to which the previous government committed the troops in Kandahar. What has happened is that the intensity of the insurgency has increased over the last few months. As the insurgency increases, we have to react with more and more military operations to suppress it.

In the increases we're putting over there, you'll notice that we're not only increasing our capability to carry out military operations, combat operations, but we're also putting resources in there to make sure our development succeeds. We haven't lost the focus that we have to develop and suppress the insurgency at the same time; it's just that the challenge right now is that there is a pulse, an increase, in the insurgency. As that insurgency comes under control and is suppressed, we can put ever-increasing effort on development. Right now we are definitely oriented to developing—to get projects going, to get success there. One of the examples you see in the press; as I said, we had six soldiers killed trying to build a road.

I'll have CDS speak to this in more detail, but all our returning soldiers receive careful assessment of their situation, both from a

physical and medical point of view and from a psychological point of view.

With respect to family doctors, I'll put it this way: officially the Canadian Forces and the Government of Canada are not responsible for providing medical care to families, except in isolated areas. The sole responsibility of the Department of National Defence is to provide medical care to their soldiers, sailors, airmen, and airwomen, but the Canadian Forces have been moving as quickly as possible in their family support centres, certainly in the areas that are not in major urban areas, to try to make some arrangements with the local people to try to get the doctors there to give some care.

An example is Petawawa. If you go up to Petawawa, which is not a big town, they themselves in Petawawa have a shortage of doctors, but the local family centre and the local town have made some arrangement whereby they hire doctors on a part-time basis to provide care to the families. But—how will I put it?—this is not a prime responsibility of the federal government.

● (1710)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's no way to treat the families. You can't do family medicine without seeing the whole family.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'm just saying that may be so, and we're trying to do the best we can, but except in isolated areas, we cannot commit Canadian Forces—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Why? I thought you wanted to support the troops.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Because you are now getting into constitutional issues. The provinces deliver medical help, and you're a doctor, you should know—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I know that the troops are not being treated well. Some of them are on two-year waiting lists, Mr. Minister.

The Chair: The time has expired, Mr. Minister, I'm sorry.

The time has expired, but if the CDS wants to jump in on that issue with someone else, that's fine.

That ends our second round. When we get into our third round, we have 20 minutes left and we have five-minute spots. How it will proceed will be as pre-organized—the Liberal Party and back to the government, over to the Bloc, and then back to the government, and that'll bring us almost to the end.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Surely I can get one little question in, Chair.

The Chair: Well, you're way down the list here, and if everybody gives up a little bit of their time we can, but....

It starts with Mr. Dosanjh, and then back to Ms. Gallant, for five minutes.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Mr. Minister, I just want to put on the record that I actually beg to differ with you that this is the same mission that was started by our government. The mission is totally out of focus. CIDA money isn't flowing to the PRT in an adequate fashion. All we've been doing for the last several months is war fighting. Security was part of this mission. This mission is absolutely unbalanced.

I have a question I really want to ask you. When we were talking about what preparations and discussions you may have had when you placed the motion for extension before the House, it is obviously now clear that General Hillier and others in the military are having to take extra special measures to ensure that we don't fall short in terms of the numbers of troops required to actually fulfill the mission until 2009.

The question I have, sir, is this. Did you really consider the issue of how stretched we might be with the capabilities we had if you extended the mission in a rush fashion, as you did, to 2009?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I guess the short answer to that, Mr. Dosanjh, is yes, we did consider it, and I must remind you that you did vote against the extension of the mission. Yes, we did do the calculation. We did do the calculation on the advice of the Chief of the Defence Staff, and I'll have the Chief of the Defence Staff make his own comment in a minute. We did this on the basis of the best military advice we could have at the time.

Chief.

Gen R.J. Hillier: I would simply say, from a strictly military perspective, our mission remains the same—to help Afghans build a country of their own that they want in a democratic political process, with all the positive characteristics that can come from that, including removing the terrorists' base and increasing the security and stability for people who live there.

We are doing a significant amount of combat operations, because the security threat in the short term is the main obstacle to building that country. But to say that's all we are doing is absolutely incorrect. We are doing a whole variety of development in the south—Canadian Forces with Foreign Affairs and with CIDA. We're building bridges, building a road, delivering medical assistance to village after village after village, and helping build schools. We're working with the Governor of Kandahar and his tribal councils to help them develop efficient processes and procedures to deliver to the population what they want to deliver to them. We're helping train and equip their police force. We're helping to build the type of capacity that the police force can use then to actually sustain security once their army is built to a level and the Taliban are reduced to a level such that we can get a cross-over so they're running the security part of it.

We're doing all of that while the combat operations carry on. There are hundreds of other organizations and countries spending money to do that also, so what I talk about there is only a small part of the overall piece. And the effect of it cannot be underestimated.

Part of the CIDA money has gone into inoculations of children, which is something that we take for granted here in Canada, where our children are inoculated against the basic diseases of life as a matter of course. We don't even stop to think about it. This is the first time this has ever occurred in Afghanistan. In part as a result of \$2

million of CIDA funding, five million children have been inoculated against polio, which is a main killer in that country. When you see the little kids running around—55% are less than 14 in that population, so their average age is slightly younger than the age of those of us who are sitting around this table—and see the visible diseases and parasites on them and then realize what those basic programs are doing for the people, not only in Kandahar but also around the rest of Afghanistan, you realize it's not just about fighting.

The fighting is necessary if the Taliban continue to destroy that process, and we're engaged in it to help them. The Taliban are the cause of the fighting, and the other Afghans, the vast majority of the population of the country around all of Afghanistan, in the south in Kandahar, want us there to help them rebuild.

• (1715)

The Chair: One minute.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Mr. Minister, if we're talking about the categorization or the characterization of the mission, the purpose is to create a stable country, and I understand that. The mission is the mission of the military and the PRT. PRT was the mission, and the defence forces were there to assist the PRT.

Now it seems that defence has become the major element—in fact, contrary to what NATO said. In January, Major Andrew Elms, the British spokesman for the NATO force, said, and let me quote, “If you think of a policeman who's armed, but he does not go out looking for a fight, that's along the lines we're looking at in terms of the NATO mission”. Sir, that is not the mission we have today.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I disagree with you, Mr. Dosanjh. The mission is exactly the same. The military has not received one iota of change in direction from the original government. It's the same mission. What has happened is that the intensity of the insurgency has gone up, which has required us to put more military power into the place to try to suppress the insurgency, so we can get on with development.

Our government's main focus is on development—governance, development, and security. Security is there to support development, and that's what we're attempting to do, despite these very trying conditions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Ms. Gallant, and then back to the Bloc.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What can be done to better explain to Canadians the tremendous, yet unsung, accomplishments the troops are achieving in Afghanistan?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: In many cases, the troops are the best spokesmen. When they come home, many of the troops talk to their local newspapers, to the local media, and they explain their situation. I have been impressed by the quality of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen, and how eloquent they are in expressing their feelings about the mission. Time and again, they explain why they believe in the mission.

Even the families of the soldiers, whom I meet when we're receiving back in Trenton, family after family tell me and tell the chief that their loved one believed in the mission and they believe in the mission. I think allowing individual soldiers, when they return, to explain what they were doing will help the public understand.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: With Remembrance Day coming up, we have Legions looking for keynote speakers. Would it be permissible for the soldiers to tell what they witnessed in Afghanistan?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Yes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Could you tell us a bit about the care in theatre and in Landstuhl? What sort of care do our soldiers receive once they've been injured and taken out of combat?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: I'll ask the chief to answer that.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Ms. Gallant, it's world-class. I've talked to many of the soldiers who have come home wounded—in fact the majority of them, either in Kandahar, in Landstuhl, Germany, or here across the country, depending on which hospital they've been in. To a person, they have been effusive in their compliments and praise for our Role 3 hospital at the Kandahar Airfield, which is a multinational hospital that's Canadian-led, with British, American, and Dutch physicians and physicians' assistants all sharing part of the burden. They have an incredible team, and the soldiers say—including a couple I sat down with on their beds when I was there two weeks ago—they've never had care like that. This kind of care has been delivered for them in a hostile environment. We believe that's necessary in order to have the confidence to ask them to go out and do something that is risky and dangerous.

Secondly, when they leave Landstuhl and come home, they will say, almost to an individual—and perhaps every one of them—that this is the foremost medical facility in the world. That's their assessment of it.

The families that go over—and sometimes we have families go to meet the individuals in Landstuhl, if we anticipate their being there for more than a few days, or particularly if they're very critical—also agree. They come back here and say, sir, nothing is better than the Landstuhl Regional Medical Centre.

So as part of making sure that we thank them appropriately, I visited them last week. In fact in November, as I'll be back in Europe for a variety of meetings, I'm going to award them the Canadian Forces Unit Commendation, because they deserve it for their care of our men and women, and their families.

Back here in Canada, we have worked with regional centres. For example, I think it's the University of Alberta Health Centre as one example, and the Civic Hospital here in Ottawa, where we established an understanding of who those great young men and women are who come home wounded, who care.

Young Private Mike Spence was on the Hill several weeks ago for the “Wear Red Friday” rally. He and his dad, who also happens to be a serviceman, and his mom and family say the care has been second to none. They could not want for a single thing. When I went to the University of Alberta Health Centre, the staff lined up to meet me to tell me what great men, great gentlemen, and what great patients our wounded soldiers were, and they asked if they could use them all as examples for the rest of the patients—because there's no reversing

those guys we bring home. They want to get better and get out, or get on with their lives, no matter what.

The care is world-class, Ms. Gallant.

• (1720)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

Over the course of our study on Afghanistan we've had witnesses tell us how wrong it is to encourage the farmers to grow crops other than opium. Would you explain to us why it's important that we encourage the farmers to seek other crops?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Afghanistan produces about 90% of the world's opium supply. At the moment, within NATO, the United Kingdom is responsible for trying to bring this problem under control.

The drug trade is a great source of money for the Taliban. What happens is that the drug people pay the Taliban to protect them, and then the Taliban, in turn, have cash to buy day soldiers. As the CDS mentioned earlier, the Taliban itself—the professional organization—might be a relatively small number, but they buy people at \$12 U.S. a day, which is a very good salary in Afghanistan, and the drug trade is a source of that money for the Taliban.

If you just go in there and destroy the crops and you don't compensate the farmers, you alienate all the farmers. And from the point of view some of these farmers, that's the only thing they can grow right now. They haven't been given an option.

As I said, our government and our military are not involved in suppressing the drug situation, but it is a root cause of some of the actions we're engaged in. Whatever solution NATO and the Afghan government ultimately come up with, there has to be some way to legitimately compensate the farmers. They have to have a livelihood so that they can survive with their families.

This is still being considered. I don't think that a coherent approach to dealing with the drug trade has been determined at this moment. Occasionally, from time to time, the Afghan army and the Afghan police go into areas and just destroy the crops. We want to destroy the crops; we want to suppress opium, because it's bad, except in a medical way, for populations, but we have to find a solution that compensates the farmers so that they have a livelihood.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to Mr. Bachand and then back to the government.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In our quest to resolve the conflict, since we are still trying to ensure that it does not go on forever, there is one subject that we have not yet broached today, that is, Pakistan.

Increasingly, we hear that the Pakistani secret services are actually giving sanctuary to the Taliban and that the border is extremely porous. This means that, when the Taliban are pushed back, they simply cross the border to the Pakistani side, where they replenish themselves, and then come back to attack the international forces.

I know that your visit to Mr. Musharraf, recently, was not a great success. I heard Mr. Musharraf on the CBC. He did not wish to cross swords with the Canadian military. Your attempt concerning the possibility of having joint and other patrols was a good one to my mind.

I would like to know whether you have any discussions with your colleague, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, to try and solve this problem. If the Pakistani problem cannot be resolved, if the border cannot be sealed more tightly or the Pakistani government cannot be convinced to stop giving sanctuary to the Taliban, it seems to me that resolving the conflict could be much longer. There are rumours going around to the effect that there are agreements with the Taliban at present.

I would like to know whether discussions have been initiated with the government, between you and your Foreign Affairs colleague, to try and solve this problem.

• (1725)

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: One of the challenges faced in the south is that the Pashtun people.... There are about 12.5 million Pashtun people on the Afghan side of the border; they're the predominant tribe within Kandahar province, Helmand province, and a whole bunch of provinces in the south and east. There are also 22 million in Pakistan. So collectively they're about 33 million; they're the population of Canada, the Pashtun. There may be exceptions, but the Taliban essentially come out of the Pashtun.

We have on a map a line that shows a border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but in reality it's a porous border. There are mountains and desert, and people can move back and forth all the time. And of course when somebody moves across the border—two or three men—we don't necessarily know they're Taliban; they're just tribal members.

There's no paperwork needed for the Pashtun to move back and forth across the borders, because they have the rights, much as native Canadians have to move back and forth into the United States. So that causes a problem.

There's also.... How do I put this? Afghanistan may dispute where the border is with Pakistan. That adds to the problem.

When I was in Pakistan most recently, and when I met yesterday with the president of their senate, I gave both of them—I was dealing most recently with the defence minister of Pakistan—the same message, that we appreciate what they're doing. They have 80,000 or 90,000 troops along their border with Afghanistan, and they have been suppressing Taliban. They also have other insurgencies in their country that they're dealing with, but they have been suppressing Taliban.

But we asked them to do more, because to us it's like an open door, back and forth into our area. When the Taliban need

reinforcements, they come across the border from Pakistan. And so we have been encouraging them to do more.

One of the modest steps of confidence I've suggested, and my meeting was quite receptive yesterday with the leader of the senate, is that we deploy a liaison officer, not troops. One of the press people in Pakistan—I guess her knowledge of English wasn't that good—translated a single liaison officer into “troops”. I was suggesting that we put a liaison officer with the 12th army corps of the Pakistan army, which is south of us in Pakistan—south of our province—and that we put a Pakistan liaison officer in our headquarters in Kandahar.

I was never suggesting we send troops anywhere into Pakistan. It was that if we have a liaison officer on both sides of the border, they can increase the confidence of both sides that they are both addressing the problem and can pass information back and forth.

I have received relatively positive comments on this and I'm going to keep proceeding with it. We will keep proceeding through our government—and NATO is doing it too through the ISAF commander—to encourage the Pakistanis to do more on their borders. The more effort they can put on their borders into suppressing the Taliban, the better it is for us and the better it is for Afghanistan.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We're just about out of time. I understand the bells will be ringing at 5:30 for a vote. If my colleagues on the government side will allow me, I'd just like a minute to wrap up here.

We'd like to thank you very much for being here today. We understand—I believe the committee does understand—the pressures that are on the department and the military at a time when we are deployed in a very major way. We have asked for officials and people from both of your areas to appear, the department as well as generals, and to date we've had some pretty good cooperation. We understand that at times some people have to postpone or take up other duties because they are busy, but we do hope, Mr. Minister, that you'll take to heart your comment that you will reassess the issue. I think the committee would be very appreciative of that.

We also understand that at this time in the history of this country, the work this committee does is extremely important. We're working on this Afghanistan report, not only for Parliament to better understand when the report is tabled, but also for Canadians to better understand what we're doing there.

I think your comments today were very straightforward, both of you, and we appreciate that. We hope that in the days to come the situation will get better, and that we will be able to start making the difference over there that we went there to make.

Before I adjourn, I'd like to tell the committee that we received approval in the House today for our travel to Petawawa next Tuesday. The clerk will be working on the details of that, but we have a meeting on Monday as well, so stay tuned and that information will be coming out to you. Plan on an early morning rise next Tuesday morning.

The meeting is adjourned.

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