



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on National Defence

NDDN • NUMBER 019 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Monday, October 30, 2006

—
Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): I call the meeting to order, it being 3:30 plus a bit. This is meeting 19 of our study on the Canadian Forces involvement in Afghanistan.

Today we have the first of the half-hour briefings we asked for. With us is Brigadier-General A. J. Howard, director general of operations, strategic joint staff.

What I'd like to do, committee, just to even it up a bit, to make it fairer—in my mind, I think it's fair—is that whatever time the presentation takes out of the half hour, the remaining time would be divided amongst the parties equally for questions. If that meets your approval, we'll proceed that way.

It looks like we have some electronic presentations here.

Just before we get into that, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): I would like to take this opportunity, before the general begins, to say that today—since we are civilized people—, I am here to listen to the briefing he will deliver to us. But I want this to be clear: in my view, the committee is master of what goes on here. I say “master“ because you have already taken some of the time allotted to the presentation, discussions and interactions. I believe that, after the general's presentation, the committee might want to see whether the format is appropriate, whether the time is appropriate, and whether the issues addressed by the general are appropriate.

I want it to be clear that it is for the committee to determine the importance of these briefings. I believe we need to give them a great deal of importance. The mere fact that the minister reconsidered the decision indicates that he is on our side and he understands how important it is that members of Parliament be well informed.

It should therefore be clear, Mr. Chair. I am willing to listen to the general's presentation today, but the different issues we should address after he leaves are the following. Are we satisfied with the time we are given? Do we want more interaction with the speaker? Can we ask that specific issues be addressed, such as equipment, personnel distribution and contacts with NGOs, for example?

Unless my colleagues disagree with me, the committee must maintain control over these presentations and not just sit back and listen passively. The select committee may need to discuss this later. I wanted to raise a point of order, from the start, to make it clear that today, I will listen, but I also want to participate. If the committee

wants more participation, we will need to make sure that the speakers deliver these more important presentations we are asking for.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to essentially say the same thing but in somewhat more specific terms. I want to thank Brigadier-General Howard for being here. It has nothing to do with you, sir; this is an internal matter for the committee.

I am very concerned about the tone of the instructions in this letter that we received. It is as if it's coming from on high and the committee is to do what it is told. The committee is the master of its own procedure. The committee can summon whomever it wishes to summon. It was kind of the minister to agree that we will have briefings from DND, but it is really not for him to decide whether or not we get briefings. We can summon people to come and give us briefings.

If we ask questions outside of the subject covered, it is up to them to determine whether or not any classified information might be revealed. We're not asking for classified information and they don't have to answer those questions. All I'm suggesting is the time limit and the limit on what questions can be asked, the limit on what subjects might be covered—all of those are unnecessary hurdles in the way of the committee being able to do its job in a fairly relaxed fashion.

It's a very serious issue, and nobody is trying to create partisan situations here. I just want to put on the record that, first of all, it was kind of the minister to provide consent. We don't need his consent to get these briefings. This committee is the master of its own work.

Secondly, I don't believe we need to be limited by the timetable or the time that the minister says we can work with those who come and make submissions. Thirty minutes is not the limit.

In this particular briefing, we'll respect that, but for future briefings, as the committee might determine in the steering committee....

I'm not part of that committee. I just want to put my position on the record in a public fashion. I just find the way this is being done very, very stifling.

•(1535)

The Chair: I appreciate those comments. It looks as if we will have to deal with this at the steering committee after we see what we're going to be presented with today.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Will we have a chance to speak before the steering committee breaks up? I'll bring up my comments then, if that's the case, because it's relative to what....

The Chair: No. If you're along the same vein as these two comments, go ahead now.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: My comment is that I understand where Mr. Dosanjh is coming from, but that was the whole point of doing briefings: that in fact they were briefings. Obviously we can call witnesses, and that's what we were doing. We were calling witness after witness, which is the right and proper thing to do. We were getting testimony from people from the minister to the CDS and on down, and that's why we call witnesses.

This is a briefing. General Howard is not a witness per se, in my view. Questions are fine as they relate to the briefing, but I don't think it's appropriate that we treat General Howard as a witness and start getting into other areas that are not brought up as part of the briefing. That's why we call witnesses; that's why we've been doing so for the last several months. I think we're at cross-purposes here.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: We'll let the steering committee figure it out. Let's not argue about it.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I just wanted to get that point in there as well.

The Chair: We're cutting into the witnesses' time. We'll start the half-hour now, if that's all right, sir.

You have the floor as indicated for this session. We'll hear your presentation, and whatever time is left out of the half-hour, we'll split evenly among the parties for questions.

Go ahead, and thank you for being here.

BGen A. J. Howard (Director General, Operations, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Honourable members of Parliament, good afternoon.

It's my privilege this afternoon to provide you with an update of Canadian Forces operations in Afghanistan. I've structured my update to include a brief overview of ISAF and Regional Command South, an overview of the CF elements deployed both in Kandahar and Kabul, and finally a snapshot of some of the CF activities and accomplishments over the last few weeks and months.

Mr. Chairman, let me state up front that I've developed this brief to the best of my ability, but I can, for future briefings, adjust my format to suit your needs and obviously the discussion that has ensued from this.

Finally, while the CF works with many other government departments to make a valued Canadian contribution, my presentation will focus on military efforts. I'm certainly prepared to provide clarification on my presentation if I can, but questions on activities of other departments are probably best addressed by them.

I hope you'll find the slides useful, so that I don't just speak on text.

I think it's always worth reflecting on what our aims are in Afghanistan. The soldiers understand these, but they have a unique way of their own of boiling down and getting to the essence in simple words of why they think they're serving there. Having interacted with a number of soldiers, especially in the preparation of those soldiers who serve in Afghanistan now who were from Petawawa in my previous employment as the brigade commander, what resonates through—and we've heard the soldiers speak—is that their reason for being in Afghanistan is simple: “I want to make a difference in Afghanistan and to help Afghans.” That's how they boil down some of these aims that appear on the slide.

•(1540)

[*Translation*]

We are in Afghanistan to defend Canadian interests, hand in hand with our allies and the Afghan people. Our goal is to expand stability, security and the democratic independence that forever rejects terrorism, its methods and its support.

The purpose of the mission is to protect Canadians against terrorist threats before they reach our shores, but it's also about helping the Afghan people rebuild their lives and their country. The multidimensional involvement of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan requires action on three levels of governance: supporting and advising the Afghan government and national security forces at the national level; leading the multinational brigade at the regional level; and providing a strong battle group and provincial reconstruction team at the provincial level in Kandahar.

[*English*]

Turning to the next slide, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan is a multinational endeavour. Over thirty nations are actively engaged in providing assistance to the Afghan government. Progress is being achieved throughout the country, and despite the challenges we face in the southern region, most of the rest of the country has advanced, albeit slowly. I think it's always important to put up a map to show the entire country, because there are some great things going on. Canadians can be proud of what we've accomplished in Kabul and what the international community accomplishes in at least 75% of the country. There's no doubt about it: we have some challenges in the south.

The expansion and transfer of the NATO ISAF mission from the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom is now complete. General Richards from the United Kingdom is the ISAF commander based in Kabul who is directing all ISAF activities. Operation Enduring Freedom continues; however, its focus is on counter-terrorism.

In Regional Command South, the next slide shows that the relatively recent introduction of NATO nations, which really began earlier this year, has been challenging, to say the least. This map shows you that our partners in the southern region include the British, along with some Estonian troops in Helmand province, and they number some 3,800. I'm sorry the slide is hard to see.

The Dutch are coupled with the Australians in Oruzgan province. There are 1,200 Dutch, 360 Australians, and a Romanian contingent with some U.S. support—800 Romanians and about 400 Americans.

All four groups in these four provinces have roughly the same type of contribution, namely a battle group to provide security and a provincial reconstruction team to help advance development efforts and governance efforts. All four are confronted by the same challenge, namely the Taliban, which seeks to undermine the Afghan government and would really prefer NATO to leave before the Afghans can establish credible plans for a local security apparatus, which is vital to any nation state.

The focus of all NATO battle groups and their PRTs, led by Regional Command South, are essentially the same, namely to make best efforts to establish a secure environment, help grow Afghan governance capability—in other words, help the governor build his bureaucracy—and assist a variety of international organizations and non-governmental organizations in their efforts.

The U.K. force has newly rotated into theatre, so their focus over the last two weeks has been to adjust to Helmand province. The Dutch flowed into Oruzgan province in the late summer and are also acquainting themselves with their area of operations.

As you are all aware, the focus of the Canadian battle group has been just to the west of Kandahar city in the Panjwai and Pashmul regions. Taliban efforts and actions to terrorize the local population in this area, to establish a permanent presence, and to attack Canadians and local Afghans with IEDs and suicide bombers seriously disrupted the governor of Kandahar's ability, aided by the PRT and many others, to pursue much development. Operation Medusa, which has recently been completed, was successful in getting large concentrations of Taliban to leave their fixed defensive positions just to the west of Kandahar city; however, the Taliban still remain a threat.

While the Canadian effort remains focused on this area, we are working hard to expand our influence within the entire province. Efforts—and these are efforts that are similar to those in every province in Afghanistan—look to grow the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police capacity so that they can serve in the areas we operate in and allow us to expand our efforts.

This is a tremendously important subject, building the capacity of the local Afghan army and police themselves to provide security within their own country, and it is a solid foundation of our efforts in Afghanistan.

• (1545)

Over the last two weeks, Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie and his battle group have been working to improve the professionalism of the Afghan National Army soldiers partnered with them. While we only have a few hundred presently, this represents an important milestone.

We need to further grow the Afghan army capacity to provide security. We have created an observer and mentor liaison team of approximately fifty soldiers to work with the Afghan army assigned to Kandahar province. Hopefully, over the next couple of years we can significantly grow this capacity.

Over the last few weeks the provincial reconstruction team has continued its work with local Afghans, and I will cover some of the accomplishments they have achieved in a little more detail.

I have three slides that talk about the Canadian Forces in Kandahar and Kabul, but in the interest of time, I will skip over them. I think you're all aware of the Canadian contribution there. I suggest we roll over the slides on our forces in Kandahar and Kabul, and if you wish me to come back to them, I will be happy to do that.

Next I'd like to discuss some of the accomplishments the Canadian Forces and Canada have achieved over the last several months.

[*Translation*]

Brigadier-General David Fraser officially led the multinational Regional Command South within the international forces for nine months, starting February 28, 2006. The goal was to ensure regional development and stabilization. Under his command of the South Region, the Brigadier-General and his troops achieved several major accomplishments. Some of these include: facilitating the establishment of operational forces in the Helmand and Uruzgan region; enabling the transfer of the operation under NATO control; reinforcing governance within the province of Kandahar; developing Afghan development areas in the South Region; enabling joint operations between our forces, coalition forces and Afghan security forces. Large numbers of insurgents were driven out of the Panjwai region during Operation Medusa.

• (1550)

[*English*]

These are tremendous accomplishments under very challenging conditions. Are things perfect in the south? Far from it. But progress, albeit slow, has been made. Brigadier-General Fraser will pass command to a Dutch general this week, and he and his team of 200 Canadians and the other nations that were represented in the headquarters will head home after nine months of hard work for a well-deserved break. All Canadians can be proud of what's been accomplished by Dave Fraser and his team.

Security is essential to promote stability. There cannot be long-term development if security is not achieved. Therefore, as part of our security mandate, our battle group is deployed in Kandahar province, the former Taliban heartland. In order to remove terrorist safe havens and create, bit by bit, security in development zones, the Canadian battle group, with the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, and the Afghan national auxiliary police, are currently securing the ground in the Pashmul, Panjwai area, as I described earlier, in order to enable development.

Apart from the usual patrol framework, vehicle checkpoints and forward operating bases have been created to permanently secure the land and ensure that the Government of Afghanistan can stand on its own two feet.

Many challenges are still in front of us. However, as the Afghan national security forces' capacity grows and develops into a professional organization, it's our belief that the advantages and local benefits of a strong central government will be felt by the Afghans, and they will accept that there can only be one future. It's a future that leaves the Taliban behind.

The Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team, headed up by a Canadian using multinational players, conducts coordinated inter-departmental operations to promote good governance and to assist the Government of Afghanistan. Through ongoing contact with government officials, including the governor of Kandahar province and the elected provincial council, as well as with local tribal, religious, and opinion leaders, the PRT contributes to the efforts to improve security and enable stability.

The PRT is a key member of the Kandahar disaster management committee, which coordinates relief efforts with NGOs and the United Nations. The PRT has assisted in the distribution of food, water, blankets, and tents throughout the Panjwai region. DND funding, in the form of a commander's contingency fund, was established at \$2.4 million Canadian and is to be used, at the discretion of the commander, to assist with development and security efforts in the area of operations. Sixteen of 27 projects have been completed in the timeframe of our being in Kandahar province. That equates to more than \$700,000 having been spent, from a DND perspective, on this endeavour.

Let me list a few of the other accomplishments to give you a sense of what the PRT is doing. The PRT has purchased medical supplies for the Afghan National Police hospital and has established a form of an Afghan National Police dispatch system, which is similar to a 911 system that we would recognize back here in Canada.

The PRT also provides mentoring by the RCMP to the local Afghan National Police. The provincial reconstruction team has provided more than 1,000 police uniforms, which were obtained from the local economy. We have also provided essential basic policing equipment, such as winter coats, boots, flashlights, belts, and gloves to the registered police.

A third accomplishment, of many, is that the PRT has improved the plumbing system of the city of Kandahar women's prison. A total of nine village medical outreach activities were conducted, four of which have been conducted in the last six weeks. More than 2,000 Afghans have received basic medical care and material assistance in remote areas, from Panjwai to Nazyan, in Kandahar province.

● (1555)

Finally, as an example, a generator was provided for the Cloak of the Prophet shrine in Kandahar city. This is representative of the wide range of assistance coordinated by the PRT in trying to help local Afghans.

I won't spend any time on the strategic advisory team. You've met with my colleague, Mike Capstick, who has given you a good briefing on the strategic advisory team, a part that's not well known to Canadians but certainly is trying to make a difference in the governance from the Kabul end, and, again, I think it is an outstanding endeavour.

Let me conclude by stating that we face many challenges in Kandahar province. There can be no doubt about that. The soldiers and officers I talk to, who I know well and who are on that deployment, feel that Canada is making a big difference. But they are very realistic about the amount of time this will take to achieve, so that Afghanistan can go it alone.

At this point, Mr. Chair, I'd be happy to address some questions.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you very much.

That leaves exactly twelve minutes, which means three minutes per party. Unlike regular rounds in which I'm fairly generous, I'm afraid I will have to stop either the questioner or the witness at three minutes and move on.

Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I really don't want to take additional time with any arguments, but if the general has more time and we have more time, you could extend. I don't know whether—

The Chair: I think we really need to assess this and deal with that in the steering committee.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Fine. Thank you. All right.

General, I have only a couple of questions. I'll ask both of them and then you can answer. One is about the CIDA money getting through. You were on record making some comments on that issue. I'd like you to tell us whether it has improved and what needs to be done.

Secondly, how many Taliban are we facing, say, in Kandahar? And as a result of that assessment, how many additional troops do we need? We're asking other NATO allies to send additional troops and they are not doing that. We've heard estimates that we need a couple of thousand more troops. I'd like to hear from you.

BGen A. J. Howard: Thank you very much for your questions. Let me begin, perhaps, with the last one first.

The Taliban numbers that exist in Kandahar province cannot be looked at in isolation. The Taliban will move between provinces. The CDS, when he was here last week, mentioned 1,000 Taliban, and that's a rough number that best estimates have. Certainly, that number can shift around. As I mentioned before, one of the problems we have had is that the Taliban tried to concentrate larger numbers to the west of Kandahar and actually take a permanent presence. It was the ISAF commander's decision that their presence would be extremely dangerous and that resulted in operations that were successful in dislodging them from there.

But to answer your question specifically, we work on a figure of 1,000, but these warriors can and do shift around.

In regard to your first question, I have nothing but absolute respect for all government departments that are working the Afghanistan file. In particular, CIDA has some outstanding folks who are working overtime, if you will, to provide development and aid to that particular country. The specifics of their long-term program are best addressed I think by the CIDA officials themselves. Certainly, if you look at the development from a PRT perspective, the PRT commander himself—

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm sorry, sir, but thank you.

Mr. Bachand.

● (1600)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Howard, in your presentation before the Senate committee on October 16, you mentioned \$1.9 million being allocated to the Command for various projects. Today, you mention \$2.4 million and 24 projects.

Why is there a difference of \$500,000 between October 16 and 30?

Also, when you appeared before this committee, you were asked for a list of the projects. Could you provide this list to our clerk?

Furthermore, I was very surprised when you said, in your presentation, that you were not the only ones to have money at your disposal in the province of Kandahar. In fact, you said that the UN and NGOs also had money, but you didn't know how much they had, nor what it was used for.

Is there any way to improve coordination between the Canadian Forces, the UN and the NGOs, so as to know exactly who does what in the province of Kandahar?

[English]

BGen A. J. Howard: Thank you for your questions.

To the first one, \$2.4 million represents an increase by DND and the Canadian Forces to the PRT effort in Kandahar. So, yes, you're correct, there has been an increase to that amount of money. I see that as enabling those in the field with more money. Most certainly I can provide the committee with a list of DND projects that we have accomplished and that we have in the mill, and we will endeavour to do that. For CIDA, they would have to bring their own list of projects.

Your last point is a very interesting one, and it is a frustration. I speak as a military man, having served on several operations. Idealistically, we would want the international community to work together in all parts of Kandahar, but the reality is that non-government organizations and international organizations do work on their own, independent of the military. Sometimes to better provide the development from their perspective, they would like to work independently, and it does from time to time loosen the coordination that you would expect might be possible. That's not a bad thing; it's just a reality. So in Kandahar province there are many organizations—for example, the World Food Programme is there, the United Nations is there—trying to do the best job they can. Painting a complete holistic picture of what everybody is doing is the challenge, there's no doubt about that.

The Chair: That's perfect. There are four seconds left. Thank you both.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Black.

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

Thank you very much for attending and for your briefing.

I want to ask a couple of questions specifically about the PRT that you talked about. You talked about the Afghan police and the Afghan auxiliary police. I have some concerns about the reports we heard about the Afghan auxiliary police who were brought in recently. According to press reports, they were teenagers with only ten days of training and AK-47s. So I have some concerns about that, and I'd like you to address it.

Secondly, you talked about a 911 type of system. I'm wondering how that would work in Kandahar and how many people actually have the ability to get in touch with a 911 operation. Are you talking about telephones? How would that procedure work?

The last question I have is around the PRTs and their ability to get out beyond the immediate perimeter of Kandahar city. How is that happening?

BGen A. J. Howard: Let me perhaps address the 911 system first. I want to put "911" in quotes.

What we mean by that is that we have developed—I've actually seen it at the governor's palace—a little coordination cell where the Afghan National Police are actually stationed, so that if, for example, our soldiers on patrol see a problem, or if a local Afghan has a problem, it may be that they have to walk to get there, but there is a centre that can deal with an emergency or problem.

Ms. Dawn Black: It could be a long walk.

BGen A. J. Howard: It could be a long walk. But our soldiers see a lot, so it's just the ability to have a coordination centre so that we can turn and say to a fledgling judiciary that we are trying to create from scratch, "We're having some problems here; we need your help to come and deal with that situation." So when I say "911", I'll put it in quotation marks.

Certainly the Afghan National Police endeavour and the auxiliary police are an attempt to create a judiciary out of nothing. What you and I take for a professional police force here in Canada is certainly the ideal that we are trying to put together within Afghanistan. It's very slow progress. The RCMP officers and the PRT are working slowly and diligently with the local police, who we do have assigned to the region, to try to professionalize them, but this will take some time. The effort with the auxiliary police has been to try to screen out any of those folks who are undesirable and don't have some forms of self-discipline that we would expect from police. It's in very early days, and I think it will take some time to develop from there.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

BGen A. J. Howard: Sorry I couldn't get to your last question.

Ms. Dawn Black: That's okay. Thanks.

The Chair: We'll now go to the government for three minutes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There have been a greater number of casualties on this rotation than Canadians are used to hearing about in the news. What assurances can you give this committee that the soldiers over there right now are properly trained?

BGen A. J. Howard: The training for Afghanistan has been centred and focused on leadership of the Canadian Forces, from General Hillier all the way down to the lowest-ranking folks. We have tried our very best to prepare the soldiers for Afghanistan in several ways. We had a fair amount of experience operating in Kabul, so it was easy to teach the soldiers about the local conditions.

One of the new initiatives we brought into the army was the creation of the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre in Alberta. All troops that are destined for Afghanistan go through that centre, so we're able to practise many of the skill sets they will need in Afghanistan.

I'd like to reassure the committee that it's not just combat they're practising; they're also practising interacting with locals and conducting shuras and PRT activities. We've put a lot of effort into that, and each and every soldier is trained to the best standard we can.

As I told the soldiers from 2 Brigade who were deploying, "I can only give you about 60% of the training you need. You have to get in the theatre and see it yourself. We want you to learn and adapt when

you get there." One of the last messages I left with them was, "Please learn each and every day from everything you see and adjust as you go along."

I'm immensely confident in the training system we have put together for our soldiers going to Afghanistan.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir. This was the first of what is supposed to be some regularly scheduled briefings. As indicated by members, we will be discussing your presentation—the value of it and the format—in our steering committee.

That adjourns this meeting.

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

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

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