



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on National Defence

NDDN • NUMBER 029 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, December 12, 2006

—
Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): This is the 29th meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence, dealing with our study on Afghanistan.

Today we have the Honourable Josée Verner, Minister of International Cooperation.

We're very pleased to have you here, Madame Minister. As usual, we'll give you an opportunity to give us your presentation and then we'll go to a round of questions. We have an hour booked for you; I hope we can keep to that timeline.

The floor is yours.

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation): Mr. Chairman, I want to thank the Standing Committee on National Defence for inviting me to speak about Canada's presence in Afghanistan, particularly as it relates to development.

With me today at the table are Mr. Robert Greenhill, President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and Mr. Philip Baker, Director General of CIDA's Afghanistan Branch.

I am here today to discuss the work that Canada, our Afghan partners—particularly the democratically elected government of Hamid Karzaï—and our Canadian partners are doing together in Afghanistan, particularly in the region of Kandahar.

During my trip to the region in the month of October, I was able to see for myself that the collaboration between the Canadian armed forces, Foreign Affairs and International Trade and CIDA is effective.

The Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team, which houses Canadian Forces, diplomats and CIDA development workers, represents a key anchor from which to pursue mission objectives in the region. President Karzaï emphasized this during his visit to Canada. The mission with our troops is essential to ensuring the security required to create a climate of peace. Without that security, building and development cannot occur.

[English]

Our troops are there to protect with a purpose. Their role is to help expand a democratic Government of Afghanistan's reach in Kandahar. CIDA's role and the PRT is to address sources of insecurity and help create conditions conducive to long-term development. This means starting with basic needs.

[Translation]

Through the Provincial Reconstruction Team, we are delivering a number of streams of activities in Kandahar, most notably \$5 million to immunize all children against polio in the south of Afghanistan, including 350,000 children in the province of Kandahar. With \$4.9 million we also provide food aid to thousands of displaced and drought-affected families as they prepare for winter.

And we are funding \$3.1 million for key infrastructure initiatives such as bridges and check-dams in six Kandahar districts. This is aimed at enhancing the lives and productivity of over 500,000 Kandahars.

As well, we are providing cash for efforts to repair rural roads in Kandahar.

• (0910)

[English]

My officials have recently been meeting with village elders, including elders in the Panjwai and Zhari districts. They have directly heard the urgent needs of these Kandahar community leaders. They have told us they need short-term humanitarian assistance, especially for those families displaced by the recent violent but unsuccessful Taliban efforts in the Panjwai. They have told us they need ongoing development assistance to help them rebuild their communities and create positive employment opportunities for their youth.

Kandahar district councils have recently completed prioritized lists of their most urgent needs, such as access to clean water, bridges, and irrigation.

[Translation]

In addition to these initiatives led by the Provincial Reconstruction Team, the Canadian government is deeply engaged as a key support of Afghan national programs across the country and in Kandahar in particular.

The Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Mr. Ehzan Zia, recently visited Canada to speak to Canadians about development progress in his country. Minister Zia expressed his gratitude for Canada's support of the National Solidarity Program, which his ministry has conceived and managed. Canada supports this program because it delivers results, and because it reflects principles that Canada shares with the Afghan government, such as democracy, and equality between men and women. Under the program, projects are managed by community development councils, including women's representatives, that are elected by local communities.

In Kandahar, such programs have achieved good results in close to 400 villages so far, with more to come. In Kandahar, Provincial Reconstruction Team projects are being completed at a rate of roughly 10 to 20 new projects per month, touching 7 Kandahar districts so far. We are funding the roll out of these projects to 2 more of the 17 Kandahar districts, and more will follow.

In the province of Kandahar alone, Provincial Reconstruction Team projects with CIDA and other donor assistance have resulted in tangible improvement in the life of villagers and the rural population. For example, more than 1,000 wells have been dug and 800 manual pumps have been distributed; 4 large water reservoirs are now in service; 100 km of irrigation canals have been rehabilitated; the provincial transportation and electricity networks have been improved. This means 150 km of new roads, 4 bridges, 50 km of power lines, 10 transformers, and 42 power generators.

[English]

Minister Zia has told Canadians that this help is both crucial and appreciated. Canada's military mission is heavily focused on helping Kandahar rise up from the devastation of more than 25 years of conflict. Canada's diplomatic and development efforts are intense in Kandahar, but also necessarily focus on the whole country. The development progress we are helping to achieve in the rest of Afghanistan contributes to the overall stability of the nation, and consolidating that progress ensures that those areas don't fall back into instability.

[Translation]

The Kandahar stabilization efforts by the Canadian Forces, CIDA, DFAIT and the RCMP are helping to provide the security so important for development progress. The solid progress happening in the rest of the country shows that this is possible. It demonstrates that Kandahar too will share in these benefits, once stabilized.

• (0915)

[English]

Canada has a focus on development, and it's working, but it's a long road, and Canada has made a long-term commitment. There is much reason to be confident that we will achieve our goals, together with our partners. Girls—two million—are now going to school. During the time of the Taliban, not one girl was in school.

[Translation]

Throughout Afghanistan, these projects—some 8,100 to date—are being done by community councils and less than 1% have been subject to rebel attacks. It is for just this reason that we are working with local partners, with elected councils, with representatives of the population. We are assured that they are in full possession of the

projects because these people enjoy considerable support. There is no better way to promote freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In addition to the assistance we provide to the National Solidarity Program, Canada is the largest donor to the national microcredit program, known by the acronym MISFA (Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan). Thanks to this program started by the Afghan government in June 2003, approximately 200,000 people with almost no revenue have been able to obtain small loans. As a result, they have been able to open a small food business, or buy an animal or start some other type of small business. Afghanistan has great potential for free enterprise.

This is why last September the Government of Canada gave \$12 million to MISFA. This money comes from the \$40 million that Canada has reserved for MISFA. The program finances 13 micro-finance establishments that offer various financial services with a view to generating revenue and business development, as well as personal loans to people with limited income. The amounts loaned are invested in businesses in areas such as retail, agriculture and livestock, crafts and manufacturing.

This initiative—one of the rare ways of directly improving the status and condition of women and their families—has produced excellent results so far. It has helped Afghans, and above all women, who make up 75% of the recipients. Loans of more than \$70 million have been given out in 18 provinces in Afghanistan, and 98% of them have been paid back with interest.

I firmly believe we must find a way to continue strengthening this budding democracy, to provide ongoing support to these people of such great will, such great potential. Afghans across the country want to take care of their own needs and those of their families.

We are concentrating on Kandahar and our work is producing proven results. Kandahar is the most unstable area. If we stabilize it, we will be able to continue making progress elsewhere in the more stable regions of Afghanistan. We cannot turn our backs on challenges that we are capable of taking on.

[English]

The situation is growing more stable, thanks to the presence of the Canadian Forces and partners, and we have found successful means of working together for the well-being of the people of Afghanistan.

[Translation]

The violence in Afghanistan will have an end. We know how much progress is possible through development. All hope is permissible and quite achievable.

[English]

Afghanistan would already be lost had we not believed in the determination of its people and their strength of character. We must continue to show equal strength of character in support of their development.

[Translation]

Mr. Chairman, thank you. I would be pleased to respond to questions from the committee.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start our ten-minute round with the minister.

Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): Minister, I'm wondering whether CIDA, or you on behalf of CIDA, have a specific list of all of the projects that have been funded by CIDA, and precisely how much of the money budgeted has already been spent.

• (0920)

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, of course we have a list of projects in progress. It is available. We will be pleased to send a copy to the committee.

[English]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you. When could that be forthcoming?

Mr. Robert Greenhill (President, Canadian International Development Agency): The list is on our website. Every time there's a new project, it's on the website.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Does it include the amount of the budget and how much of the budget has been spent?

Mr. Robert Greenhill: It provides regular updates on both elements, on how much has been budgeted, and then when we've actually completed a year you would see the amount that had been disbursed up to then. In addition, we can refer members to websites for some of the key national projects, such as the national solidarity program in MISFA, so they can receive monthly updates on project impact and disbursements by Canada and by other donors.

On the minister's directions, we'd be happy to provide them.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

How often do CIDA staff at the Provincial Reconstruction Team operate outside the wire? Is it true the local Afghan councillor's bureaucrats must present themselves at the PRT to discuss potential projects most of the time, if not always?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: I regularly speak to the people at the Provincial Reconstruction Team, and of course, for security reasons—and this is the contribution of our Canadian Forces—we must make sure that projects are going ahead and that we are working together with the local community. This is the only way to obtain results.

[English]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Minister, with all due respect, you haven't answered the question. How often do CIDA staff at the PRT operate outside the wire?

Mr. Robert Greenhill: In terms of the issue of operating outside the wire, there are three or four different ways in which CIDA officials and PRT officials interact.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I have a very specific question.

Mr. Robert Greenhill: Sir, let me position it, please.

Due to duty of care issues, we don't provide operational details of that type. Let me—

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I'm sorry. I have respect for you as a witness.

Tell me, how does it breach security for us to know how often CIDA staff operate outside the wire?

Mr. Robert Greenhill: If I could answer your question, sir, people come into the PRT, as you mentioned. We have CIMIC officials who go outside, and when there are strategic meetings, CIDA officials are also in a position to go outside the wire.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Madame Minister, I understand CIDA staff were refused permission last spring to talk to the Canadian embedded media about development projects. Are those restrictions still in place?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: No, there are no restrictions. CIDA personnel regularly gives information to the journalists who come to Afghanistan.

I went there myself and I could see that our work is being done in full transparency.

[English]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I understand last spring they were specifically forbidden to talk to the embedded media. Number one, is that true? Number two, if that was true, are those restrictions off?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: There were no restrictions that forbade CIDA personnel from speaking to journalists on site. This information is false.

[English]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: All right.

In terms of the focus of CIDA funding, I know CIDA is funding various projects in different aspects of life in Afghanistan. Why is CIDA not focusing more on direct infrastructure projects, such as funding the construction of clinics and police stations?

• (0925)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: CIDA intervention in Afghanistan has several aspects. I brought some photographs that were taken in Afghanistan and that show the infrastructures that we are funding there. We are handing them out to you right now, as I speak.

There you can see roads, bridges, sustaining walls, buildings, and ongoing projects. It also shows the amounts allocated to the projects, the supply of electricity, and at the very end of the list, all the projects that were finished up to last August 31.

[*English*]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I understand that. I have a very specific question, and that is, if CIDA is funding the construction of clinics or police stations, I'd like to know. I can go through the list. I'd like to know if you know whether or not CIDA is funding the construction of clinics or police stations. If not, why not?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: CIDA is working together with the local communities. As I mentioned in my presentation, villagers elect a council member who determines his own priorities independently.

Thus, for a community, the priority might be building a school, for another community it might be building a bridge, for another it could be the supply of drinking water.

Our government is sensitive to the needs directly defined by local communities. This is the best way to be successful. It is not up to us to determine the local community's priorities; it must take its own affairs in hand.

With regard to health, as you know and as I said, \$5 million were recently announced to vaccinate 7 million children against polio. Services are also offered to widows and women. These are priorities set by the Afghan government.

[*English*]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I understand that, madame, but my question is, has any village council indicated to CIDA that the priority is a health clinic or a police station?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: With your permission, I will give the floor to the director general, who will give you more details on the specific projects of the communities.

[*English*]

Mr. Philip Baker (Director General, Afghanistan Division, Canadian International Development Agency): As to the question about police stations, we have to keep in mind that the team within the PRT is made up of more than CIDA. We have Foreign Affairs colleagues, diplomats. We have RCMP officers based there as well, along with Canadian Forces officers and soldiers.

This team works together with an appropriate division of labour across the whole stream of possible projects to be done in Kandahar. In this case, policing and substations, for example, are a particular focus of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP officers and Foreign Affairs, working together through the global peace and security fund, another source of funding for the PRT.

So they are funding and constructing substations for police in various communities.

On the clinic side of the question, each village will create its list of priorities, and at the moment there has not been an explicit request for a clinic. But we do anticipate those will be coming through in the next wave.

So we do expect that in the near future CIDA will be funding the creation of clinics in some villages, according to their requests.

• (0930)

The Chair: Very good. Thank you. That's right on time.

Now on to the Bloc for 10 minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will share my time with my colleague.

Good morning, Madam Minister. First, let me say that CIDA is doing good and even excellent work in Afghanistan. I know the people who work for CIDA, and they are indefatigable workers. As far as we are concerned, we must make sure that the projects are properly targeted. And this is what I want to ask you about.

First, in your notes, you spoke a great deal about Kandahar and very little about what is being done in the rest of Afghanistan. Might I know why?

Hon. Josée Verner: Kandahar is Afghanistan's most unstable region. We have committed \$100 million a year for Afghanistan as a whole. As I said in my presentation, it is important to stabilize the Kandahar region so that we can make progress there as visibly as is being done in the rest of Afghanistan. Of course, we continue supporting programs all over Afghanistan, as I said in my presentation, because the rest of Afghanistan must not become unstable while we are focusing on Kandahar.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: The reason why I asked you that question, Madam Minister, is because in another committee on which I sit, we received several witnesses—I say several, because there were more than four, and I could give you their names—who came to tell us that the presence of warlords in the other regions of Afghanistan is causing problems. These warlords, who have often been put in power by Canada, allow corruption to go on. I am not criticizing Canada for this. This is probably because no one else was available there.

Also, women, among others, came to tell us that there was still no justice in Afghanistan. Corruption and insecurity are destroying the system. They came to tell us that Hamid Karzai's government, although it has given some freedom to the media, newspapers and magazines in the country, has nonetheless instructed the media on the way they must deal with subjects of national interest, and that the media that did not comply received threats right from Hamid Karzai's government.

We have two or three problems with regard to this: there is no justice yet, there is corruption and democracy has hardly even taken root. On the other hand, I think that CIDA—I have the entire list of your projects—is trying to work with the local people to ensure greater justice, less corruption and more democracy.

This is why I asked you that question. Why are you only telling me about Kandahar? Of course, that is where you went, and we also saw the photographs. But what is happening elsewhere? What is CIDA doing in the rest of Afghanistan to help the people and prevent the Taliban from coming back to power?

Hon. Josée Verner: This is a big question and it requires big answers from several points of view.

CIDA is continuing its work with its partners all over Afghanistan. You made special mention of women's rights, etc. You are probably quite aware of the work being done by Rights and Democracy, for instance, a Montreal organization that has trained several thousand women with regard to their rights, that has opened shelters for women in Afghanistan. You have the list of projects that we announced, which includes literacy projects for women, professional education, aid through microcredit so that they can take control of their own future—I witnessed this when I went there in October—especially in agriculture, so that they can receive training and help for cultivating small gardens, to be able to sell their fruits and vegetables and increase their revenue.

I also informed you that recently, in Montreal, we had the opportunity to receive two journalists at the UQAM, two new Afghan women reporters who, thanks to the programs we are funding, have been trained as journalists. They presented a video on how women's rights have evolved since 2001.

Is there much work left to do? Absolutely, madam, there is a great deal of work left to do. As I said in my presentation, this country has been at war for over 25 years. Women have literally been terrorized. Yes, there is work underway to ensure that women will take their future in hand. Let me also inform you that 27% of members in the Afghan Parliament are women.

I do not know if I've covered your entire question.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Not quite.

Hon. Josée Verner: If there is any information missing, tell me, because your question had several parts to it.

● (0935)

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: I will now let my colleague continue.

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, Madam Minister.

Some witnesses came before this committee and spoke of a crisis, of famine, of families that do not have resources to buy food. As I listened to your testimony, everything seemed to be fine—even very encouraging—and there is progress.

Do you share the point of view of those witnesses with regard to a real food crisis in Afghanistan, or at least in certain regions?

Hon. Josée Verner: In fact, on October 23, we announced some emergency food aid, for the Kandahar region among other regions. We are following the people's needs very closely. As our programs are refined, we are present with our partners to help the people and to meet urgent needs. That is what we are doing.

I would like to come back to your statements, honourable member, regarding the fact that from our point of view, everything seems fine and dandy. That is not what we are saying; we are saying that progress is being made. That is the reason why we must stay on and continue to help the Afghan population that desires to take its own affairs in hand and to live in freedom, democracy and security.

This is, in fact, the reason why the Canadian government announced that it would be giving more funds to reconstruction. We did this last May, and this why we extended our aid program, our commitment until 2011.

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Thank you.

You mentioned that CIDA was committed to working together with the communities. Each community must set its own priorities and make its own choices.

How would you describe the interest the Afghan people are showing, their participation? Is it passive, or it is dynamic?

Hon. Josée Verner: As I mentioned, there are more than 8,100 projects in Afghanistan, and this certainly shows that the population is interested in taking its own affairs in hand. Moreover, when we evaluate our success, we notice that less than 1% of our projects have been destroyed by the Taliban.

When we work together with the local community, it means that the community has come to a consensus and defined its own project. Therefore it owns the project and it protects it with considerable pride. This is what will ensure the success of operations and yield concrete results for the people. Requests are being made.

Minister Zia came to Canada last week. I spoke to him on Friday. The programs are popular. The people see concrete results and see that they can take their own future in hand, but above all, they see immediate results.

● (0940)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bouchard.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Minister, for your presentation this morning and for taking the time to come and brief the defence committee. We appreciate your doing that.

At recent updates that we've had from the Department of National Defence, and also from other witnesses, they've come and shown us slides of people who were obviously starving, children who were starving, on the outskirts of Kandahar City. Also, the department showed us slides of horrible flooding that seems to have impeded a lot of the work that was going on by Canadians in Afghanistan. I wonder if you could give us any details right now in terms of specific numbers, the number of internally displaced people in the camps outside Kandahar and the number of people who are in desperate need of food aid.

Further to that, I'm curious about who in the camps for the internally displaced is providing the assistance for those people. Is it NGOs? Is it multilateral groups? Is it CIDA specifically?

We've also heard from witnesses who've appeared at this committee about a real concern that NGOs have with the militarization of aid. They've expressed very strong concerns about that. So which NGOs are working on the ground in Kandahar right now? Is CIDA having difficulty finding partners to work with, other NGOs to work with CIDA?

The last question I have along this vein is, how are the other countries doing in terms of living up to the commitments they made in Bonn, and do you have a comparison of how other nations are doing in relation to how Canada is doing in living up to the Bonn commitments?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

I will let the director general answer the question about the exact number of displaced persons.

Let me tell you more about the announcement we made last October 23 regarding the supply of emergency food aid in Kandahar province. This aid was specifically meant for 12,000 families in the districts of Panjwai and Zherai. These families had to leave their homes during the Medusa military campaign. Thanks to the funds that we provided through the World Food Program, we will be supplying 4,400 tonnes of food to the most vulnerable persons, especially those who have been severely stricken by the drought.

With regard to more precise figures of the number of refugees and displaced people, I will let Mr. Baker answer your question so that he can give you more details.

[English]

Mr. Philip Baker: There are two major issues that would lead to a need for food assistance. There are internally displaced families for a number of reasons. There are also drought-related insecurities created for food issues. There are, as the minister mentioned, approximately 12,000 families in the Panjwai and Zhari districts who have been internally displaced due to intense recent conflict. Food aid is going forward to those groups through the World Food Programme. There are—

Ms. Dawn Black: But they're not the only internally displaced people.

• (0945)

Mr. Philip Baker: That's correct. In total, there are about 20,000 families who are either internally displaced or have food and security

issues due to drought, for example. In this case, the World Food Programme is delivering now the first of three waves over a three-month period. So far, over 600 metric tons has actually been distributed to over 6,000 families. There are two more waves to come in short order, over the next two months, getting them ready for winter.

Ms. Dawn Black: Are you working with anyone else besides the UN program? Are there any NGOs on the ground in the Kandahar district that CIDA is partnered with or know of, other NGOs working there?

Mr. Philip Baker: In fact, the number of NGOs active in the province is somewhat limited, compared to other provinces, due to security reasons. For example, there were NGOs that were beginning to implement the MISFA program that we described earlier. They attempted that during one year but then brought those to a halt due to security reasons. There are other small NGOs across the province that are starting to gear up, but for large food distribution, it's the World Food Programme that is manning and leading the show.

Ms. Dawn Black: Thank you. I think also the concerns expressed about the militarization of aid has made a lot of NGOs apprehensive about working in that area.

I sent an inquiry to your department about spending and plans that Canadians were doing in Kandahar, and you gave me back a very thorough document. I want to thank you and the department for that information.

On the development projects that were focused on Kandahar, I was surprised to go through that information and find out that only 1.6% of the funding and the projects we're doing there were specifically targeted to women.

When we listen to the government talk about—not just our government, but also ISAF and NATO—the rationale for being in Afghanistan and the military missions taking place there, they always talk about the needs of women in Afghanistan. It may be the only time in history that women's equality is given as a reason for war.

Anyway, I was surprised that only 1.6% of those funds were specifically directed to women, even adding the nationwide funding for women's programs. Only four programs in Kandahar mention women specifically. I want to ask you about that in particular, because as I said earlier, women and girls are meant to be a big priority in what we're doing there.

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: We must realize that the year is not over. As we gradually identify projects—be they for women, children or for other areas where we want to help the people—we are of course pleased to announce them and to implement them.

With regard to women, when I visited Afghanistan, I announced that we wanted to implement a professional education program for 4,000 Afghan women. We also intend to train 4,000 teachers.

Now let us talk about the condition of women in Afghanistan. They had absolutely no rights, and of course young girls did not have any either, because they are the women of tomorrow. Therefore we must act at more than one level. Not only must we train tomorrow's women, but we must also help the women who have never had the opportunity to have rights, to take their future in hand and to earn their living.

We are most assuredly paying very close attention to all the projects that are proposed so that we can rectify this situation.

Let me take this opportunity to tell you that when I was in Afghanistan, I had the opportunity of meeting with the director of Women's Affairs. She had been on the job for only a few weeks, because she was replacing the ex-director who had been killed. She asked me for two things: first, to come to the aid of women so that they can take their own future in hand, but above all to ensure security, for obvious reasons. As we are able to broaden programs for women in Afghanistan, we will be able to help them more and more.

Let me add something regarding this. Yesterday, I met with a representative of an Afghan NGO who is here, in Canada. He clearly explained that the more we work with the Afghan population, the less security problems we will have. As we become more able to protect the population and give it a chance to take its own affairs in hand, including its own security, we will be making great headway in Afghanistan.

• (0950)

[English]

Ms. Dawn Black: I have a very quick follow-up. When I look at the analysis of the figures and what percentage was going specifically to women's projects, I'm wondering if it means at the local decision-making level—and I know we're partnered with the people in Afghanistan—is it still difficult to get agreement that projects should be specifically targeted to women?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: Let me simply remind you of this fact. Recently, I read in a Quebec newspaper that an Afghan had said that his priority was to send his young girls to school, that in his opinion women have rights, and young girls also have rights and that this is a priority for him.

I would also like to remind you that after the Medusa campaign, especially in the districts of Panjwai and Zherai, the opening of new schools was announced. Nine hundred children could go to these schools and, of course, there are young girls among them.

Last October 22, I also announced that \$14.5 million would be allocated to primary schooling for girls. This was meant to train 4,000 teachers, more specifically women. These sums will be distributed among 11 provinces, including Kandahar.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Minister.

Mr. Blaney.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will share my time with my colleagues.

Madam Minister, we are very glad to meet you this morning and to hear you speak with such conviction about the progress that is being made in an extremely difficult situation in Afghanistan. I think that you have clearly shown the link that exists between security and the progress of Afghan society, especially for women. As I am a member from the same region as yourself, I want to tell you that your earnest and heartfelt commitment to your ministry gives meaning to the intervention of our soldiers from Valcartier, who will soon be leaving to relieve the troops already there. Some 2,500 Quebec soldiers will be leaving to defend our values in Afghanistan. This is important, and I wanted to mention it to you.

You announced a microfinancing project. I would like to hear some details from you about it. Personally I think that the small sums of money are a very concrete way of making a difference. You stated that women were the main beneficiaries of the microcredit program and that the loans are being paid back. Basically, this program is not too costly.

How can this help us to make progress in Afghanistan?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question and your comments.

The microcredit program is an extremely popular program across the globe, but especially in Afghanistan. Among other things, it allows women to take their future into their own hands and earn an income to support their family.

In the photos that were handed out, you can see women working at sewing machines. You must understand that with small loans, these women can start up a small arts and crafts business, for example, or buy cattle to ensure that they and their family survive.

Over 200,000 loans were made in Afghanistan, and 75% of those small loans were made to women. Clearly, that is a good way to assure that they integrate Afghanistan's economy. It is a very popular program, and we most certainly intend to continue working in this and other areas.

• (0955)

Mr. Steven Blaney: Thank you.

[English]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, and if there's any time left, Mr. Chair, I'd like to share it with my colleagues.

Thank you very much for this handout. I think Afghanistan is far less developed than we thought. It stands to reason that you would need electricity and access to water before you built a more complex structure.

Recognizing that Canadian soldiers have been deployed to Afghanistan both to fight terrorism on their own shores and to provide a stable and secure environment for reconstruction and development to take place, we always have the safety of our soldiers utmost in mind. Last week in the national news it was reported that some of the Afghan soldiers actually trade ammunition to the Taliban in exchange for security for their village.

Can you tell me what measures CIDA has in place to ensure that the money that taxpayers put toward CIDA is used for the purpose that it's intended and not going to arms or ammunition?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: As you know, our government is very committed to accountability.

We are working with very respected partners, for example the World Bank, which retained the services of Price Waterhouse Coopers to ensure that the money is properly channeled, that the money intended to help Afghans is spent appropriately. The report is available to anyone who wants to consult it.

Furthermore, we are working with NGOs that have their own very strict accountability criteria and we make sure, of course, that the money is well spent.

CIDA has its own internal assessment programs, which are also very strict. Funding is only paid out once the various project stages are completed. That is how things are done.

To conclude, I would like to quote a senior official at the World Bank, Mr. Mazerolle. He recently commended CIDA and the Canadian government for its strict monitoring of the way that the money intended for Afghanistan was being spent.

[English]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

When a country such as Afghanistan cannot purchase technology from within—for example, de-mining technology—is Canadian business made aware that purchases are being tendered, or is the recipient country free to purchase technology or products from the competitors of Canadian business?

•(1000)

Mr. Philip Baker: In this case, there are two fronts on this approach. The Government of Afghanistan is doing its own internal procurement, and Canada in fact is helping with a project called the procurement marketplace, which is assisting both donors and the Afghan government to source locally within Afghanistan, to help build capacity and build its own base of small and medium-sized enterprise and private enterprise.

For Canada, for projects that companies can bid upon, you will see systems through CIDA and the Government of Canada like the MERX system or the ACAN system, advance contract award notification—open and public bidding processes that allow private firms and NGOs to be bidding on certain projects. CIDA also has an arm that assists the private sector with feasibility studies as well.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

The Chair: There are two minutes left.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, I'd like to follow up on a couple of points that Ms. Black raised.

In the briefing from the NGO that talked about rampant starvation in Afghanistan, the pictorial evidence was about six or seven pictures of the very same child. But I want to ask a question.

Clearly there are people who need help. We talked about the amount of food aid given. Do we have a grip on that situation in Kandahar with respect to at least making progress to define that we can solve, in relative terms, the hunger problem in that area within a reasonable time?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: The CIDA team, which works with the Provincial Reconstruction Team, has weekly meetings with the food assistance organizations, for example, to provide us with accurate information on the status of projects as they move forward. Vaccination and food aid programs come to mind.

If I remember correctly, yesterday, during my conversation with staff, it was said that over 7,000 families had already received food aid. That is information I received yesterday morning.

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn: The second point raised was that 1.6% of the funds have been directed to programs specifically for women.

All programs directed to the Afghan people obviously are destined for women, men, children, boys, girls, so is the 1.6% to women potentially misleading if somebody takes that out of context, since all those programs are going to all Afghan people?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: You are right to raise that issue.

Generally speaking, of course, the aid we give to Afghans is also intended for women. We will not give food aid solely to women in order to claim that we set up a project especially for women.

Generally speaking, approximately 90% of women benefit from one or another of our programs in Afghanistan.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner: Philip Baker would like to make a comment.

[*English*]

Mr. Philip Baker: I'll just add one more quick comment on that. We are a major supporter of the national solidarity program nationwide—one of the top funders, in fact. That program has reached close to half the villages already, right across Afghanistan.

A key tenet of that program is empowering women, such that they are involved in democracy at work right at the local level; they are involved in community development councils in selecting and identifying the right projects. It's a key program, one of the many that are reaching out directly to women in the villages right across the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes this portion of our meeting.

Before you go, thank you very much for being here and answering the questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: I would like to thank all members of the committee for having received me today.

I would simply like to remind you all that Canada values freedom, democracy and peoples' right to live in a safe and secure environment.

I want to make sure that, when defending human rights, we defend them for all, including the people of Afghanistan, its women and children.

Our work is very important. We have to ensure that women never again live in darkness. Young girls and children in general should never again be prevented from going to school.

● (1005)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll adjourn this meeting and take a short recess to go in camera. Could the steering committee please stick around for the next portion.

Thank you.

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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