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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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● (1115)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Order. This is our sixth meeting of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan. This is in reference to the recommendation adopted in the subcommittee report on March 26, and then again on May 14, that the committee invite General Thompson and General Howard to discuss the ongoing training for the Afghan National Army.

To that end, Brigadier-General Howard has recently returned from nearly a year in Afghanistan, holding a senior position in the CSTC-A, responsible for coalition support to the development of the Afghan National Army.

Sir, welcome.

As well, Brigadier-General Thompson recently returned to Canada after completing nine months as the commander of Joint Task Force Afghanistan—you were in that position when the defence committee was over there a year ago, I guess, General—the Canadian Forces element in Afghanistan, and also as commander, Task Force Kandahar, the NATO International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, operational command responsible for military operations in the province of Kandahar.

So I think, committee, we have two witnesses today who are going to be able to offer a lot to us in our study and as we look at the preparation of the Afghan National Army, in particular, as it advances in its ability to work in that country.

Gentlemen, you know the routine. I would believe you've been in the committee before. You have an opportunity to present your comments, and then we'll open it up to a round of questions to the committee members.

The floor is yours.

Brigadier-General (Retired) Alan Howard (Brigadier-General, Department of National Defence): Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. My name is Brigadier-General Al Howard. I'm joined by my esteemed colleague here, General Thompson.

I will just say a couple of short words at the front end. I don't think Dennis needs much introduction. He and his troops did some outstanding work down there in Kandahar province, and obviously we'll have a chance to explore that a bit.

I recently returned from a one-year assignment as the assistant commanding general for Afghan National Army development within the Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan, known as CSTC-A, and that's how I'll refer to it.

CSTC-A is a U.S. joint command with other nations participating, as negotiated with the U.S. on a bilateral basis. CSTC-A is mandated to plan, program, and implement the generation and development of the Afghan national security forces in order to enable the Government of Afghanistan to achieve security and stability. In U. S. fiscal year 2009, the CSTC-A budget to accomplish its mandate is approximately $5 billion U.S.

As the assistant commanding general for ANA development, my responsibilities included not only designing plans to grow ANA capacity; I also assisted the ANA deputy minister, the chief of the general staff, and all of their subordinates to build a functional headquarters in Kabul and to enable problem-solving at the strategic level.

In spite of all the challenges Afghanistan might face—they certainly do, and we face many challenges there—it's my assessment that the ANA is well on its way to becoming a viable and self-sustaining military force. Growth above 80,000 soldiers, introduction of modern weapons, vehicles, and equipment, and effective involvement in counter-insurgency operations are but three areas of ANA progress that I observed and helped them with during my tour.

Finally, perhaps you'll permit me to deliver one message. After my one year in Afghanistan, it would be the one that the Minister of Defence, General Wardak, delivered to me on a regular basis: Afghanistan is a grateful nation and the Afghans do fully acknowledge and honour the Canadian sacrifices and generosity.

Minister Wardak considers it Afghanistan's patriotic duty and moral obligation to fully utilize an environment of global cooperation to achieve the hopes and dreams of the Afghan people, who have experienced nothing but misery and suffering for decades. While there's no argument there are many challenges there, progress is measurable, and with the ANA, I think that would be an excellent example.

Thank you.

The Chair: Sir, did you have something you wanted to add to that?

[*Translation*]

Brigadier-General Denis William Thompson (Brigadier-General, Department of National Defence): I do not have much to add, except to say how happy I am that some members visited Kandahar nine months ago.

We are ready to answer questions about the Afghan army and the security forces in Afghanistan.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much. We'll now get to a round of questions.

We'll start with the official opposition.

Mr. Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Generals.

It's good to see you again, General Thompson, under different circumstances.

I appreciate the initial comments. On the issue of the benchmarks and going back to the report of December 2008 regarding the Afghan National Army, we talk about one in five being currently capable of planning and executing near-autonomous operations. We are looking at a 2011 target of at least four of the five being able to do that.

We don't have a lot of time between now and 2011. What is your current assessment in terms of the viability of that target? Either general can answer.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I think we're talking specifically about Kandahar province, so it's perhaps best that I take this on.

During the time I was there, we confirmed one of the infantry kandaks, specifically 21205—so that would be the second battalion of the first brigade of the 205th corps—as being a capability milestone 1. We confirmed in December of last year, after this report came out, that the brigade headquarters is now a capability milestone 1.

The other infantry battalions, or other kandaks, as they're referred to, didn't stand still. Some of them made progress from capability milestone 3, which is low-level platoon operations, to capability milestone 2, so they're all making progress.

The important thing to take away here is that as with any army, it's not a linear path. If you went into the Canadian army, you would find battalions that are at CM3, to use the nomenclature, even though the year previous they had been at CM1, because we go through cycles when you change commanders and you change soldiers around.

There is a plan in place that has 2011 as a target, at least in Kandahar province, and we will get there, but it won't be along a linear path; it will be a sinusoidal curve that grows from this point in time to that point in time.

● (1120)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Do you think it is still achievable?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I'm encouraged. I believe it's achievable, to some extent because of the efforts of our soldiers, but also because there are more soldiers being assigned to the brigades in the south. That's the important piece. We were getting down to 70% strength in some of these battalions, and frankly, they were getting tired.

As General Howard pointed out, there's a real effort to recruit more Afghan National Army soldiers and to push those soldiers into these deployed battalions out in the field. That's the piece that gives me as much confidence as the plan that's in place.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I'm going to ask, through you, Mr. Chairman, about the issue of retention and attracting soldiers to the Afghan National Army.

What's your assessment?

BGen Alan Howard: The Afghan National Army grows, on average, by two battalions each month. That demands a recruiting basis of about 3,000 soldiers. We actually have to turn Afghans away. As we know, Afghanistan is a poor country, and lots of young Afghans wish to join the army, but the army doesn't have the capacity to take them all in. The recruitment is not a problem.

Attrition is an issue that we're going to need to deal with. The first battalions that were created are just coming up now to the end of their first cycle, and soldiers will have to re-enlist. As General Thompson has mentioned, down in the south there are some very busy battalions. The word “retention” is a word that we've introduced into the vernacular within the ANA, and it's something we're going to need to deal with to retain troops.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Through you, Mr. Chairman, as the approach of the Taliban has changed in terms of its operations, how has both the work of the OMLTs and of the ANA forces themselves been able to respond to the changing tactics of the Taliban?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I can certainly tell you that in Kandahar province the principal shift has been away from what you might call conventional tactics to an increase in the use of improvised explosive devices and acts of intimidation, the latter being more the work of police forces, and the former being more the work of the Afghan National Army.

Certainly we are in the process of standing up Afghan National Army counter-IED teams themselves, and EOD teams as a part of that. This may already have happened and it's something I would have to check with my colleague, Jon Vance, who is in Kandahar now.

So there is an increasing focus on the specialist skills that are required to address some of the current Taliban tactics, but the important piece is the real counter—if there was one, or if we could describe it as that—to the change in Taliban tactics is not so much shifting the way training is conducted but increasing the numbers of security forces that are present on the ground.

That's what makes a difference. You need to be able to secure the population, and to secure the population, you need a larger number of soldiers and police. That's precisely why the establishment has been changed in Afghanistan.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Through you, Mr. Chairman, how will the addition of American forces in the Kandahar region change the equation in terms of what we're doing and the role of the Afghan National Army?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: That's a pretty deep question, and you'll have to allow me a little bit of a sidebar here.

There are several issues in a counter-insurgency, and one of them is infiltration routes. Frankly, infiltration routes are not being addressed to the extent they could be at this point in time, because there aren't enough troops. That will be one of the principal focuses of the U.S. combat forces in southern Afghanistan—not the exclusive one, but one of the principal ones. So clearly that will contribute to the overall counter-insurgency strategy.

Will it change what the Afghan National Army does on the ground? I doubt it. They're the ones who are better suited to secure the population, because they understand the population much better than we could ever hope to.

Does that answer your question, sir?

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Right on schedule, too. That's great.

Monsieur Bachand.

● (1125)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to welcome the two generals. Mr. Thompson attended the Royal Military College Saint-Jean. We are always pleased to see officers who attended that college.

My question is for you, Mr. Thompson. I have here a copy of the latest edition of the military magazine *Esprit de Corps*, in which you appear to be overly optimistic. In an article, you said that we are not losing the war in Afghanistan, and you refute what the Americans have said; they do not think things are going well. You seem to be saying that they are painting a very bleak picture of the situation on purpose in order to justify to the American people the deployment of 17,000 new soldiers.

You also said that there have hardly been any civilian casualties, when almost everyone.... Even Mr. Karzai recently demanded that the U.S. stop all bombing precisely because of these civilian casualties. Contrary to what many people see as a loss of territory following Operation Medusa, you said that ground was not lost and that the Taliban changed tactics. They did so because it was clear that they were not able to stand up to NATO forces. In my opinion, that is not a bad move on their part.

Were you not a little too optimistic in that article? Do you remember speaking with someone from the *Esprit de Corps* magazine? If what you said is true, reassure me. I do not think that you are painting a very accurate picture of the situation on the ground. One wonders sometimes whether you are not spreading propaganda yourself when you say things like everything is under control and things are going very well. In the past, I have seen generals paint a very rosy picture of the situation in Afghanistan, including General Howard.

[*English*]

BGen Dennis William Thompson: If I got that correctly, you're asking me if I'm an optimist. The answer is that I am cautiously optimistic.

Up until this point, there has not been...and that perhaps is in the same article, which, no, I have not had an opportunity to read yet. I'll be sure to avail myself of it later.

Mr. Claude Bachand: There's also a nice picture of you in there.

Voices: Oh, oh!

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Well, let me start by saying it's not about me. It's about Canadian soldiers. It's about this country, and it's about our support to the Afghans.

So we can throw up our arms, walk away, and say we gave it our best shot but it just didn't work, or we can acknowledge that we have never applied the correct number of resources to the issue at hand. And that really is the nub of the problem. We can sit here and fix the blame, or we can fix the problem.

I'm from the school that says we need to fix the problem. To fix the problem, you need to secure the population. And to secure the population, you need more Afghan national security forces, which takes us back to the reason both General Howard and I are here today: to talk about Afghan National Army training, formation, growth, etc., because that is the key to marginalizing the Taliban to the point where they have to become a political movement.

That's how you define, incidentally, victory in a counter-insurgency. It's not defined by seizing ground or holding cities or by whatever previous military objectives might have been. It's more about marginalizing a movement to the point where it's forced to put down its arms and engage in normal democratic practices. And we're a long way from that, because we really have yet to secure the civilian population.

To answer the question directly about civilian losses as a result of bombardments, artillery, or otherwise, I can tell you, as the NATO commander of Task Force Kandahar, with 850 U.S. soldiers under my command, that because of the targeting methodologies we use, there were zero civilian casualties as a result of any operations directed from my headquarters.

That's not to say that we tied our people's hands. They certainly had access to all the firepower they needed in order to have the desired effect on the battlefield.

● (1130)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: In the same article, you said that it is the police that should set up in the municipalities and watch what is going on, not westerners such as NATO forces. I agree with you there.

However, in terms of police and army training, what will the arrival of 17,000 American soldiers change? Will it change the role of the Canadian Forces? You recently abandoned an advanced base, which people saw as a withdrawal. Aside from a different rotation in the Kandahar command structure, what impact will the arrival of the new American troops have? Will it change the mission of the Canadian Forces? Will the Canadian Forces spend their time on something else? How will that fit in with the American troops?

[*English*]

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Right. As I said earlier, the principal focus of U.S. forces—and it's not exclusive—will be on the periphery of the province. So nothing will change dramatically for the Canadian Forces on the ground, because they're focused on the city of Kandahar and on the populated approaches to the city of Kandahar, specifically the eastern part of Zhari-Panjwaye district, Arghandab district, and the lower part of Shah Wali Kot and Daman districts. That's where Canadian Forces are focused, and that's more than likely where they'll continue to be focused. So nothing will change in terms of their employment.

What the U.S. will do is allow the NATO commander—Canadian or otherwise—of Kandahar province to influence what's happening on the periphery, which they're not able to do to any great effect at this point in time. That's the difference.

In terms of the command structure, I think these are things that have been under discussion and continue to be under discussion at levels far above my pay grade.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We'll go over to the government, with Mr. Hawn.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

It's nice to hear from people who have actually been there and actually have the expertise and don't rely on retired corporals who run magazines.

With respect to securing a civilian population, I'd like just a generalized comment. I know you can't give a number on this, General Thompson, but you talked about zero casualties. That's a tremendously commendable thing. Can you give a generalized comment on how many civilian casualities we'd have if we weren't there?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I can't, Mr. Hawn. That would be entirely speculative. I have no idea.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: No, I know it's not a number, but suffice it to say that the civilian population is safer because we are there.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: The civilian population that is not under the security umbrella of the Afghan national security forces are certainly subjected to acts of intimidation on a daily basis.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: We were talking about benchmarks, and I have a couple of things for General Howard. You have a broader international view. We have a number of benchmarks and we're measuring progress against them. Is there an international view of how Canada's doing with our benchmarks? Do you have a view on how we're doing with ours, compared to other folks who may have similar benchmarks of their own?

BGen Alan Howard: When I left Afghanistan, nine of the 15 brigades that compose the Afghan National Army—they're spread out in five different regions, five different cores—are combat-capable and are involved in counter-insurgency operations every day, including the brigade within the Canadian sector. I've had a chance to see all 15 brigades and the standard that has been achieved across the ANA. We should be proud of what we've accomplished within the Canadian Forces to help the ANA.

One of the questions was on the growing technical aspects of the Afghan army and their ability, for example, to counter IEDs. It's a very tough subject to get the ANA squared away on counter-IED. There are very high illiteracy rates, and it takes a long time to train the illiterate soldiers we get. I dispatched the very first counter-IED team to my good friend here, Dennis Thompson, in December. That was a 20-man team. The very first counter-IED team in the field trying to learn their trade to come up to our standards was in the Canadian sector.

I personally felt proud as a Canadian. I'm not just painting the walls red here. We are seen as a true partner over there, and certainly when we had challenges within the command, we weren't necessarily looking in the Canadian sector.

● (1135)

Mr. Laurie Hawn: General Thompson, I'll switch gears here a little to the air wing. I don't think you were there for that one, but Operation Sanga Fist was the first air operation in which we had Canadian soldiers inserted as part of a larger force by air rather than ground. How significant is that mission in going forward?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Obviously we made great use of aviation assets previous to the air wing. It just happened that they were British, American, and Dutch aviation assets.

Having that sort of flexibility for tactical commanders is a tremendous advantage, because it allows you to appear in places where the insurgents wouldn't otherwise expect you to be. It gives you the element of surprise and allows you to catch them on their back foot. It also allows you to get close to compounds of interest that would have been indicated to you by intelligence, so it's a significant multiplier. To have Canadian assets only makes the job that much easier for my colleague Jon Vance.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I'd like to go back to securing the civilian population, as you put it. I know you personally had a lot of close contact with them in your time there.

People are concerned. People talk about how the Afghans are lukewarm to us or don't want us there. There is that sort of attitude. Is it that, or are they being prudently cautious because if we don't stay—when I say "we", I mean the broader we, not just Canadians—and the Taliban return, they will want to have hedged their bets on where their support is? Does that go back to the basic premise of boots on the ground and having enough people there to stay long enough to secure the confidence of the population for a longer term?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I think what it goes back to is precisely that.

We do not conduct operations, whether they're ISAF operations, NATO operations, or Canadian operations, without being in direct partnership with the Afghan national security forces, whether that's the police or the army. We always conduct operations in that manner, and that's because we recognize that once we're in among the Afghan population, they're obviously the best ones to be the face of the security forces and to represent their government.

While I would agree there is a lukewarm acceptance that western forces are necessary—particularly in the south, where the insurgency is present and appears to be intimidating larger parts of the population, as they might have done in the past—we find we're much more successful when we operate in partnership with the Afghan national security forces.

The key is getting more boots on the ground, but not necessarily.... Where the population is, those boots should be Afghan boots vice western boots.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Benchmark four talks about the confidence that the ANA has in the population, and it has assessed that about 85% of people are happy with the ANA.

The ANP is a larger challenge, actually. Would you put a number on the ANP at the moment? And how would we get that number up?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I wouldn't put a number on it. You might be able to ask through the researcher. It may have formed part of a survey at one time.

The reason, again going back to the differences between the ANA and the ANP, essentially is that we got to the ANP late in the game compared to when we got to the ANA. One of the interesting facets —I'm sure General Howard can shed some light on this—is that when a member of the ANA graduates from his recruit training, he has a bank card, so he knows he's getting his pay.

When security forces actually get their pay, and they don't have anybody between them and their money and their money and their family, then they're no longer in a position where they have to prey on the local population. This happens in many conflicts around the world.

That is essentially what the problem was with the police. As they graduate now from the focused district development program, they're all given a bank card. During our time, anyway, about 1,000 police officers went through the focused district development program in Kandahar province, and those are 1,000 police officers who don't have someone's hand in their pockets, so they're able to look after their family.

It's an important distinction to make.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You're right on schedule here.

Mr. Dewar, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests.

One of the areas that I think is going to be important is the American footprint on the work that we're doing. I understand the description you just gave, and I appreciate that. I think it's important to lay out the recent changes at the top.

Secretary Gates is quoted as saying, “It's time for new leadership and fresh eyes”, so he's brought in someone new. General McCrystal, who is going to be the top general, obviously will be providing a different direction, and, if you believe Secretary Gates, new leadership and fresh eyes.

In what I've read of the new leadership for the American military, they seem to be trying to do two things. One is to provide more military—not necessarily in numbers, though, and I want your take on this—and a different approach. If we are now inheriting a new variable, if you will, the new leadership, is it too early to state how we're going to change what we're doing?

I appreciate your saying that you're going to continue doing the work you're doing, but it seems to me that there will be some effect on what we're doing on the ground. I'd just like to know your take on it to date with the new leadership change.

● (1140)

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I think it's an excellent question, but unfortunately you're asking me to speculate in some regard.

What I will say is this. While I was there in October or November —I can't remember the precise month—an assessment team came from the United States Central Command. This was part of General Petraeus taking over his new role. They went to all parts of the United States Central Command area of operations, and we met the team that came to Kandahar. We get lots of visitors. Some of them are learned, like this group, and other ones are a little bit more taxing. I can tell you that the officials who showed up from the U.S. Central Command, they had their stuff in order, so to speak. It was quite refreshing. They asked the right questions, and I think that the subsequent strategy that has been developed by the Obama administration is actually probably on the mark. That includes some of the changes, I suppose, that they're making now.

What's important is that the team left with an appreciation, in a positive sense, for how our provincial reconstruction team operates. It is a different model than that used by the United States. You would have noted, recently, that the United States is trying to increase the number of civilians they're going to deploy in all of their various provincial reconstruction teams and across the mission writ large, and they've appointed a senior envoy in Mr. Richard Holbrooke to look at the regional problem.

All of these things are encouraging. So while it may be described as fresh set of eyes or a different approach, that different approach is going to look, in my opinion, and I'm talking opinion now, remarkably like the Canadian approach.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you for that.

On another issue of import, we were discussing the training of police here recently. I know that's separate from the issue today, but it's related. One of the issues that was of deep concern, certainly for me, and I'm sure others, is the fact that when we look at the Afghan human rights commission's reports on the conduct of police, we see there is some really horrific behaviour amongst the police. I know the problems with the police and I don't want to open that up, I simply want to talk about the army.

I couldn't agree with you more that there need to be professional standards and some basic things, like making sure you're going to get paid, to deal with things like corruption. But how is the whole issue of human rights done in the training of the army? Is there monitoring of the army, like there is of the police, in terms of their conduct, and if so, what kind of reporting has been done on that in terms of human rights conduct and standards?

BGen Alan Howard: During my year with CSTC-A, if I can comment on the first question quickly and then move on to the second one, the big thing that was missing for us was enough resources. General Thompson talked about that. I think the influx of U.S. troops will allow CSTC-A, for sure, to better deliver its mandate. It has been an operation that was second in priority for the U.S. when it comes to Iraq. We were very deficient on police mentors and were not able to get enough of the police mentors squared away. I think an influx of U.S. troops will really help with that particular issue.

The challenge that faces the ANA is no longer the production of combat units. They're quite good at that. What I spent a lot of my time doing was building systems—logistics systems, medical systems, and legal systems. We spend a lot of time and we have Canadian and U.S. officers working with their legal branch. None of those officers have legal training; we are almost starting from scratch. The law of armed conflict, human rights, and the like are things the Afghan seniors take very seriously. I worked with their equivalent of the JAG and the deputy minister to start a training plan. We're in very early days with that.

My experience with Afghan generals was that if there was a problem that was reported from the field, we would go to investigate immediately, and they would take it seriously. But to inculcate it amongst all of the Afghan troops will be a work-in-progress over the next several years.

● (1145)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Does the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission monitor the conduct of soldiers at this point, or is that a work-in-progress?

BGen Alan Howard: I do not know whether they monitor what the soldiers do. I know that within the Afghan chain of command, if any abuses are noted, they do come up the chain. We are beginning to put training packages together to explain to the Afghan army the importance of following the rules of armed conflict.

The Chair: We're right on schedule again.

That closes the opening round. Now we're on the second round, five-minute spots.

We'll start with Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, General, for coming. From our testimony I think it has become obvious that Pakistan is a key cog in the wheel to bring stability to Kandahar province. It was made very clear to us that without stability on the Pakistani side, there will not be stability on the Afghanistan side. This is a challenge that is out there.

We would be interested in knowing if the Afghan National Army and the Pakistani army are cooperating. Is there animosity? There seems to be animosity between the presidents, but is there really animosity between those two forces out there? If so, what are we doing about it?

I know we are helping them on the border situation for customs and everything, but I'm talking about both sides of the armed forces. That will become the key element. Perhaps you would like to shed some light on that, if you can.

BGen Alan Howard: Let me start at the higher level, and then Dennis can talk at the Kandahar level.

Quarterly, it was a bit of a confidence-building regime that I observed under way. There's no doubt about it, there is friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. If I was to say any different, you would call me a fool. The issue, though, is confidence-building.

Once a quarter, I observed General McKiernan leave Kabul with the Chief of the General Staff, General Bismullah Khan, and normally his G3, General Kayani, would go with him. They would meet with their Pakistani colleagues at a border point and they would discuss border security issues, confidence-building, and the like.

I hope that does bring fruition. The big thing was to have the discussion, to at least begin a bit of sharing of information, but there's much more work to do in that area. At least the two sides are talking at that level, and that's really what we tried to do. They're very initial steps that have some way to go. The Afghan army appreciates and knows that the situation in Pakistan needs to be stable for them to be able to flourish in the security environment that they have in Afghanistan.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Right. And just to put a more provincial note on it, if I could, if you think of the problems in Pakistan right now, they're predominantly in the northwest frontier provinces and in the federal administered tribal areas, vice Balúchistán, which is the portion of Pakistan immediately adjacent to where Quetta is and where the Canadian Forces are deployed in Kandahar.

In this region, the Afghan and Pak counterparts are the Afghan border police and the frontier border corps from the Pakistan military. Those two organizations speak through a mechanism called the “border flag” meeting, which is a meeting that I would co-chair with whoever decided to host it at that time.

We had three of those while I was there. They would discuss, because now we're talking where the rubber meets the road, such basic issues as radio frequencies, and exchanging cellphone numbers, and talking about incidents that might have occurred over the last couple of months. But these were discussions about real-life friction points.

So that process has to continue and that dialogue between the security forces has to continue down at that level, as well as at the capital level. There's certainly lots of animosity between them, but there isn't some sort of trigger that's going to go off that's going to start a war between Pakistan and Afghanistan at this point in time. Tensions aren't at that level, if you see what I mean.

● (1150)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: But there is still a lot of work of do.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Oh, without question. It's a completely unregulated border. Highway 4 runs from Quetta to Kandahar City. I think you had a session on this, so you're probably better informed than I am on where Canadian Border Services and others are going with the control of the legitimate crossing. What I'm talking about is all those other illegitimate crossings where not only insurgents move back and forth from Pakistan to Afghanistan, but also, clearly, narcotics and other nefarious products. And that piece is going to be tightened up over time.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: One factor, and let's not beat around the bush, is that the Afghan government has accused the ISI of fostering all those things over there.

Does that create the animosity between the two forces? Because if these two forces don't talk to each other at this thing, we have a volatile situation there.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: If they weren't talking to each other, we would have a volatile situation, but they are talking to each other. Sometimes the discussions are substantive. Sometimes it's just, literally, a cup of tea and, as General Howard pointed out, an opportunity for the two commanders to meet each other. Just that act tends to defuse things.

The Chair: Mr. Coderre.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Rae will start.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Just briefly, General Howard and General Thompson, can you give me a profile of the typical Afghan recruit: level of education, background, etc.?

BGen Alan Howard: Certainly from my perspective as I sat at the top, I had the good fortune to go down to the recruiting command on a regular basis, where all of the recruits would come in. They are very representative of the entire country. It is actually quite a thing to see. The battalions are built ethnically balanced. Of all the entities within Afghanistan, the army tends to be a bit of an ethnic balance.

For most of them, their eyes are wide open. If they've come from a major city, they'll have a bit of an understanding of some of the basic things you might see. If they come from smaller towns, they will unlikely be literate, and a thing like a fridge can be a bit of a discussion point.

The one thing they are is extremely proud. As I walked around talking to sections that were already formed, I'd ask about their ethnic background. They'd say, “I'm Afghan.” I was quite impressed with that sort of response. I saw some very proud soldiers, struggling perhaps with some of the advanced concepts because of literacy rates. They are not stupid by any stretch, but when you can't read, that becomes difficult. They're loyal to their country, very friendly, and certainly willing to put their life on the line. They're very brave. That's certainly what I saw.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I'll just add to General Howard's explanation.

In the field, these soldiers are brave to the point of being foolhardy. You can have a guy from our operational mentoring and liaison team, an officer or an NCO, sitting here and he'll tell you that they need to tell Afghan soldiers to take cover, because it's not a manly thing to take cover. They're committed to their country. I don't think I have ever heard of an act of cowardice. If anything, you've got to rein them in.

It's an impressive army but it's very difficult when people are illiterate. We managed to accomplish something as simple as firing an indirect-fire missile from an artillery piece, which is quite an involved operation, near the end of December when this brigade headquarters got its CM1 qualification after a long period of mentorship. We just started with basic math and worked our way up through the basic principles of artillery theory.

The will is there and the attitude is right.

● (1155)

Hon. Bob Rae: I've got to get Mr. Coderre in.

How would you compare the typical Afghan recruit that you've described with your perception of the Taliban, of the enemy, in terms of the average membership? What are we talking about here? The same people, the same kind of people? The same level of education?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Yes, they're drawn from the same population. The only difference is that the committed Taliban have been through a madrassa and are completely brainwashed. There's no lack of commitment to the cause and to the other comrades in arms.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to come back to my colleague's questions. Recruiting soldiers is one thing, and training the chain of command is another.

How do we train a colonel or a senior non-commissioned officer? We have 80,000 soldiers, and in 2011, we will have to make a decision and leave the military mission to make way for the Afghan army, which has to take charge.

[*English*]

What is the status regarding those officers?

BGen Alan Howard: During my tour, one of our big challenges was systems and training. The Afghans have designed an Afghan National Army training command led by a three-star, and we're in the process now.... Our big challenge is to build beyond the level of basic training. Now a soldier enters, he gets a little bit of basic training, he heads to the field, away he goes. Officers have the same thing, but that lasts for only a few months. What we need are the service schools, the schools to teach the officers higher-level concepts. That is all a train in motion right now. We will build an Afghan defence university. Those are things that are under way.

Canada is providing the assistance to build the junior officers staff corps. During my tour, I saw 88 young Afghans graduate from their equivalent of military college. That was the first graduating class. The Taliban had shut it down. That's very much a work-in-progress. For me and for the command, it's one of our major focuses. We are years away from having a viable education system, but we've laid the foundation.

The Chair: Mr. Abbott.

Hon. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Gentlemen, thank you very much for being here today.

I have to tell you that I'm immensely encouraged. The reason I'm encouraged is that you come to us as people who have been on the ground. You come to us as absolute experts. You come to us with a message.

I want to read your own words back to you, General Howard, and allow you the opportunity to expand on them, if you will, because this is the good news this morning. You said: In spite of all the challenges that face Afghanistan it is my assessment that the ANA is well on its way to becoming a viable and self sustaining military force. Growth above 80,000 soldiers, introduction of modem weapons/vehicles/equipment, and effective involvement in counter insurgency operations are but three areas of ANA progress that I observed during my one year tour.

I want to give you the opportunity to expand on that, because I've never seen a headline in Canada, I've never seen an article in Canada in any of the current publications, that will say that.

I really respect the fact that you come to us with the one-year experience, specifically in Afghanistan, and with the expertise that you and your colleague have. This is immensely good news. I don't know how we could underscore, underline, highlight, exactly those words.

BGen Alan Howard: I think Afghanistan's army has made major accomplishments. It certainly has a long way to go, and that's why we're there, quite frankly. During my time there I watched the Afghan National Army be involved in many more counter-insurgency operations than they had been the previous year. The command uses the figure of 60% as the number of operations that the Afghan army lead in. Their air corps is growing. They have 30 aircraft now and they can meet 90% of their demands.

There are challenges, though, and there are numerous ones. The first one is literacy. There are very low literacy rates in the army, and we're trying to teach difficult things. General Thompson was talking about artillery, but counter-IED design specs for radios, really trying to get the soldiers and middle personnel some basic training so they can read and understand the education we're giving them, I think is a huge key. It could be the big, big piece that we need to move forward on.

Second is systems development. Without having had a functioning bureaucracy, a functioning ministry, I spent a lot of time trying to help them with systems, logistics, getting enough equipment and stuff forward into the field.

I think the Afghan army has made some good steps. There's certainly refinement and polishing that is required. Are they able to run security by themselves right now? Absolutely not. The technology and the expertise that we bring behind them, that General Thompson and the troops were doing down there, is absolutely essential to the work they're doing. But, by golly, I saw a lot of progress over the year I was there.

● (1200)

Hon. Jim Abbott: Thank you.

Dave.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you to both witnesses.

One of the things I think you've illustrated to us in many respects is that there's now a growing pride in the Afghan side of things through their military, and perhaps part of it is through their training, through their money and so on. But all of that plays a part, ultimately, in the professionalism.

I know that Mr. Dewar's comments...and well respected about the humans rights. But as these people then become more literate, more professional, in terms of the issues with the Afghan military and the police—I'm sure you saw this—they start to grow, and to understand the need to respect human rights. Is part of that what we see being instilled in them?

I wonder if you can give us some indication as to whether you have seen that progress that we would expect and hope to see with both the police and the military.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: The Afghan National Army that's presently in Kandahar province is a professional force. They are not at odds with any elements of the civilian population. I believe, and it's certainly indicated in the survey that was cited earlier, they are held in very high regard by the population.

The police are playing catch-up. While I was there, Brigadier-General Sageb, who was a provincial chief of police, was replaced after the prison outbreak on June 13, 2008, by Brigadier-General Matiullah Khan. This gentleman, the current Kandahar chief of police, is not about filling his pockets. He gets the idea that police forces exist not to prey on the population but to protect the population.

Through his attitude, which trickles its way down to all the different districts, and the training people receive through the focused district development program, slowly but surely they're building up a professional police force in Kandahar province. That's the key to changing attitudes; it is this training followed up by continuous mentorship.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to Mr. Crête.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Brigadier-General Howard, in your document, you said that the Afghan National Army was well on its way to becoming a viable and self-sustaining military force. How long before it is?

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: The construction of the army is, I think, a long-term process. Certainly as you talk to Afghans, you find they are quite proud of what's going on. But to be honest with you, we're talking in years. This will be measured in years.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: In approximately how many years?

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: I don't know that you can put a figure on it. Anything less than five years to build up the army to the systems we would have in the Canadian Forces, I think, would be unrealistic. If we have the time, we certainly can build that up.

● (1205)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: Do you think the 2011 departure date for soldiers in Afghanistan will be the same for those who provide support to the Afghan army?

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: Absolutely. All the work that is done down in the south by Canadians is well appreciated. We will challenge the Afghan army and we will challenge NATO to find an equivalent partner who is able to work down there, but we will not have it all done before we go.

Let me give you the example of counter-IED teams. Every brigade should have a counter-IED team. I managed to get one going, through the training we did, and delivered down to the Canadians. But the educational systems we need to put into place, the long-term sustainment pieces, they will be a work-in-progress for several years.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: You think the departure date will be the same. Those who provide support to the Afghan army will leave when the combat troops do.

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: I don't think we'll have the job done before we leave, but we'll be certainly proud of what we've accomplished. There's a lot of work-in-progress right now to determine what the steps will be after we leave. But I don't think it's viable that they are going to be able to stand alone without us after we leave.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: Do you know the proportions of the ethnic groups that make up the army? How many Pashtun, and so on?

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: I don't have the chart with me today, but the command kept stats of the different ethnic backgrounds. I'd be happy to provide that to the clerk.

That was almost, in army talk, a centre of gravity. But the most important issue for the minister and the chief was to maintain ethnic balance. As they put together teams, they would ensure the ethnicities were respected so they could work together.

I was quite impressed with that. I thought that was a very valuable tool for them. And that, for them, is how they will keep their army together, by ensuring the ethnicities come together.

I will provide the chart. That's easy to provide.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: Is it possible that the Taliban are infiltrating the Afghan army? Is there a way to screen for that? Is this a problem you have had to deal with?

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: Within the Afghan National Army, the biometrics process was commenced to start tracking Afghan National Army recruits who arrived, and cross-referencing that back to any material the government might have on criminals or on known Taliban.

It's something the leadership is very attuned to and watches closely, but there's not a specific formula.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête: Since there is virtually no justice system, there must not be much in the way of criminal record statistics. Regardless, a Taliban does not necessarily have a criminal record. It could just be someone who is involved because of their religious values and so forth.

BGen Alan Howard: You are right when you say that there are no statistics. Be that as it may, that is something that the leaders have to monitor during operations. I cannot confirm that there are not any Taliban in the Afghan army, but the leaders are....

[*English*]

They're watching closely, sir.

The Chair: Over to Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome. This is a very informative session today.

I know we're here to discuss the military and the changes going on. We hear a lot of talk about the human rights issues, the horror stories, and what happens. I'd like to draw some lines of comparison.

You talked about the attitude of the national troops there. We've heard the horror stories about how the women are treated in a certain way, and the children and so on. How important is it to them personally that there be calm, serenity, and opportunities for the women and those who are at risk?

● (1210)

BGen Dennis William Thompson: When you speak to an Afghan soldier or officer, or you sit down and have chai tea with them, as General Howard would have done in Kabul, and as I have done on multiple occasions in the province of Kandahar, you learn that they have all the same hopes and desires we have. For the most part, they all have families and want to look after them. They all want their kids to be educated. They want the best possible future for their country.

So when it comes to some of the acts you're referring to, of course they abhor them. There's not a lot of daylight between an Afghan soldier and a Canadian soldier on some of the basic issues.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I thank you for that, because it helps cover some of what we don't necessarily hear from the stories on the ground. We mentioned the different ethnicities involved in the army, and they become of basic human interest to any soldier or citizen. The fact that they get regular pay lets them focus more on where their country is going.

On the infrastructure being developed through our sources with our support and that of other countries, how important is it that they take it over, consider it theirs, and protect it so things like schools, hospitals, bridges, and roads become their property?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I think that's fairly self-evident. It's obviously what they're there to do. They're securing the population, so by extension they're securing large parts of the infrastructure.

The best example is ring route south that is swept—that's the expression we use—on a daily basis to make sure it's free of improvised explosive devices. The Afghan national security forces—in large part the army and their engineers—do that on a daily basis. It's not without risk, and they do that every single day. They're absolutely committed to bringing about security to their own population.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I know you say it's self-evident, but we don't always get that sense when we hear the stories. It seems so important to me, because we're going to hear more about the human rights issues and the laws that change etc. That seems to be one of the most essential ingredients. Like any other nation in the world, if the citizens take ownership and control of their laws, their way of life, their policing, and their army, they will take control of their country eventually—hopefully in a peaceful way.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Absolutely.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you.

The Chair: Does anybody want to pick it up?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Obviously this is about training ANA, ANP, and so on. We have only 2,800 folks and they have done a great job—there's no question about that—but we're a small part of a much larger force. Someone is going to take over the ANA and ANP training when we leave. Do we know who that will be? How do you see that transition happening?

BGen Alan Howard: I left when those discussions were occurring, so I'm really not sure where we're at. But the influx of American troops will allow CSTC-A to double its capacity in police mentoring. That was our biggest challenge when I was there.

The commanding general's theme was to keep going with the army in the way we were, but we definitely needed more emphasis on the police. He'll be able to double his efforts now with the influx of American troops. Several weeks of training in a police district can make a big difference, and I think they'll have some of the resources at hand.

Maybe my colleague knows about the advance planning for Kandahar. I'm just not there.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Given the way we operate and the Americans operate and the style of training, do you see it as being a pretty seamless transition from Canadian mentors to U.S. mentors?

● (1215)

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I can tell you that on the ground it would be, absolutely, because that's the way it works right now. As we sit here, there are U.S. police mentoring teams, USPMTs, in Kandahar city that have embedded in them members of the civilian police. They often go out with our own military police and operate and live inside a Canadian provincial reconstruction team and patrol almost daily with Canadian soldiers. There isn't much difference between what the U.S. brings to the table and what a Canadian brings to the table except the colour scheme of their equipment, perhaps.

BGen Alan Howard: I had a validation training team that worked for me up in Kabul. They were responsible for verifying the level of training across the entire ANA. This team had absolutely no problems when they went down into the brigade we were mentoring; they found it to be at the same standard as what the Americans were doing. I left confident that our methods were very similar.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Thank you.

The Chair: I'll put in a comment. When we were over with the defence committee last year, we met some village councillors at Camp Nathan Smith. Someone—I'm not sure who—asked the question, what are your top five concerns? They were just the basic things of life: security, food, and then they got into—you could have been sitting at a table in Canada—education for their children, jobs.... That type of thing is no different there from anywhere else.

Mr. Coderre.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am going to share my time with my other two colleagues.

It is hard to train non-commissioned officers and superior officers because of problems with illiteracy, among other things. What takes 10 years in Canada should take the same amount of time in Afghanistan. In addition, our soldiers are educated.

You mentioned that it was possible for the Taliban to infiltrate the Afghan army, but you said that there were biometrics and such.

How can we be sure that the mentoring will work? Elections will be held, and our soldiers will be leaving the ground since they are there to provide support. It is not a protectorate. What are your evaluation criteria for levels 1, 2, 3 and 4?

[*English*]

Readiness is truly the issue. It's their country, and that's our legacy.

What's the true status? We talk a lot about the security issue, about the Taliban being all over the place, and the Afghan army not being the same as the Canadian army, for example. Let's have a portrait. Not everybody watching right now—because we're televised, folks—perceives the same thing we do, for example.

[*Translation*]

BGen Denis William Thompson: What is your question, Mr. Coderre?

Hon. Denis Coderre: What is the army's actual status? You seem to be very optimistic. You say that things are going well, that they are getting better. But, given the status of the non-commissioned officers, the illiteracy problem and the possibility of infiltration, what are you basing your positive comments on?

[*English*]

BGen Dennis William Thompson: There are the capability milestones, about which I'm sure General Howard will be happy to talk to you in a broad way. Then there's what happens with the soldiers actually on the ground.

The important thing to remember is that while they're struggling with illiteracy, so are our adversaries. They are drawing from the same manpower pool, in a sense. They are in the same playing field, and what we're trying to do is raise a professional army that has to meet all the international standards. In other words, it's like a kid who has to write an exam while the other kid doesn't. It clearly means the one who doesn't can follow any rules he wants. That's the situation we're in.

We are putting in boundaries—making these folks *encadrés*—so that they're inside a milieu that respects international norms. At least the mentors whom we have deployed in Kandahar province, who live every day, day in and day out, with these guys in combat outposts where you might find six Canadian soldiers and sixty Afghan soldiers, live exactly the same life. It can't help but rub off on their Afghan counterparts.

I'll just finish by saying that illiteracy doesn't equal stupidity; it's not an equation. These are very smart people.

● (1220)

Hon. Denis Coderre: That's not what we're saying here.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: No, no, I know that, sir. I'm just saying—

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: But if they do not understand the mentoring process after we have left....There is a cultural reality.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: The officers are well-trained. For instance, my colleague, Brigadier-General Bashir, commander of the first brigade in Kandahar, received excellent military training during the Soviet army period. It may not be the same training we get here.

[*English*]

He may need to have some minor adjustments made, but the guy is brilliant. He knows the ground.

The officers are quite a bit different from the soldiers. They are educated, for the most part.

The big issue with some of the officers is that they've been deployed for the entire war. They're tired. They need some fresh blood too. We come in and out in six-month or one-year rotations, and we're full of energy, which has been sapped out of them by the duration of this conflict. We need to take a measured approach. So that's part of the answer.

As to how you measure it, a guy like me measures it by watching them on operations and from what I physically see happening on the ground. What I saw physically happening on the ground is what I've already described. But in terms of *des données qu'on met sur une fiche*, that's something that comes with the capability milestone system.

The Chair: The time is up on that spot.

We'll go to Mr. Hawn and then to Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to go back to the American folks who are coming over, the 17,000 or so, and the infiltration routes. I'm sure we know each infiltration route, or you do, intimately. Is 17,000 going to be enough to choke off those routes, with the other duties they're going to have?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: You cannot hermetically seal any border anywhere in the world. That's certainly the case of the Afghan-Pak border. And that number isn't specifically oriented on the border; some of those infiltration lines are internal to the country.

The short answer is that it will help, but you'll never get to a 100% solution. You can't put people shoulder to shoulder on that border and be absolutely certain that things aren't getting through.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Canadians tend to be impatient, understandably. The Americans are going to make a significant difference. I know you can't give me a definitive answer, but do you have any sort of feeling as to when it might be a fair time to start assessing what the difference might have been? Are we talking six months, a year...?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I think we measure these things on a quarterly basis. If you're doing it any more frequently than that, you start chasing your tail. I think a quarterly basis is a good time period for which to measure things. I don't see that there will be any reason to change that.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: In terms of officer development, General Howard, we're talking about providing them with more westernized training, more training such as we get. These are small things, but I think they're significant. Are we looking at getting some Afghans into institutions such as RMC or Staff College—those kinds of officer development programs that we have?

BGen Alan Howard: When I was there, we had about 200 Afghan officers undertaking training outside of Afghanistan in a variety of nations, the biggest being the U.S. In fact, we have four Afghan students at RMC in Kingston, and they've completed their first year. I'm not sure how they did, but I met one of them who was back over Christmastime.

One of the initiatives I undertook while I was there was to take ten of the best and brightest of their colonels and brigadiers-general, get them some literacy training, and get them out of the country for some advanced training.

You know, a lot of the senior folks I worked with—the deputy ministers, the three- and two-stars within the national headquarters—have had lots of previous training, whether in India or in the U.S. What's missing is in the middle. It's rather like having a hockey team on which only the first line has skates and the rest of the team is in bare feet. What we're trying to do is get the second and third lines on these teams squared away.

It's the middle piece that's been missing for the last 30 years. In fact, a lot of the seniors we've used were in the old army, trained by the Soviets, or they went to India or to the U.S. So there's a good crust of older folks there. It's the middle ones we're working on.

For example, we managed to get the literacy training of three general officers squared away, and they will do a year's worth of education back here in the U.S. That will make a big difference to their army. We need to increase that output, but it's really at the lower end and middle end that we're trying to get some education going.

● (1225)

Mr. Laurie Hawn: You probably know I have to ask about the air force, because you brought it up. Can you tell me a little bit about the development of their air force—obviously it's embryonic—including the types, numbers, levels of capability?

BGen Alan Howard: The first graduating class of their military academy had approximately 88 candidates. Out of that were 30 bright young potential candidates for pilot school, and all 30 of them are now in the U.S., undertaking training.

In big-picture terms, the plan for the Afghan National Army Air Corps was to simply use the pilots they had trained during the Soviet time to use older Eastern bloc equipment, the Mi fleets and the Antonovs. So that's who they have as pilots. This first generation of new, young pilots is in the U.S., training, doing rotary and fixed wing. We'll stay with the Mi-17 and Mi-35 fleets. Those will grow in size, but we will introduce what I call half a Herc; the C-27 will be introduced. I believe the first squadron is slated to stand up in December. The first Afghan pilots will be these young 30 who are in the U.S. They're across all four services, taking training as we speak.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So they're not just taking flying training with the U.S. Army, they're taking training from the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army and Marine Corps.

BGen Alan Howard: The U.S. Navy is involved in training a number of them as well. They're spread out across.... I don't know if they're with the Marine Corps, but I know they're with the other three services.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Super. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Chair.

I want to follow up on the questions I was posing before on human rights. In the report from the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, there was some citation of military conduct. Have you been able to see this report that the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has written?

BGen Alan Howard: I have not.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: It's available to us if we want to look at it.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes. One of the issues, and I'm going to get to it, is that it's in Dari. It's on the web. It's been on the web for a while.

This is one of the questions I posed to some of the DFAIT people, and RCMP. They had heard of it but hadn't read it. I've had a chance to read it, because I had someone who interpreted it for me. In that there is quite a list of things on police and military conduct and abuse.

Well, here's the question; that's just an outside thing. There are concerns around linguistic capacity, I think, from our end. I mean, we talk about training Afghans in the United States and elsewhere. One of our challenges is our own linguistic capacity.

But we do know that we've had an investigation by the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service on reports that Canadian soldiers had witnessed abuse by Afghan soldiers and interpreters. The outcome of that report was that there was no wrongdoing. That was just two days ago. Yet there were public reports that these soldiers had claimed they had seen this abuse.

I have to ask the question, because it's conflicting, to me. On the one hand, they have Canadian soldiers saying they had seen abuse by the Afghan army. On the other hand, we have the national investigation service saying they hadn't. I'm trying to square that circle.

If we're going to talk about what, General Thompson, you said was very important, that, you know, we don't want to have different standards, obviously, than the other guys, because that can undermine...and it's the rule of law and human rights.

Had you heard of reports of abuse by the Afghan army? And how do you deal with the fact that we've had public reports of soldiers saying they saw abuse, and then we have a report from the national investigation service saying there was none, or at least there was no error in terms of the wrongdoing and the response to the allegations?

● (1230)

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I can only speak for the 1st Brigade of the 205th Corps, because that's who I was partnered with.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Fair enough.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I can tell you that during my nine months, there were no reports of abuse. Certainly the story broke about the abuse that allegedly occurred in 2006. That, I believe, is the subject of this NIS report.

Obviously, on even the idea that a Canadian soldier wouldn't report such abuse if he were witness to it, immediately orders went out to make sure people knew that everybody has a duty to report any serious crime they see, regardless of who the perpetrator is. That's just Canadian Forces policy, and that was reinforced.

With respect to the NIS report, all I can tell you is that I have complete confidence in our national investigation service. I certainly used them not only for Canadian Forces disciplinary cases while I was the Commander of Task Force Kandahar, but they also provide the very sad service of looking after the remains of our dead soldiers. I have nothing but absolutely the highest respect for that service.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But you understand my concern.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Yes, absolutely. That's exactly why the military investigates these things and does so in a thorough manner. I haven't been privy to the precise contents of the NIS report, but if it finds no wrongdoing, I would have no reason to question that finding, because I have nothing but the highest regard for the people who serve in the NIS.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Just on the linguistic issue, though, is that an issue—

BGen Dennis William Thompson: It's not an issue for me personally. The Canadian commander has a language and cultural assistant who goes with him everywhere. That language and cultural assistant is an Afghan Canadian with a Canadian security clearance up to level II—not top secret, but secret. So you can have darn near any discussion you want with the guy before you go and meet—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Do we have enough of them, though? How many do we have, about?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I can't give you a precise number, because I don't have it, but there's enough. Commanders have them. We also have fully engaged civilians who are used as interpreters. Every patrol that goes out has to have an interpreter. Otherwise, you're not going to be able to connect. It was never brought to my attention that there was a deficiency in interpreters. I know it's a challenge to get language and cultural advisers. I make the case for this every time I'm in Toronto, talking to our Consul General there, where 70,000 Afghan Canadians live. This is a great place for them to serve their country, if they wish. The ones who do come are absolutely first-rate.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: General, first of all, we would like to express our deep appreciation to all the Canadian soldiers out there, including yourself, for the excellent job you are doing. We are just seeking information, but let me assure you that all Canadians stand solidly behind you.

This committee was in the United States, at the Pentagon. We talked about benchmarks. The Americans were actually pretty surprised, but they thought we were doing an excellent job. They were looking at benchmarks to bring into their own operations in Afghanistan. Are these benchmarks achievable by us, or are there a lot of other factors, other countries, that will make us achieve those benchmarks? Is it in Canada's control to achieve our benchmarks, or do we need the cooperation of others?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: It's dead simple. This isn't Canada's war; it's NATO's. It's the international community's effort. In everything that's done, we have to take a multinational approach. I know you're representing the Canadian public, and that we're members of the Canadian military. But when we deploy overseas, we go over as members of NATO, and we're executing the NATO plan in direct support of the Afghan government.

So it's a multinational effort, done in partnership with our Afghan counterparts. I have a responsibility as a Canadian officer to report to the Canadian public on benchmarks that we have laid out, but the entire problem is much more complex than that. I used to say that Canada has six priorities—and they're all great ones—but there are probably 30 things that need to be done, not six. Those 30 things are being done by the entire international community, and we're contributing to some of them.

We have a responsibility to answer to the Canadian people on how Canada's effort in Afghanistan is being executed. I get that 100%. That's what we're measuring against, those six benchmarks, because that's government policy. But when you consider the entire international community, the problem is much larger than that. They are moving on a whole host of other issues that we, quite frankly, don't have enough resources to be involved in. Maybe I'm being a bit convoluted, but nation-building is a pretty broad-based project. It's not narrow in focus. If you want to have an effect, you have to narrow your focus when you're a country as small as Canada.

● (1235)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: So basically you are saying that our benchmarks are achievable by us, but the larger picture is that we are part of, of course, the NATO alliance. That's all. Nation building—

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Right, and there are other things going on. For instance, and I apologize if I've got it wrong, but I'm pretty certain that hydroelectricity is not part of Canada's priorities, nor one of the things we measure, but it's darned important. So it's something that somebody else is doing—in this case, USAID. And for those who follow the reconstruction and development path, it's something that's coordinated at the PRT by Canadian officials because they're responsible for Kandahar province in the NATO rubric.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Rae and I are going to split the time.

The Chair: Good. Go ahead.

Hon. Bob Rae: I don't want to be provocative, but I just wanted to ask you a question.

We've been told a lot over the years that it's impossible to separate training from combat. But I understand, General Howard, from what you were saying about your responsibilities in Kabul, that you had a particular responsibility with CSTC-A to do a training operation and an educational operation. You talked about how you were training up people and then sending them to Kandahar.

Is it possible to imagine a training role that does not involve a combat role for Canada?

BGen Alan Howard: Canada has a really good history up in Kabul. You go into the Kabul military training centre, where we used to have a team; I met many Afghan NCOs and officers there who were trained by Canadians when we were up there.

There's a huge role for any nation that wishes to step in. CSTC-A was searching for many partners to assist with the educational schools that we were setting up. There were many schools that we would participate in, or just the general basic training of soldiers. That is a huge task of a command and a huge task within Kabul, and something I spoke to General Natynczyk about during his last visit. There are lots of possibilities and it's an option we could look at. We certainly have before had troops, Canadian forces personnel, in Kabul helping with that higher-level training.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Can I just quickly add one point there?

Hon. Bob Rae: Sure.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: When we speak about OMLTs, operational mentor and liaison teams, it's that mentoring and liaison that puts you in harm's way. General Howard is absolutely right because he's talking about structures where formal schools exist. But if you want to continue through the whole continuum of looking after building capacity in the army, you need to be part of that OMLT program. And then, once you have agreed to do that, if you're in an OMLT, whether you are in combat or not, it's really not your choice. It's brought to you.

● (1240)

Hon. Bob Rae: I understand that completely, and I appreciate your clarification. I was just trying to understand a little better the nature of some of the operation that goes on in the capital.

Thank you.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Gentlemen, I wonder if you could respond to this. Counter-insurgency strategy needs to integrate the population in terms of their security, in terms of building local governance, and obviously in terms of economic development. In Iraq, the United States was, I think, pretty successful in terms of developing a strategic communications strategy to counter the terrorist information that came from the other side.

Where are we on that, and if we're at the point, which is my understanding, where we're not very far down the road, what should we be doing? The U.S. military was very successful in Iraq on this point.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Again, I can only speak to Kandahar province, where we had fairly robust information operations, as the military expression goes.

Here's the problem with information operations; and allow me just to digress here for a second. There was a Confederate general whose name was Nathan Bedford Forrest, a cavalry general, and his expression was, "You need to get to the battle firstest with the mostest". He wasn't a particularly literate guy, but he said that the guy who gets there first, generally speaking, with the most stuff, generally wins. And that's absolutely the case with information operations.

So if we get beat to the punch by the insurgents, if some untoward event occurs and they get the information out, usually completely erroneous and exaggerated, then we're on the defensive and trying to fight back. The way to get around that is you have to get your information out there quickly.

We made conscious efforts—mind you, I had three different governors—with the governors to program them to call press conferences when bad things happened, for us to pass them as much information as we had and to get it out in the public as quickly as possible, and, as a direct result, avoid some of the backlash that tended to happen in other parts of the country.

That idea is well known in western circles. It's just that sometimes it's difficult to get a press release agreed to in a multinational environment, in a sufficient period of time, to get your information out there first.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I was going to say it's difficult to do it around here.

But in terms of where we are at this point, are there elements we're not using that we could be? The Taliban seem very successful in terms of getting their message out. Even though it may be exaggerated or false, the fact is that they seem to be good masters of that.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I think it's fair to say they are, at the national level. I don't know so much that they're as successful in Kandahar province. Whilst I was there, remembering that my target audience in Kandahar province consisted of Khandaharis and not so much Canada, I was the commander on the ground focused on those people. I think we were relatively successful there.

But there are occasions when rumours and whatnot circulate, and you need to get an Afghan official on all the regular media outlets, or even a local shura, to set the record straight.

Really, you just have to understand that and pursue it vigorously. Although we weren't perfect, I thought we had a pretty good information operation cell.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to hear about military justice. We read that, in Afghanistan—and Kandahar is no exception—the civil justice system is very difficult. If the military justice system is distinct from the civil justice system, does the Afghan National Army have a specific military justice system? That is my first question.

My second question has to do with the state of the Afghan National Army as an institution. We know that they have a minister of defence, Mr. Wardak, but do they also have a chief of staff?

General Thompson, you said that the situation is incredibly complicated given the number of countries working together. Does the minister of defence or the prime minister have to approve operations on the ground? From an operations standpoint, when you plan an operation, does it stay in the army's hands, or, in the case of a large-scale operation, does the minister of defence or the prime minister have to give their approval?

What is the state of the Afghan National Army as an institution?

● (1245)

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: I spent a year with all those officials—the Afghan Minister of Defence, Minister Wardak, and their equivalent of the Chief of Defence Staff, General Bismullah Khan—and helped them create a system of governance over the top of their army so that when the President heard from the people, and military operations needed to occur, there would be a flow-down of orders. The President would talk to the Minister of Defence and certain military actions would occur.

There was certainly a lot of autonomy for the corps commanders —for example, down in General Thompson's area—to conduct military operations to achieve governmental aims.

During the period of November to March, the Afghan government issued direction on military operations that were to be achieved during that period. One of them was the registering of voters. A huge military operation had occurred throughout the country. The plans came and were done jointly with ISAF. But on the Afghan National Army side, the minister reviewed the plans, and then I accompanied General Bismullah Khan, and we went to every corps to understand what their plan was and what the resources would be that were required.

So of systems development, if I can use that term, the operational oversight from Kabul is a work-in-progress. We've created an operations centre and there are senior Afghans who are involved. The Afghans in Kandahar are not just left to their own devices.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: By way of civilian control of the military, what's encouraging is that every week in Kandahar province—I think it's the case in most other provinces as well—there is a provincial security meeting, chaired by the governor, with the army, the police, the NDS, and the border police. All the security players are present, and of course ISAF. It's at that meeting where it's decided what the priorities will be for that week in terms of military or police operations. And the executive in that case comes from the governor, which is an interesting way of doing things.

General Howard is absolutely right that voter registration is a classic example of a large-scale operation that came from Kabul and trickled its way down to those of us in the field.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Can you talk briefly about military justice? Is there such a system?

[*English*]

BGen Alan Howard: Yes, there is a judge advocate general division within the Afghan National Army headquarters. There is a separate military justice system, but it is very much a work-in-progress. As I related earlier, there is a legal framework within the Afghan army that has a JAG—he's a brigadier-general—and at various units and brigades there are legal officers.

Our challenge is to get them up to a level of education where they can apply legal standing, but that is going to be a work-in-progress. It is important to the Afghan army and it is a pillar of work that's going to take us a while to square away.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae: I will just follow on a little from my question the last time, about where we are and where we could be after 2011. How do you envisage our development work and the relationship between the security that is provided by NATO and our PRT? Is it conceivable that a political role or a development role could continue in Kandahar, in a PRT, without the Canadian army necessarily providing the security, but that security could be provided by others?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Hypothetically, yes, absolutely. You can continue with the development effort and...but let's be clear: there has to be a security arm in the PRT.

Hon. Bob Rae: No, no, I understand that. I accept that as a given.

Again, some of the pressure that one gets a sense of, from various statements being made by senior military officials in Canada, is that one of the reasons why 2011 is not just a political imperative...it's also a military imperative for our troops, that we are overextended.

Is that a fair comment, or am I overstating the case?

● (1250)

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I'm not placed to answer that question. It's better to go to General Leslie, the commander of the army, or even General Natynczyk, the Chief of Defence Staff. I was merrily ensconced in this problem overseas and, happily, completely oblivious to what's been happening to the institution back here.

Unfortunately, come July 3, that will no longer be the case.

Hon. Bob Rae: Are you going back?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: No, I'm going to army headquarters. I'm going to be up to my eyeballs in this and probably answering the same question from you, sir, next fall.

Hon. Bob Rae: If I'm still here, yes, absolutely.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Well, I can't comment on that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Are you good, Mr. Rae?

Hon. Bob Rae: Yes.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Can I ask, through you, Mr. Chairman, about the upcoming elections in August?

What potential security concerns do you see and what is the role of the Canadian Forces? In terms of both the army and the Afghan police, are they going to be prepared for any eventuality?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: Again, that's a great question for the current commander. However, I'm not completely ignorant of the situation. As General Howard pointed out, we conducted voter registration just as I was leaving theatre. So it was completed just as I was leaving.

Voter registration—the mechanism, the plan, the layout, all the rest of that—is very similar to actually conducting an election. Voter registration lasted for 30 days, a month, without any major security happenings. I'm sorry I don't have the number, but it's somewhere in the vicinity of 300,000 people who were registered in a population of a million, only half of whom would be of legal age. I don't know what the final number is. You could probably get it fairly easily.

My point is that when the election occurs, if we could secure these voter registration sites for 30 days, we can certainly secure an election for a single day. The insurgents—I'm not laying the gauntlet down here—are not the sort of organization that has targeted significant dates. I don't know why that is, but they haven't gone after Independence Day or they haven't launched major attacks that coincide with particular anniversaries.

I think, from the 10,000-kilometre view right now, the election can be held in full security with the forces that are available on the ground, remembering again that of course people will surge into the field on actual election day. There's definitely a view from the capital because there is lots of planning vis-à-vis that.

BGen Alan Howard: The voter registration itself was a huge success, with cooperation between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence. For me, from an Afghan perspective, what was different between this voter registration and the first one a few years back was that it was Afghans doing the security. We were in behind, ready to help. When an Afghan came to register—they didn't all need to register, it was only those who hadn't registered before—they saw Afghan security forces around. They would have seen a bit of NATO, but the last one would have been completely coalition troops. So I think they're well poised here for the elections.

They've already done it for voter registration. For them, this will be an easier task, as General Thompson has mentioned, a one-day task to help with the elections. That's a measure, because that was not possible a couple of years back, I would say.

The Chair: Mr. Dewar, you get the last word.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I have two quick ones, hopefully, on the role of the private security companies, because our relation with them isn't clear to me, and the Afghan army in terms of training. There's hiring that goes on, but who does it? Who are they responsible to, and what's their involvement in training the Afghan army?

BGen Alan Howard: Certainly from the CSTC-A perspective, we use consultants to assist us both in Kabul with the headquarters and then the delivery of training. I did not get involved and didn't see any contractors involved with actual conduct of military operations. But because we were short, we hired a number of contractors to help us to great effect. They tended to be ex-military and tended to be on staff training. For example, in the introduction of NATO weapons and up-armoured Humvees, they brought a great skill set to help us do the training.

However, I was not involved in any sort of conduct of military operations with private security. We did not hire them for that task.

● (1255)

Mr. Paul Dewar: And on the ground, it's not an issue in Kandahar?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: No. The principal company from a western perspective is DynCorp, who are involved in the training of the Afghan National Police. Their principal mandate is to deliver training—you may have got this last week, I would imagine—at the Kandahar training centre, just outside the front gates of the airfield.

There potentially is one DynCorp member in each U.S. police mentoring team. Frankly, I'm not in the best place to answer what they do. I think it's largely logistics; it's obviously not combat operations. But I never had big issues with them.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Okay.

This is more of a point, but there may be a question in there. On the voter registration, I actually heard reports of concerns of oversubscription, shall we say, and concerns that there might have been some movement over the border, and that a lot more men—looking at the gender breakdown, at the men who have registered to vote versus women—were being registered to vote. The reports I heard were that there were actually men who were going to sign up on behalf of their wives, and a concern that people were crossing the border from Pakistan registering to vote.

I'm wondering, were there reports that you had heard, and is there anything to these reports?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: I don't know if there's anything to them. I can talk to you about Mr. Wasifi, who was from the Independent Electoral Commission, obviously an Afghan. He came every week to the weekly provincial security meeting to talk to us about progress in terms of numbers of voters who had registered, or where we were in the run-up to the planning and whatnot. He was a guy who was very positive, because he was the one who did the process in 2004.

But no, I don't have any specifics. He never came with any stories of that nature.

Mr. Paul Dewar: So that's not something you've heard.

BGen Dennis William Thompson: No, I haven't heard that. But to be frank, I haven't been following this very closely since February.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Fair enough. Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that, and thanks to the committee.

Gentlemen, we appreciate your being here. Part of the mandate of this committee is to let Canadians know what's happening. This was a televised meeting. Your frank and prompt responses were appreciated. I'm sure they've added value to what Canadians know about our operation there.

Do you have anything you want to wrap up with?

BGen Dennis William Thompson: No, I'm fine, thank you.

The Chair: After two hours, I don't blame you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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