



House of Commons
CANADA

Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan

AFGH • NUMBER 014 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, October 20, 2010

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Chair

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz

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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC)): I'd like to bring this meeting to order.

We have decided to divide the remainder of the meeting into two equal parts, and the clerk will indicate the approximate time for those.

For the first part of this meeting, I would like to welcome His Excellency Mr. Jawed Ludin, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada.

Welcome, sir. We appreciate you taking the time to come before this committee. We look forward to the discussion. Our usual practice is to allow approximately seven minutes. If you would like to make an opening statement, you're welcome to do so at this time.

Welcome again, and go ahead whenever you're ready.

His Excellency Jawed Ludin (Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Canada, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan, thank you for your invitation.

[English]

It is a pleasure and a distinct honour for me to appear before this distinguished committee today and to have the opportunity to discuss with you the ongoing situation in my country.

[Translation]

On behalf of my government and the Afghan people, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the committee and to each honourable member for your engagement, your friendship and your support of my country, often in difficult times.

[English]

Over the past nine years, Canada has been part of a truly international effort to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan and help the Afghan people restore their basic rights as human beings and as citizens. Our shared achievements are historical, and we Afghans are proud of them. We are grateful to the international community, and particularly to those countries, including Canada, whose commitment and support to Afghanistan has come at a significant cost in blood and treasure.

Honourable members, we are gradually nearing the end of 2010, which has been a momentous year for Afghanistan. Marked by a number of significant milestones, the year has also been an accurate indicator of the sense of urgency in what has been a rapidly evolving context. The military surge, spearheaded by additional U.S. troops, ordered by President Barack Obama last year, has successfully unfolded in southern Afghanistan. While the success of the surge, measured in terms of sustained security enjoyed by the population and the establishment of a functioning government will take time to materialize, early signs of success are apparent in Helmand, and even in Kandahar, where the surge is currently under way.

In addition, we are optimistic about the refocusing of the war strategy to take into account the regional dimension of the terrorist threat and the existence of sanctuaries on the other side of our southern border. This aspect, in our view, has been the missing link in the conduct of the war, and with this piece of the jigsaw falling into place, hopefully, we can be confident about succeeding in the fight against terrorism in the region as well as the fight against the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

You will recall, honourable members, that your visit to Kabul last June coincided with the convening of the landmark peace *jirga*, organized by the Afghan government to generate consensus across Afghan society for the goal of reconciliation with the Taliban. Earlier, at the London conference of January 2010, the Afghan government had consulted the international community on its strategy for reconciliation and reintegration.

While a consensus, both nationally and among our partners from the international community, seems to have emerged behind the reconciliation agenda, there is still considerable anxiety, honourable members, among Afghans about the price they will be asked to pay to achieve peace. In our view, no reconciliation will be desirable, or possible, if it comes at the cost of compromising our freedom, our rights, and the prospects of a democratic future we are trying to build for our country. It will also be a mistake if some among our partners from the international community use the reconciliation agenda to pave the way for a premature departure of the international forces from Afghanistan.

Honourable members, the Kabul conference of July 2010 was the most important event on our national calendar this year. An important outcome of the Kabul conference was the agreement with regard to the buildup of Afghan security institutions and their gradual takeover of responsibility for security in the country. As we have said many times before, we Afghans are extremely eager to take responsibility for the security and defence of our homeland and to create the conditions for a dignified and victorious return of all international forces to their home countries. However, the extent and timeframe for achieving this goal will depend on the extent of the international community's contributions to the training, equipping, and building of the capacity of Afghanistan's security institutions: the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, and the National Directorate of Security.

Another major event on this year's calendar was the parliamentary elections on September 18, which took place in a relatively secure environment despite the pronounced intention by the Taliban to try to disrupt this national process. As of today, the preliminary results have been announced and we are eagerly awaiting the inauguration of our new parliament later this autumn. Evidently, the elections have not been free of challenge, including voting irregularities, but I am pleased to observe that the relevant institutions, the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission, have dispensed their roles in a robust manner to ensure a just outcome of the election process.

• (1550)

Aside from the positive developments I have enumerated today, and many more that I have not, significant challenges remain, chief among them the challenge of bringing security to the lives of the Afghan people. Judged by the net amount of violence reported from some parts of Afghanistan, mainly in the south, by the level of casualties suffered by Afghans and our international partners, and by the continued support and protection that our terrorist enemies enjoy beyond our borders, the war we are fighting is far from won.

Within Afghanistan our critical institutions will continue to need the help of the international community for a few more years in order to gain the strength and confidence they need. Tackling other challenges, such as corruption and the drug trade, will also require patience and perseverance.

At the regional level we must have a stronger, more determined response from the United States and NATO members to the problem of sanctuaries, as well as sincere cooperation from the Government of Pakistan if we are going to see progress on the war front.

Honourable members, today the key question to ask is not whether Afghans want to and can change our destiny—we do, and we can—but to ask to what extent will the international community persevere with us as we continue on this arduous journey. As Canada ponders the future of its engagement in Afghanistan beyond 2011, this question applies to you more so than to any of our other international partners.

As I have told some of the honourable members individually on multiple occasions before, we Afghans are extremely grateful for Canada's friendship and contribution during some of the most difficult years in the past. We honour and we will never forget the sacrifices of 152 soldiers and four civilians from Canada who have

lost their young, promising lives in my country. In our view, for Canada to remain in Afghanistan will not just be an appropriate response to the needs of Afghanistan, but also a fitting tribute to the legacy of those Canadians who have served with honour and distinction in my country over the past years. The nature of Canada's mission beyond 2011 will be for the Canadian people and their rightful representatives in this august House to decide. Afghanistan needs all it can get from its friends, and Canada is a friend with many capacities and strengths to offer help.

For the time being, security is the topmost important concern for the country. In that context, the training of our national security institutions, particularly the ANP, the Afghan National Police, and the NDS, the National Directorate of Security, and providing them with enablers, including equipment and support, are among our top priorities.

On the civilian side, apart from the investment in the building of democratic institutions—the civil society and the rule of law—we look to engaging Canada's private sector in investing in the enormous wealth in our nation and in our geography that needs to be unlocked.

The bottom line, honourable members, is that Canada has been a friend and partner during our hard times. We would like Canada to be with us during the good times when they inevitably arrive.

Merci beaucoup.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

We'll move immediately to our questions and comments round. The first round is seven minutes per member.

We'll begin with Mr. Wilfert, please.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): I have two questions, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, Ambassador, it's good to see you again. Again, we appreciate working side by side with members of the Afghan National Army in particular.

When we were in Kabul in June, one particular person who impressed me was Dr. Massouda Jalal, a former minister for women's affairs, formerly dealing with the Afghan human rights, and twice presidential candidate. We talked a lot about reconciliation. The concern she raised on the issue of women's rights was that, depending on what types of arrangements are made with Taliban—we're know they're not monolithic, but it depends—if they come into Parliament, the erosion of women's rights....

In other words, take the number of children we've seen who have gone to school: over six million. Of the 600 doctors who graduated a couple of years ago, half of them were women, etc. The concern is that the national action plan for women that the Afghan government launched in 2007 would be in peril. And I'd like you to comment on that issue.

The second question I would put on the table is really always the elephant in the room, and that is the state of corruption in Afghanistan, and particularly the issue of aid money that is going and is not being properly utilized or is simply disappearing—or there's not the capacity to utilize it.

Then one of my colleagues will take the second round, or even this round, depending on the answer.

• (1555)

The Chair: That's if there's time left in the seven minutes.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Thank you, honourable member.

On the question of reconciliation, as I stated in my brief statement, those are exactly the concerns many have had, including me, personally, not necessarily as a spokesman of the government but as an Afghan, first and foremost.

President Karzai has been very clear in his definition of the reconciliation process, and that is that reconciliation will be used as a strategy to help in the ongoing war we are fighting against terrorism in the counter-insurgency. To that extent, it will be aimed at winning over some of the people who are not tied irrevocably with terrorism, with al-Qaeda, and who can be won over by a political strategy.

He has also been very clear that reconciliation will not come at the cost of changing the Afghan constitution and reversing the achievements and the democratization process we have had in the past nine years.

I think the kinds of concerns Afghans have had, and the ones Mrs. Jalal raised, are exactly along the same lines. They are answered by those clarifications from President Karzai. At least as far as President Karzai is concerned, in his definition of reconciliation, it should and must not come at the cost of Afghanistan's achievements. Inasmuch as it's important to win this war, to win it through political as well as military strategy, it's more important in the minds of the Afghan people to safeguard our own achievements and not compromise them.

On the question of corruption, it's a problem. There is no question. But I think the perceptions of corruption, even though they do in a lot of cases relate to reality, should be seen as one of the challenges we have together. The last thing we should do, really, is enter into a kind of blame game. It will be so unhelpful that at the end of the day, not only will the problem of corruption not be addressed but we will lose momentum in some of the other areas where we have to work together.

I think, unfortunately, that this happened because this is a very logical and natural outcome for a country that had totally lost its state institutions and nine years ago suddenly became the recipient of one of the largest aid programs in history. This inevitably causes a lot of complications. Corruption is first and foremost a question of capacity. It's not really a question of culture. Other people have raised this, and it's absolutely wrong. It would have happened in Africa. It would have happened in Europe. It would have happened in any other part of the world if you had had a country like Afghanistan as it was nine years ago facing the situation we did.

So I think it should be seen as a problem we need to work on together.

• (1600)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Chairman, there's no question that it's a problem we need to work on together. Obviously, capacity building is critical. But it's not what the Government of Afghanistan says, it's

what the Government of Afghanistan actually does in addressing this, in terms of the officials, whether they are ministers or bureaucrats.

What we heard in June, when we were there, was that this is fundamentally the critical issue. Unless there is a real strategy that demonstrates both in terms of the rhetoric and in terms of the delivery, this is going to continue to undermine whatever the work of the government is. Could you comment on that?

My other quick question goes back to women. My concern, and the concern I heard there, was that legislative changes could occur if the balance were to change. It's very nice of the president to say that this is where he stands, but the question is whether he will have the ability to stand behind those words if, in fact, there is a parliament that becomes increasingly hostile, if you will, or unsympathetic to women's rights.

The Chair: There is very little time to respond.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The second point is very important, honourable member, if I may just respond to it. It's music to my ears that you, honourable member, are raising this issue, because there is no stronger, more important, guarantee than I as an Afghan would like from the international community than an emphasis on those kinds of issues, on women's rights and on our prospects of our own democratic future.

I really hope that as we go into this, because a lot of people... I told you about President Karzai, but there are a lot of actors, and not all of them share the vision that we have for our own country. There is a lot of interest and there are still big risks for our country, including risk for reversal of all those things that you're talking about.

The only thing that will safeguard those interests will be a position from the international community and from countries such as Canada that have a big voice to say that there are limits to what the reconciliation program can be about.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go over to the Bloc.

Mr. Bachand, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

First of all, I want to welcome Ambassador Ludin. We had long discussions not only here, in the committee, but also at the embassy and elsewhere. He is a very active diplomat and an excellent advocate for his country.

However, Mr. Ludin, I have always told you, because I consider you as a friend, that I would invariably tell you the truth and always say exactly what I think. Before deferring to my friend Mr. Dorion, I want to talk about election results. The independent commission said in a statement that it would probably reject partly or completely the votes from 430 voting sites and that hearings are being held about 830 other sites because they suspect massive fraud took place during the elections.

This is my first question to you, Mr. Ludin. The commission was to hold a press conference on Monday of this week. Two hours before the expected time, the commission said the press conference could not be held because they needed more details but that an announcement would be made on Wednesday, which is today. As the ambassador, can you tell us if this announcement was indeed made today?

[English]

Mr. Jawed Ludin: *Merci beaucoup.*

I was struggling with the translation—it's still not working, for some reason—but as I understood your question, you were asking about the parliamentary elections and the fact that the announcement was supposed to be Monday.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Now it's postponed until Wednesday: until today.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Exactly. There was an announcement today that the counting and the looking into complaints have now been final. There are over one million votes that have been invalidated. It was an important thing to do for the commission, and that represents about 25%, as you've said, of the turnout, of the total votes.

The reason it was important to do is that, as you remember, there was a bitter experience from the presidential elections. What happened as a result of that was that there was a blame game. Afghans were blaming the international community and the international community was blaming Afghans.

This time the difference was that both institutions involved in the elections were mainly made up of Afghans, and they had to show that there was integrity in the process. The integrity is not really the absence of fraud or the absence of irregularities but what is done in order to respond to those. For that reason, they took a long time to look into all the complaints. They have now looked into complaints, and wherever there has been enough evidence of fraud, they have invalidated the whole voting site.

As a result, preliminary results were announced today, but the final announcement has now been delayed because there will still be a process involving one last element. When the preliminary results are out, there is again an opportunity for the candidates to complain. After that process, there will be an opportunity to announce the final results.

● (1605)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: If one million votes have been invalidated, what are the consequences, particularly if these votes all came from the same area? Let us take the case of a candidate in a district where three quarters of the votes were invalidated. I guess this candidate cannot be declared elected. What are the consequences of today's decision?

[English]

Mr. Jawed Ludin: In the final analysis, the turnout was 5.6 million, which was more than 50%. If you invalidate a million votes—and I know it's an enormous number of votes to be invalidated—it's about 20% of the total turnout.

If you remember correctly, at the time people did believe that we would be really happy, given the kind of environment Afghanistan was in, given the fact that there were security risks, given the fact that a lot of people, including in Kabul—because there were security attacks in the week before—did not come out to vote. So in that sense it was still a success. The legitimacy of the election process was not affected.

It is very regrettable that those invalidations took place at that scale, but it also shows that the institutions did their job. That aspect has to be borne in mind.

The Chair: There's less than a minute. Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Mr. Ambassador, thank you for being here.

You referred to the existence of sanctuaries in neighbouring countries. I guess you meant Pakistan in particular.

Do you think it is still possible for the Afghan government or for the UN allies to reduce the number of these sanctuaries? Would you go as far as to support intervention in Pakistan against the forces that are launching attacks against the Afghan government from that country?

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Thank you very much, honourable member. I don't think the Pakistani government will do it on its own. We have had nine years now to show that it will not happen without a systematic, principled, and strong position from the international community—from the United States in particular, but from NATO at the same time.

If there is one strategic shift today in the way this war is being conducted at this stage, it is the realization that this war is not really so much in Afghanistan; it's going to be won on the Pakistani side of the border.

We are optimistic to see some engagement from the United States with Pakistan through the Pakistani government. There is also pressure through the use of drones. But I think much more has to be done, and we are not seeing enough signs of activity yet on that front.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hawn, please.

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

Thank you, Ambassador Ludin, for being here. It's good to see you again.

First of all, I want to congratulate you. Even with a million votes invalidated, from the numbers you gave that's still a 41% turnout. We've had an election in Alberta, in my city of Edmonton, and the turnout was 33%. So congratulations on the progress you're making there.

Obviously, voting is fundamental to a functioning democracy. One of the other things that's fundamental is the justice system. I'd like to talk about that a little bit, since you raised the private sector. We've thought often in terms of Canada's support of, obviously, military and CIDA and the whole-of-government approach, and that's all great, but we've got a huge capacity in this country in the private sector for capacity building and training and mentoring and whatever else. The justice system, obviously...you know, you can have an army and you can have a police force and all the rest of that stuff, but if you don't have a basic functioning justice system to bring criminals to justice in an appropriate length of time and in an appropriate way, then you're never going to get past being a lawless state.

The NDS is a key to that. It's obviously a lot smaller than the Afghan army and a lot smaller than the Afghan National Police. It's something that maybe a country like Canada could help get its arms around with our capacity for that kind of thing.

One of the things we did hear in June, when we visited Kabul, from Ahmad Nader Nadery of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, was that, you know, the NDS is far from perfect, but how much better they are than they used to be, the progress they've made and the fact that they are probably one of the better institutions in Afghanistan.

Could you comment on that, on perhaps something that Canada could do in general terms? You're very familiar with our private sector and how we operate. Would it be things like providing something for the NDS to get them to that next level where they can be a solid part of a functioning justice system?

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Thank you very much, sir, for the kind words, and also for this very important question. As I mentioned in my statement, Afghanistan will really need all it can get from our friends, security being the topmost important concern for the country for the time being above all the other concerns. One of the priorities that we have, and this is something that we will be looking to Canada to continue to support, is in the area of training, capacity building, equipping, and essentially strengthening and making confident the institutions that are responsible for security.

The question of NDS is particularly important here, because the two other institutions, the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police, being by far bigger and important in one respect, also at the same time receive a lot of assistance already. The United States has obviously had a significant role in building up the Afghan army, and also in the police training as well. Now they have multi-billion dollars' worth of programs to support the Afghan National Police.

Canada has a tremendous capacity in building and mobilizing and giving support, and they've done a good job in the past. We would like Canada to focus on areas where there is a comparative advantage, and where their support can actually be tangible. The NDS is already one such institution. I know there is good cooperation between CSIS, the Canadian intelligence organization, and NDS. I know if there is interest in pursuing any role in the future or support to our security institutions, that would definitely be one area. It should also include support, not only at the technical level but also management support, because a lot of these institutions need

to become strong, need to be able to manage their own affairs. As much as technical capacity and skills are important, it's also important that they receive support as an organization. It would be an important area for Canada to consider.

● (1615)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: We've had people come and talk to us—and I've had people come and talk to me—about counter-IED proposals and some flying training proposals and various training proposals. Have you had any contact with the Canadian private sector about specific capacities or capabilities? Would there be things that you could bring to us to suggest that the Government of Canada could maybe talk to these people and perhaps find a way to help?

Mr. Jawed Ludin: You see, honourable member, that's another area that's extremely important. I've been going around, since coming back after the summer, to speak to some of the private sector organizations in Canada. My focus in the past has mainly been on the mining industry, in which Canada has tremendous potential, or on some of the other investment opportunities.

One area in which we do have a lot of capacity here in Canada is defence. Particularly with reference to counter-IEDs, I know this has been an important consideration for NATO as well. Most of the Canadian troops that have lost their lives have actually lost them to IEDs. So these have been a concern for them.

NATO has the resources and the technical capacity to at least do something as far as their own protection is concerned. But what about the future of the Afghan institutions? Our police lose their lives by a factor of one to four: more than the national army. Our police are at the forefront of this war against terrorism. They do not have the necessary protection. In fact they have minimal protection for their lives. It would be such a valuable contribution by Canada to engage the private sector capacity that exists here, technological and otherwise, to help the Afghan security institutions, particularly the police, in this particular area.

At the risk of being politically inappropriate by raising a particular name, I am aware of at least one particular organization that is a world leader in this, and that is Allen-Vanguard, which specializes in this particular area that I've seen.

The Chair: You have thirty seconds.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'll just go back to the election for a second. You talked a lot about the election reforms and things you're doing with the complaints commission and so on. Obviously, I think, you have made some good progress, as dramatic as having one million annulled votes is. Do you have a map of the road ahead, or is it too early to say what lessons have been learned out of this one and what you're going to do better on the next one?

Mr. Jawed Ludin: We had already learned a lot from last year's presidential election, which we took into account in the conduct of the elections in September.

A democracy is inevitably going to be a process of trial and error. It has developed in progressive democracies of today including Canada. And it will be for new democracies such as Afghanistan. But I was really pleased to see that this year, as I said, as unfortunate as it is to see one million votes invalidated, it also has to be seen that these institutions did their jobs appropriately.

•(1620)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Harris, go ahead, please.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ambassador, for joining us. We're pleased to have you with us.

I listened very carefully to your presentation. I want to say, as one who does not support a military role beyond the 2011 date or even a combat military training role.... You didn't mention that in your presentation. In fact, you talked about potential support from Canada for the ANP and the NDS in the context of support for the rule of law.

I want to say first of all that I think the rule of law is extremely important in nation-building—in my view, and of course not only mine—to have the population respecting the process, giving rise to the respect for governmental institutions as a result.

You did respond to Mr. Holland's suggestion for some private sector involvement in that. Perhaps you would elaborate slightly on what kind of support the Afghan National Police might need for policing from a country like Canada.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: That's a very good question, honourable member. The ANP needs not just training but support in more comprehensive ways, for a number of reasons. One, unlike the Afghan National Army, which was an institution that was built from scratch nine years ago through the intervention of the United States.... That involved not just recruitment and training but actually the build-up of a new, effective structure. As a result, that institution has become today, despite all its challenges, perhaps the most respected and most efficient and effective institution in the country.

The AFP has not had that. The police were not abolished at the beginning. The police did not receive an investment on the same scale at the outset. As a result, even though a lot of investment has gone in over the years and a lot of work has taken place, it still lacks a lot of very basic capacities. This is in a situation where they are, as I said, at the forefront of this war. They suffer more casualties than any other institution, whether within or outside Afghanistan.

So they would require organizational support to restructure, to take the reform process that's ongoing. Canada is already helping through the RCMP. I know this is one element of that.

As I said, by far the biggest provider of support is the United States, mainly on the training side. There are ways in which Canada can complement that. As I said earlier, I think one example, in a very specific area, is how police can handle the problem of IEDs. That would be an enormous contribution to the Afghan police if they were able to have that capacity, the equipment, the technical skills. They would also benefit from specialized training.

In addition to the police, the NDS, the National Directorate of Security; the reason it would be more appropriate for Canada to focus on that is because, in terms of scale, I think Canada would be a more appropriate organization to deal with it. It's a much smaller organization. As I said, it's an organization that already has had some cooperation with the Canadian government.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

The second area I want to talk about is the peace *jirga*. You mentioned it was held around the same time as our visit. There was also the establishment of the peace council over the summer by President Karzai. Of course, in the last number of weeks we've heard reports of discussions or the beginning of discussions and meetings with representatives or at least elements of the Taliban. I'd like you to comment on that.

Some of the recent reports talked about the removal of some preconditions, one of which was that they wouldn't talk about peace or reconciliation until the troops left. That seems to no longer be a precondition. I realize we're talking about a rather ephemeral process, but can you tell us anything from your point of view as ambassador about what's going on?

•(1625)

Mr. Jawed Ludin: What's going on is that President Karzai realizes the reconciliation process is not something the government can do only on its own. There is a need for a consensus across the country from all groups to support that. That's why he organized the peace *jirga* and that's why he has now almost delegated this particular function to a non-government national body. That is the High Council for Peace.

The High Council for Peace will lead the process. I know this will vastly draw on the government's channels with the insurgents, on government capacities, but they will essentially lead it in a non-governmental way. There are contacts already. The government has been able to build a lot of contacts over the years with some of the Taliban.

I know you're probably aware of one case in which the number two in the Taliban leadership was almost on the brink of joining the reconciliation process when he was arrested on the Pakistani side of the border. That disrupted the process. I think there is renewed potential now, renewed momentum behind that. I can say with certainty it will only work if Pakistan supports this process, because most of the leadership of the Taliban is based in Pakistan, and without the leadership there is not much you can do.

The Chair: Very briefly, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: Just what would you hope for from the international community to help that process? There are obviously a lot of players in the region, aside from Pakistan, and what would you hope to see?

Mr. Jawed Ludin: From the international side we would like two things, essentially. One, we would be really pleased to have a consensus from the international side, a sort of certainty about how they see the reconciliation process. As I said earlier in my statement, there are some views—I don't necessarily subscribe to them, and they don't necessarily represent the majority view—that some of our friends in the international community see the reconciliation essentially as a way of getting out of Afghanistan, as an exit strategy. That would be disastrous and that would just not be desirable. And it will not work, either, because it's really important to be clear about the objective of this strategy and then to do it.

Number two, what we want from the international community is to leave the actual process to Afghan leadership, to President Karzai, and the mechanisms that he has created, and then to push Pakistan in this direction. Because as I said, again, the key of making this a success is in Pakistan.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Obhrai, please.

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

Ambassador, thank you very much for coming. One of the key issues for this committee is for Canadians to understand what is happening in Afghanistan. Your presence, coming here and being televised, gives Canadians an understanding of what is going on in your country.

As you know, your country, for all practical purposes, as you said, a ground zero failed state coming into functioning state, requires a lot of effort, which we are discussing here—security, corruption, development aid, and everything you have discussed. But a key element most Canadians are looking for right now has to do with this election process that is taking place in Afghanistan. My colleague Mr. Hawn, as well as everybody else, has gone, and are looking to you to see about this process of the election. Despite the fact that over a million ballots are gone, and that 40% turned out, the key element here is that this is your second parliamentary election. You had your presidential elections. What comes out of all of these things are the questions about invalid votes, intimidation, and everything.

Rightly so, you've pointed out that these are new areas where these things are happening. But Canadians would like to hear from you, out of this whole process, where are you progressing? Has this election actually...? I mean, we're talking about a million votes being invalid. We're talking about 224 candidates under investigation and all these things. But bring it down to the ground zero level and say to Canadians that this election has seen remarkable improvements over the previous elections, and where it is going, and where it is headed. Because at the end of the day, the election, and whether you can have your peace process...

When I was in the United States, I listened to your president on *Larry King Live* talking about the peace process and everything. But at the end of the day, the Afghans are going to say, what is in there for me? Was there any improvement?

If they cannot make the judgment of who is going to represent them in a transparent manner, is that...? That is the key element Canadians are asking about, so I would like your impression of what is coming out now, and for you to tell us that there have been, oh, remarkable improvements that you can identify for us.

• (1630)

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Thank you, sir.

I can't answer that question without confessing that certainly we could have been in a much better environment today, five years after the first time we had parliamentary elections and a national process. Had we been in a better situation, where we would have had a more secure country, much stronger civil society institutions, we probably

would have had a next parliament that would have been, without any reservations, a great improvement over the previous one.

That's not to diminish the importance and value of the first parliament. If anyone were to ask me if there was value in having the first parliament, despite all its drawbacks and shortcomings I would say absolutely, without any reservations. It did a great job.

In the next parliament we'll do the same. It will improve, and in fact it's better than it could have been given the circumstances. We were fearful before the elections about whether enough women candidates would come forward, for example, particularly given the security environment, whether other independent contenders would come forward, and whether the elections would happen in the first place. I think all those concerns have now been addressed. There were enough women who came out.

From what I know, and from the preliminary elections, I think a lot of those people have the people's confidence. They had the votes. It did take place; it will take place in the next parliament.

As I said, I think they have to be seen in the context of the ongoing situation in Afghanistan. Security is not just having an impact on the troops who are fighting there, or in terms of the general development of the country; it's going to have an impact on all aspects of life in Afghanistan, including politics.

Politics will only mature and become better when we have a country that's secure. It will definitely be a big improvement on the last parliament, but we still have a long way to go before we can have a parliament that resembles this great House.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have a couple of minutes left.

Mr. Rae, please.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Preliminary to my question, Ambassador, I noted that the news report today mentioned the possibility of talks. They referred to representatives of the Quetta Shura, the Peshawar Shura, and the Haqqani group, all of which to the best of my knowledge are based in Pakistan.

Is that not correct?

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Yes.

Hon. Bob Rae: So obviously your statement that Pakistan needs to be involved in finding the solution is clearly the case. I just want to support that.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Yes.

Hon. Bob Rae: In your remarks, Ambassador, you did stress the fact that you believe that training, equipping, and building capacity for the army, the police, and the NDS were all still necessary. These are still requirements, and you foresee those as being necessary post-2011.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Absolutely.

Hon. Bob Rae: Is it your view that Canada could play a useful role in that regard?

•(1635)

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Without any reservations, Canada has great capacity in this area. It has already done a great job in Kandahar with the national army and the national police. It's an important priority for us.

I think if the people of the Canadian government and this Parliament accept in principle that the mission in Afghanistan is not finished and Canada would be willing to help Afghanistan in the future, then this would probably be the most important area to help in.

Hon. Bob Rae: Later, we're going to hear a brief from CARE Canada making a very eloquent argument that Canada should be engaged in the area of women's rights and advancing the cause of equality in your country. In terms of advancing human rights, and in particular equality rights, I wonder if you could tell us how you think those are felt and perceived by the people of Afghanistan.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: Honourable member, that is one area that's not just crucial for our future and frequently overlooked; it's also an area where an international partner would need credibility to assist and to be there. It's a very sensitive area. A lot of people look with suspicion at our country to be seen to have a democratic process and to engage directly with civil society, with human rights, and with the rule of law sector.

Canada does have that credibility. It's a country that's seen as not having an agenda that's beyond the agenda of assisting Afghanistan build its own future. It's a country that has an international reputation. It's a country that countries like Afghanistan look up to, so I think all the right ingredients are there. On the civilian side of any future role that Canada will have, it would certainly be my expectation as an Afghan to put democratization and support to the democratic process, to civil society, and to human rights organizations as a priority.

I think in the face of challenges that we have today, from reconciliation to the war itself to all the others, those institutions look for support. They need that support, and they're not getting it from anywhere else. If you don't help, if Canada doesn't help, countries from the region will not do that. There are many interests that are involved there to suppress these institutions.

Hon. Bob Rae: The argument I've often heard—I don't agree with the argument, but I want you to answer it yourself—is that western countries such as Canada have to avoid engaging in issues that are really at the heart of some of the debates under way in the culture of your own country, and that it would be wise for us not to engage in those.

I don't agree with that argument, but I would like to give you a chance to respond to it. I think it's an argument that we have to deal with.

Mr. Jawed Ludin: I'm glad you don't agree with it and I expect you not to agree with it, because it is something we don't agree with. We think it's deeply relativistic culturally to say that. In a sense, people who say that are patronizing as well.

There is no part of me, no cell in my body, that believes that we cannot have a country that's free, that we cannot have a country that's democratic, and that we should not live with dignity, in prosperity,

and in peace, as most of the world does, and with the kind of society that you have achieved and that I enjoy today by being here.

I think the kinds of arguments those people make are not surprising, because there is also a big argument that's made in support of extremism nowadays. There are many people who justify it in one way or another, but it would be wrong to just go along with them and to fall into their trap.

As an Afghan, I would be looking up to Canada to not fall into those traps and to bravely, boldly support Afghanistan's new young democracy.

•(1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I think that's a good note to end on. We appreciate your time here before the committee. It's been a very helpful and informative time. Thank you again for appearing here.

We will suspend for a moment while we bring in the next witness.

•(1640)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1640)

The Chair: I'd like to bring this meeting back to order.

For the second part of this meeting, until 5:30 p.m., we have CARE Canada with us. We'd like to welcome the communications manager, Mr. Kieran Green, and their policy and advocacy coordinator, Jennifer Rowell.

Welcome to both of you. We look forward very much to what you have to tell us today. The usual practice is to allow you approximately 10 minutes, together, to have an opening statement.

I'm not sure who will begin, but when you're ready you may start.

Mr. Kieran Green (Communications Manager, CARE Canada): I thought I would do a very brief introduction. We want to get to the meat of the report, which will be handled by Jennifer.

To begin, I'll give just a very quick history of where we came to what we are today.

CARE has been involved in Afghanistan for a very long time. We have been working, fighting poverty there, for 50 years now. So we have a strong and vested interest in the country and helping the people of that country. And Canada has been a very strong supporter of CARE's work there, financing a lot of the very good work that we do there.

As we moved towards 2011 and realized that it looked like there was going to be a shift in Canada's role there—the decision was made that the combat mission would end—we saw really no substantive debate happening among Canadians on what Canada's role would be after that combat mission ended. So we decided to take a look and basically take the opportunity to start the debate by offering some of our own proposals.

Based on our work, our instinct was that really the niche that Canada could best fill would be taking the role of champion for the women of Afghanistan, advancing their rights, their empowerment, their development. We did extensive consultation with civil society groups, international NGOs, local NGOs, right down to talking to the Afghan men and women that we work with day-to-day to find out what they believed was the best course, what they wanted to see from Canada. We universally heard the same things, that they have strong support, that Canada can be the champion for women in Afghanistan.

Why women? Because right now the women of Afghanistan are some of the worst off in the world. When you compare their relative status to men in their society, compared to the gap in other societies, developing countries, it is the widest in the world.

Currently the women of Afghanistan have no international champion. This is a niche that is currently not being occupied by anyone. Efforts towards helping the women of Afghanistan are happening in a haphazard fashion, they're not coordinated, and there's really room for someone to step in and be the body who coordinates that, who becomes the spokesperson, the voice for women there.

Finally, Canada is one of the top donor countries in Afghanistan right now. In terms of what has been done for women, we have been one of the strongest spokespersons speaking out on behalf of women and speaking out against injustice, and we have had a lot of strong work helping the women of Afghanistan. So we already have that capacity on the ground.

What we're proposing in this report really is nothing new for Canada. It's just a shift in the way of thinking and expanding some of the things that we are already doing successfully.

With that, I'm going to turn it over to Jennifer Rowell, who will really get into the meat of the proposals, the things that we are dealing with or are offering as opportunities in our report.

•(1645)

Ms. Jennifer Rowell (Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, CARE Canada): Thanks, Kieran.

Thank you very much for your time today. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you on this important subject.

As you know, Afghanistan is approaching a crossroads. Reconciliation and reintegration are taking place. NATO has just opened safe passage for insurgent leaders to come into Kabul in order to hold those negotiations. We feel, and the women we speak to—the women partners whom we work with—feel and fear that in this process of reconciliation and negotiation we possibly stand to lose many of the gains we have won over the last ten years as a national and international community.

Right now there is no strong defender of women's rights in Afghanistan throughout the reconciliation process. You are aware of the inconsistent record on human rights within the government itself, both among the individuals and also in various pieces of legislation that have been passed, such as the Shia Personal Status Law, the amnesty law, etc.

We are concerned that women's rights may be part of the negotiation, part of the compromise that is reached in the effort to create a broader security. We're asking Canada to consider leading the international discussion on how the international community can try to stop that possibility from occurring. Women have come incredibly far in the last ten years, and they are concerned that this might be turned around.

The first section of the report is about that element of security. It's about how we can assure that the women are remembered, that their rights are guaranteed to a certain standard that the women themselves approve within negotiations and reconciliation, and that they in fact have their own voice within the negotiation itself so that they can defend their own positions.

The second part of the report is on economic and social development. This is an area in which Canada already excels. You have excellent programming in social and economic development; you have an excellent education portfolio; you have an excellent economic development portfolio; and you have an increasing maternal and child health...which I hope will turn into a priority, under the Muskoka initiative.

We believe that by changing certain key elements of that portfolio, Canada would be able to prioritize and focus on improving access to services for women within those key areas. Right now, and I can't overstate this, there is a disproportionate focus within the donor community on creating availability of services—building schools, building health clinics—and very little emphasis is going on ensuring that the women are able to access those clinics. In certain areas you can have 15 maternal health clinics in one square kilometre, and not a single woman will be able to go because the socio-cultural barriers have not been sufficiently addressed. The donor community is so focused on availability that these access issues have been put by the wayside.

Canada has one of the most credible and one of the strongest engagements in Afghanistan on issues of access, because Canada is flexible and because Canada puts money into some of the more invisible barriers, and the Canadian successes have been very important. You have a very strong reputation for this, and we're encouraging a scale-up of some of those initiatives.

The third section of the report is on governance, rule of law, and human rights. We've heard many comments already this afternoon about the importance of the rule of law. One thing is sure: there can be no security in the absence of a rule of law, and there can be no establishment of genuine support for women's rights in the absence of a rule of law. But rule of law does not simply mean policing towards counter-insurgency. It doesn't simply mean having courts in place. It means ensuring that those service delivery mechanisms are capable of dealing with women's rights.

I'll give you an example on policing. Right now, new recruits to the Afghan police force go through an eight-week training. That is the limit of the formal training. There are other programs that offer other, alternative things, but the basis is an eight-week training program. Seven weeks and four days of that training is on counter-insurgency policing. One day is on community policing, and one half-hour is on women's rights.

•(1650)

A police force with that limited knowledge of its role as community protector, as protector of human rights and of women, of whom 87.2% have been abused over their lifetime and who require the services of the state to enable that they are not abused in the future or to enable that they have support they need to overcome the situation they're in....

The police sector, the justice sector—they do not have the knowledge or the skills to necessarily address those issue. So women remain in a state of fear, because they will often go to the services of the police and the justice system expecting support, hoping for support, and being either turned away or abused. Often that has to do with ignorance, and often that ignorance has to do with the fact that the international donor community and the Afghan priority at the most senior level is not focused on creating a community rule of law, such as the rule of law that we have in Canada and that is so fundamental.

We believe, if I may quote Ursula Franklin, that “Peace is not the absence of war. It is the presence of justice and the absence of fear.” We need to make sure that we get to the presence of justice and the absence of fear. We think that now that Canada is pulling out its military forces it can turn the breadth of its attention to the establishment of rule of law, in which women's rights are embedded concretely. The report has several recommendations on how that might happen.

Finally, we have a section on aid effectiveness. It's about the “how”. It's the collective wisdom of many organizations, both Afghan and international, that have experience in the country and know how things get done.

There was a reference made earlier this afternoon about culture. I believe it was Mr. Rae who pointed out the difficulties of addressing culture. I understand and appreciate this concern, but there are answers to it. Our concern is that in Afghanistan a lot gets clumped under culture. Anything that seems hostile or conservative or different from what we see in the west often gets clumped under the label “culture”. That means that many implementing partners and certainly many of the donors who are present in Afghanistan avoid it. If we actually explore culture, if we break it down into its constituent parts and find out how much is culture, how much is ignorance, how much is due to other factors, such as distance from hospitals or distance from schools or whatever it might be, the problem becomes far more practical.

I know you will have questions on this.

In conclusion, treat our report as a menu of options. Canada can undertake some; it can lead the international call on others; it can encourage other donors and the Afghan community itself to take up yet other options. This report outlines just how feasible and how practical it is for Canada to step into that position of leadership on women's rights, without increasing your portfolio size, but just making some very basic practical shifts in what Canada is already doing very well in the country.

•(1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate this.

We'll begin with Mr. Rae, please.

Hon. Bob Rae: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome to our guests. It's great to have you with us.

Can you tell me what the size is of your annual financial commitment in Afghanistan?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Are you referring to CARE?

Hon. Bob Rae: Yes.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Currently we have a turnover of about \$40 million a year. We reach about 1.5 million Afghans a year. We have significant programming in women's development and women's empowerment. I believe we work with about 30,000 women each day in Kabul alone on empowerment issues.

Hon. Bob Rae: And your revenue comes from government agencies and private donors, individual donors, all around the world.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Currently CIDA is our number one donor on our women's empowerment program, for which we are eternally grateful.

Hon. Bob Rae: And that is for how much?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: I can pass you those details. I don't have them off the top of my head. But CIDA has been a consistent donor on women's rights for the last 13 years.

Hon. Bob Rae: Jennifer or Kieran, have you yourselves been working and staying in Afghanistan?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: I have been based there for the past year and a half permanently.

Hon. Bob Rae: The past year you were in Kabul.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Yes.

Mr. Kieran Green: I was there for a number of weeks this past summer going out and meeting some of the women who have been helped by these programs financed by Canada.

Hon. Bob Rae: I found your brief very compelling. I think it's very timely, because we are now reaching a critical point in the discussion. I don't like to disagree with my colleague from St. John's, but I don't think the discussions are ephemeral at all. In fact, I think they're very real. I believe that getting them out into the public is going to be a difficult task, but I think that these are very real questions.

These questions of the conflict between human rights, particularly women's rights, and some of the arguments stemming from religious ideology that seem to be deeply ingrained within the Taliban movement, are not theoretical differences. They are very real. You only have to look at the experiences of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime to understand how real these are.

Was CARE able to operate in Afghanistan at the time the Taliban was running the government?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: We were fully operative in Kabul. We were working on education and economic development with women.

The thing about Afghanistan is that there are ways to do many things that I believe the international community assumes are not possible. If we work in the right ways, which often means with quite a bit of discretion, work with the right people, such as local community leaders and local mullahs, and take the time it requires to build up those relationships, we can absolutely work in very complicated and very distressing circumstances.

Hon. Bob Rae: To be clear, you're not asking Canada to argue against peace talks between the various shura that are now being brought into Afghanistan. You're not saying, "Don't do that, because if you do that we'll end up putting human rights on the table".

● (1700)

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Absolutely not. We believe that some form of reconciliation, some form of reintegration, is probably the best way forward. It is the non-violent end to the conflict, and it is what brings a society back together.

The way it is handled is critical. The way it is undertaken is where the devil lies. The devil is in the details. If there isn't a sufficient guarantee, at some level, that women will be remembered, then we will go significantly back in time. The women of Afghanistan are acutely aware of this. This is what they are discussing right now. Women's leaders across the country are fighting for spaces in the peace *jirga*. Even at the Kabul conference there was a significant lobbying effort the women themselves undertook to ensure that they could get a voice in that forum to explain their concerns and explain what some of the options are.

One thing many in the western world often don't realize is that Afghanistan has a powerful women's leadership base—a very strong, very capable, powerful base. We as Canada and as the international community need to listen to them. We need to consult with them as a priority, as a policy matter, and ensure that those lessons are incorporated into Canadian policy.

Also, on some of the more sensitive issues, we need to broker the voice of women to get into policy fora where Canada is present but the women are not. If Canada can consult with women, ensure that their voices are understood, that they have the resources to do their own surveys, write their own reports, and inform at the level you require, then Canada can be the broker of that voice in spaces where the women aren't and let their voices shine through. Let the women be the leaders, because they're capable of it. They're absolutely capable of it.

Hon. Bob Rae: Because of your mandate, in terms of looking at the human rights situation and women, presumably CARE has operations in Pakistan as well.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: We do. We have significant operations in Pakistan. Right now, of course, a lot of the attention is on the floods.

Hon. Bob Rae: Do you engage in any quiet diplomacy with...? You talked before about how, when you worked in Kabul, you would deal with the mullahs and try to explain what you were trying to do, and why it didn't represent a threat to any interpretation of the Koran or anything else.

Do you have any of those discussions with people in Peshawar or Quetta, or is that beyond your scope?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: It is not what we do. When we have those sorts of dialogues, it is to facilitate humanitarian access. It is to get into vulnerable communities where the UN and certain other facilitating partners are not able to go. We need to establish safe passage into the most vulnerable communities, and that is the basis on which we have discussions where they are necessary.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bachand, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to welcome our guests from CARE Canada.

It is obvious when reading your document that you consider improving the living conditions of Afghan women as one of the pillars of Afghanistan's future. There is no doubt in my mind about this, because this is what you say all over this document. You talk about good government and about the rule of law.

I went to Afghanistan on three occasions and I have always noted that women are kept under control and systematically oppressed. Even we, Westerners, sometimes find it difficult to talk to them. We often have the feeling that we do not help by talking to them because they are constantly under surveillance. I ultimately have to say that Afghan society is patriarchal in nature. It is not a matriarchal society based on a specific culture.

I can agree with you when you say that it is sometimes necessary to try to change this culture by doing concrete things, perhaps like building hospitals near villages. Then people would not have to travel on camel back for three days to get to a hospital. I can understand that but this is a big challenge you are asking us to take on. It is quite difficult. With a patriarchal society—I strongly condemned the infamous rape legislation passed by the Afghan parliament—we are quite far from a situation in which women have full powers in Afghanistan. So I think it would take a very strong will on the part of the Canadian government to really move forward.

The semi-annual report I have here mentions six government priorities and says next to nothing about women. It is therefore quite a challenge you are throwing at us, asking us to be champions and to try to effect change. I think this can be done in two ways: help women in practical terms and, at the same time, educate men. If men persist in their behaviour and hold on to their patriarchal mentality by refusing to give any rights to women, we will need to work for at least a hundred years before we can get any results.

I would like to know your reaction to what I am saying. Are you still suggesting that we go this way? Will it take a very strong will? I think Canada is the only country that is well positioned to do it. Are you in favour of a two-pronged approach involving both helping women in practical terms and educating the patriarchal society?

● (1705)

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: In fact, we need to do three things at the same time in order to improve the present situation in Afghanistan. No doubt, we should absolutely work with women to improve their capabilities, their awareness of their rights and so on.

However, there are two more aspects to this situation. First, as you said, we need to change social relations or deal with the issue of the relations of women with men and with leaders of the communities where they live. Second, there is the political aspect such as the rape legislation that you mentioned. It is essential to deal directly with the political framework, the legislation that defines what is acceptable and what is not as well as the limits relating to respect for human rights.

The problem now is that many donors focus all their efforts on women. Very little money and support is left to deal specifically with education and awareness for men or with other social problems more related to politics.

For example, in relation to maternal health, we found out a few things after conducting some experiments on the ground. When we talked directly to men and their mothers—i.e. pregnant women's mothers-in-law—and explained to them why it is very important to let women go to the hospital to get help during pregnancy, when we told them about all the risks and dangers for the women and about all available resources, such as the nearest hospital or the nearest midwife who can help them and so on, when we gave them this basic information, the chances for women to be allowed to take advantage of these resources were greatly improved.

In the sectors of the city of Kabul where we are active, there was a remarkable improvement in maternal health due to efforts directly related to the work done with men. Thus, as I said, the problem is that efforts are not focused on this aspect.

One year ago, a \$22 million hospital was built in Kabul. This is a huge amount of money. However, the only person at the Department of public health who was entrusted with the responsibility—

• (1710)

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds. I think there was another question, but....

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: About three weeks ago, my colleague, Mr. Bachand, and myself, as well as a few of the people seated around this table, had a discussion with a former Afghan parliamentarian, Ms. Malalai Joya. She told us that for some time after the arrival of foreign troops, there was some improvement in the situation of Afghan women but that almost all of the gains realized were since lost. Would you go as far as agreeing with this statement?

Also, since you mentioned Kabul, can you tell us if you work exclusively in the Kabul area? We often see in reports that Kabul is the only place that is still controlled by international forces at present.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: No. As a matter of fact, our work extends to about three-quarters of the country, either directly with people or through Afghan or international partners. We have operations in almost every part of the country, but less so in the southeast because this is always difficult. So I am talking about our experiences everywhere in the country.

As for Ms. Joya, you said that she... The fact is that she is concerned about possible decrease in—

Mr. Jean Dorion: There was progress in the beginning but we are now losing all of that. Since everything is lost, would you go as far as—

[English]

The Chair: We'll come back to this issue, because we're way over time.

We'll turn it over to Mr. Abbott, and if you have some key comments, you can maybe make them.

Mr. Abbott, go ahead, please.

Hon. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Thank you very much to both of our guests. I would say that in the time I've been privileged to be on this committee, I don't know if I've felt more informed than by your testimony, and I thank you for that. It's very compelling.

I'd like to use the term that Mr. Wilfert used in earlier testimony about the “elephant in the room”. In this particular instance, I'm talking about the fundamentals of the interpretation of the Koran.

The fact is that two days ago I read that in the United Arab Emirates—and I only have one source of information, so I could be wrong—there had been a ruling that under Sharia law it was okay for men in a family to beat up their wives and their daughters as long as the bruises didn't show, which I found really quite obnoxious, to put it mildly.

If in fact that is fundamental to what we're talking about, as much as I can't imagine there isn't one person in this room who doesn't have goodwill and wouldn't like to take a serious look at your proposal of our becoming more involved, how do we get around that elephant?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: It's a myth that it has to be an elephant. It doesn't have to be an elephant. I almost believe, with all possible respect, that the international community fears culture so much, they tend to avoid it when we actually don't have to avoid it.

Regarding Islam and the interpretation of Islam, the unfortunate reality is that the people we hear in Canada are those with the microphone, and the people with the microphone are the fundamentalists, the radicals. But there is a whole subset of mullahs, of imams, who have a much different interpretation of Islam and a much more beautiful interpretation of Islam and, many would say—including the women who are deeply faithful—a much more accurate interpretation of Islam.

A lot of groups, including CARE, work with this more moderate set of mullahs both to ensure that they're able to spread the word regarding women's rights and to ensure that groups such as CARE learn about what the Koran says, learn about what Islam says, on women's rights so that we can also be more amenable and more...I don't want to say “respectful” in the sense that we weren't respecting it before, but so that we can tailor our work so our voice is one that Afghan audiences will hear and understand.

It doesn't have to be an elephant.

Hon. Jim Abbott: Just because we only have seven minutes...and I'm absolutely not interested in entering into debate, but I think this is something that we have to understand a little more clearly. With respect, this was the supreme court of the U.A.E., as reported. We're also talking about the fact that under the Shia Personal Status Law in Afghanistan, we have these blockages.

Clearly, anybody who is looking at possibly moving forward with your proposed initiative would really have to have a great grasp of this topic, and we're not going to complete it in seven-minute testimony here today.

• (1715)

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: No, you're right, and I would absolutely be willing to continue that part of the conversation later on.

What I think we have to remember is that Afghanistan has signed up to every protocol under the sun—UN Security Council Resolution 1325, CEDAW, EAW—all of these international...

In the Afghan constitution, in at least three different areas, Afghanistan has written up their commitment to respecting women's rights. For CARE, it's a question of asking Canada, the United States, and others to simply remind Afghanistan that actually that is the supreme, overarching rule. There is a great discrepancy, of course, between what is more supreme. Is it the constitution or is it the Koran? We need to encourage the Afghan government to resolve that question, because there is a lot that remains hanging.

Hon. Jim Abbott: You spoke about the base of women whom we could interface with, and I guess my question is how, in practical terms, we tap into that base.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: It's so simple. There are Afghan women's networks that are available that are based in Kabul but they have membership throughout the country. It's one phone call. CARE is affiliated with them very directly. Heather Cruden, who is head of CIDA for Afghanistan, is also connected to them. Ambassador Crosbie is familiar with them. It's a phone call. They would be at the embassy within minutes to have these forms of discussion.

The infrastructure is there. We're just not tapping into it, as you yourself have said.

Hon. Jim Abbott: Is it a case of strengthening the infrastructure? Is that what you're saying?

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: The infrastructure could be strengthened. Right now international donors, including Canada, tend to give "projectized" grants, give grants to women's networks that are \$20,000 here, \$40,000 there, \$300 there. These support them on one particular task when really what these women need are longer-term, core funding support so that they can go out when they need to and do surveys with women across the country, they can write up reports, they can hire a permanent researcher, hire a permanent advocacy person. They don't rely on the kinds of private funding that CARE relies on.

I'm here because we've got private funding that allows me to be here. If Canada could commit its gender fund—which is a great resource right now to the women of Afghanistan towards supporting core funding—slightly longer term, it wouldn't cost any more, but it would enable women to develop yet more leadership capability.

One thing they don't need is another week-long seminar on what leadership means. They do not need that. They absolutely know it. They need the resources to make it so.

Hon. Jim Abbott: I guess we want to—I want to—bite into what we're talking about here, but the gap that I'm having, very honestly, is the power and the power base, what it is currently in Afghanistan, which is the male domination that my friend Mr. Bachand referred to, and reconciling the reality of the power base to what it is that we're talking about here.

So I have this chasm in front of me. Again, we won't do this in seven minutes, but we need to talk about the bridge, about how we bridge that chasm.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Ask the Afghan women: they live the reality every single day. They know what's possible. They know what isn't possible. They know what mullahs are on their side. They know what mullahs are more hostile to them. They've got a lot of the responses. We need to follow what they're telling us, so we need to reach out and ask them. They're willing and they're there with the answers.

Hon. Jim Abbott: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Harris, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us. CARE Canada, of course, is such a famous organization, it's actually part of the language. When you hear about "care" packages, it has come into the language from the existence of your organization.

I was very encouraged by the quite positive—I won't say over-optimistic, but certainly optimistic—statement that you're able to say that it is possible to empower women under the difficult circumstances that we are aware of...and perhaps exaggerate, because we see things in black and white from such a distance in Canada. So that's wonderful news.

I want to pay attention to your recommendations in terms of how Canada can help develop and be a more effective resource for that. The ambassador, who preceded you, seemed to recognize that this is probably an area of assistance that needs help and is one of the more vulnerable areas, and that organizations working on this type of activity are suppressed and not supported.

So I'm with you all the way on that, and I am delighted to know that you find the prospects very positive.

I do want help on one thing. My friend Mr. Rae chided me slightly for referring to the peace process as "ephemeral", but that was only in terms of the reports. I'm glad to hear from Mr. Rae that the Quetta Shura is involved in possible talks for reconciliation.

I want your help with this question that I have. One of the things we heard up until recently was that the Taliban were making it a precondition for any talks that all foreign troops leave Afghanistan, without which we will have no talks. That obviously was not going to happen and therefore there was no possibility of any peace discussions.

I'm looking at your key recommendations on security here. I know that President Karzai has suggested that any peace talks have to happen with an acceptance of the constitution—quote, unquote. You are more specific than that in terms of guarantees, so I want to ask you two questions. One, are these guarantees something that would prevent any discussions from taking place with the Taliban? And two, what is it that the international community can do—other than talking about the importance of women's rights—if we are being also told to respect that the process of reconciliation and peace has to be an Afghan-led process?

In that context, I have a further question. The High Council for Peace is a body that was appointed recently. There is some question as to the number of women present, and of course in the context of male dominance, I look around this room and see that all the members of Parliament who are here are men, so we have to be aware of that as well in terms of what we do in this country.

Would you comment on that broad question? Are your recommendations ones that would prohibit peace discussions? If so, how do you get around it? And what is the role of Canada and other communities in how that peace process works, particularly in terms of support for Afghan women?

● (1720)

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: I'm very pleased you raised the question of guarantees because this is something that has to be handled very delicately but very deliberately.

We certainly aren't recommending that Canada put itself into a position where if a certain guarantee is not met, Canada's influence disappears altogether because you've said, well, we're not going to support you anymore, we're not going to give you any more funding, or whatever it might be. We don't want to encourage Canada to polarize its position in a way that may make it unproductive or uncontributory in the future.

So there is a very delicate conversation that has to happen about exactly what is it that Canada can do to remain a stringent defender of women's rights within that process with certain expectations but that does not tie Canada's hands too significantly. It's not an answer that we have ourselves, because this room has much more information about how you engage on a political level with Afghanistan than what Kieran and I will have.

But what we do know is that if Canada did take up the brokerage role of consulting women on what they believe the minimum standards should be in this negotiation process regarding their own rights, then that is something that can set the tone for the international community to say “Okay, gentlemen, you want to negotiate; don't forget there is this other half of your population whom your constitution, whom all the UN resolutions you've signed up to, whom CIDA, which you've signed up to, suggests that you do respect. We're going to remind you what the women are saying, and here's all the evidence of that.”

Use the women's voice to create that position. I think they are in a better place to know what the minimum standards should be rather than, as you say, perhaps this group of gentlemen who are in Kabul infrequently.

It's a sensitive and delicate thing. We do not want Canada to tie its hands in a way that makes it unproductive.

● (1725)

Mr. Jack Harris: If I can, I'll add one more question. When we were in Afghanistan in May, they talked about the Kabul conference and the interest of the Government of Afghanistan to see donor countries assist the government in being able to have capacity itself. International organizations and contractors seemed to have lots of money, the money bypassing the government and going directly into groups or organizations.

I don't think it was particularly talking about support for the Afghan human rights commission or groups of your nature, but is there some body or some department that you've identified within the Afghan government that could be a vehicle for the kind of education that you're talking about, for the kind of support for women that you realize is important, and the whole nature of education for men as well in terms of awareness of this?

Is this something that the Government of Afghanistan can and should play a role in? Is there an agency or something that you could identify that Canada perhaps should support?

The Chair: A brief response, please.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Yes, Mr. Harris, it's the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which was established in late 2001, early 2002. It was given the very mandate that you describe, but since then has received only 2% of the development budget of other ministries and has received very little capacity and very little authority to do what it needs to do.

If we focus on the Ministry of Women's Affairs in a genuine way, you'd get the results that you've been describing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dechert, please.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Rowell and Mr. Green, I just want to thank you and reiterate what my colleagues have said. Thank you both for your efforts and for CARE's efforts in Afghanistan, both today and over the past 50 years.

In response to a question from my colleague Mr. Rae earlier, I understand that CARE will receive \$12 million in 2011 from CIDA. I think that's something—

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Thank you for that clarification. That's good.

Mr. Bob Dechert: It's my pleasure to do so.

You mentioned to us that CARE has been involved for 50 years, or perhaps more, in Afghanistan. I wonder if you could give us a short history of where women were in terms of their rights and their political influence pre-Taliban, what happened with the Taliban, and what has happened since the Taliban. Is there any improvement?

I was with this committee in Afghanistan in June. One of the things we were told, which was very encouraging to me, was that approximately 28% of the MPs in the Afghan parliament are women. That's actually a higher percentage than here in Canada. And those women face enormous threats to their personal safety in doing those jobs everyday.

Perhaps you could comment on all of that.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Very briefly, Afghanistan has always been a conservative society. This is sure. But before the insurgents took over, 75% of all teachers across the country were women. Many doctors, many lawyers, many nurses were women. So throughout the last century, we have seen significant moments at which women's rights have been fairly well respected, especially in cities. In the rural areas, it's a bit of a different story, but in cities there has been a precedent of very strong women's rights, and very strong economic and political participation for women.

I don't believe I need to explain the situation for women under the Taliban. From 2001 to 2005, there was a heyday in Afghanistan in which it surged back up from the great depths it had fallen to under the Taliban. There was tremendous hope. Women were coming out of the woodwork. There were more civil society activists. There were more people who wanted to go back into teaching. There were human rights lawyers, for lack of a better term. There was far more engagement. Women wanted to join the police, but because of the rule of law problems, which we described earlier in this session, women began to get hurt, so they would go to the police to seek support. They would try to join the police themselves. They would

try to become women leaders within Parliament, and they would be threatened. They would be killed. The number of assassinations for women leaders in Afghanistan is appalling.

What we found was that because the basic rule of law wasn't in place, this heyday at about 2005 started to dwindle, and women started to pull back into the woodwork. So since 2001 we've seen a surge and a decline. It's now at a stage where I think there's a mini-surge again. This surge, though, is probably due more to the fact that women know that we're at a critical crossroads than the fact that, for example, we're giving them all the support and resources they need. I think that explains why a record number of women participated in the election this year: 406 women participated in the election, despite rampant threats on their lives, their children's lives. They put themselves way out there because they know that this is possibly one of the last opportunities they will have.

● (1730)

Mr. Bob Dechert: Very good. Thank you.

Do I still have more time, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: I think we're out of time. We're going to have to adjourn the meeting. It's 5:30.

I really want to thank you very much. Your experience in Afghanistan has really made your testimony very valuable to us and most enlightening. Thank you very much.

Ms. Jennifer Rowell: Thank you so much for the time.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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