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Chair

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz

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• (1600)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC)): This is the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan, meeting number 15. We are following up a study on the Canadian mission in Afghanistan.

I would just like to briefly read you the motion that was passed by the committee. It was agreed that the committee invite the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of National Defence, and the Chief of the Defence Staff to appear on Wednesday, October 27, 2010, to speak to developments affecting the conduct of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan.

I would like to welcome to our committee today the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Lawrence Cannon; the Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Peter MacKay; and the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walter Natynczyk.

Welcome, gentlemen.

Maybe I'll begin with Mr. Cannon. The committee has asked that opening statements not be too long. Normally we give you ten minutes, but if you could do it in less time, we'd appreciate it, because there are a lot of questions by the committee. I'm sorry I couldn't get that message to you in advance.

Any time you're ready, you can go ahead.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Foreign Affairs): Thank you, Chairman.

Of course that message was delivered, and hopefully I'll be able to get this done within seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, it is a pleasure to be here today to provide honourable members of the committee with an update on the recent developments in Canada's engagement in Afghanistan. I would like to begin by recognizing the work of the men and women of the Canadian Forces and pay tribute to those who have been injured and, in particular, to those who have lost their lives in the service of Canada and Canadians.

[English]

We must also take a moment to recognize our development specialists, diplomats, and capacity-building experts, who are working in difficult and often dangerous conditions to improve the lives of Afghans and the capabilities of the Afghan government.

In addition, I wish to acknowledge the visit of the special committee on Afghanistan to that country. Judging from your report, it is clear that you saw first-hand the importance of Canada's work in Afghanistan, as well as the importance of connecting the Afghan government to its people, and then connecting them to their government.

[Translation]

While Afghanistan remains volatile, the time since the end of the quarter covered by the report, which will be dealt with in the next report, has seen a number of key events for the future. For example, the Kabul International Conference on Afghanistan was held on July 20. The conference, which was Afghan-led, co-chaired by the United Nations and attended by more than 70 partner-countries, international and regional organizations and financial institutions, marked a critical step toward Afghan leadership to secure, stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan.

• (1605)

[English]

The plan adopted at the conference sets out realistic priorities on moving towards a more secure, prosperous, and democratic Afghanistan. More importantly, it sets out clear timelines for the Afghan government to assume lead responsibility for safeguarding its people, building its economy, and reforming government institutions and services.

Parliamentary elections were held on September 18, and we still await the final results. Although marked by numerous incidents of insurgent violence, the elections did not experience a single significant complex attack. Over 90% of planned polling centres remained open nationally, and the election involved millions of Afghans as candidates, campaigners, workers, as well as voters.

[Translation]

While it is too early to pronounce on the final results of the elections, the Government of Afghanistan and its election bodies showed a greater capacity to plan for this election and ensure that voters were able to vote. However, the announcement of preliminary results on October 20 points to a considerable amount of fraud, and 1.3 million ballots have been disqualified out of 5.6 million cast.

We have supported efforts to enhance the capacity of Afghan electoral institutions. Canada and the international community welcomed the Government of Afghanistan's commitment at the Kabul Conference to further electoral reforms in order to strengthen the Afghan electoral process. Another notable event from the reporting quarter is the National Consultative Peace Jirga that was held from June 2 to 4 in Kabul, attended by some 1,600 Afghan participants, 20% of whom were women.

[English]

This represented an important milestone towards finding sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

An attempted insurgent attack on the day of the Jirga—during your visit—was effectively countered by Afghan National Security Forces, helping to underline the progress made in building ANSF capabilities. A key outcome of the event was the establishment of a High Council for Peace to provide leadership for the peace and reconciliation process, a commitment President Karzai fulfilled on September 28 with the announcement of members to the council.

We have always said that reconciliation must be Afghan-led, and Canada and the international community stand ready to support them within the framework generally accepted by the international community.

[Translation]

As you know, Canada's engagement in Afghanistan has been defined and guided by six specific but interrelated priorities, as well as three signature projects.

Our efforts to improve the delivery of basic services is the focus of the 9th quarterly report, which covers the period of April 1 to June 30, 2010.

During this period, two additional targets set by the Government of Canada in 2008 to guide our activities and investments in Afghanistan were achieved.

First, the area released as free of mines and remnants of war has surpassed 500 km².

Additionally, two infrastructure projects at Sarpoza prison were completed, for a planned total of 19 infrastructure projects.

[English]

With regard to our training and mentoring efforts, the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team training centre provided basic training to 87 Afghan National Police officers. Afghans are starting to see the benefits of the work we are doing in the security sector. According to recent polling conducted across Kandahar province, 60% of Kandaharis now see themselves as safe in their communities, and 46% see security as improving. Only one in six Kandaharis see security as getting worse.

In closing, Mr. Chair and colleagues, we must always remind ourselves that we are trying to help the Afghan people rebuild in the midst of a conflict. While progress has been difficult, we must also recognize the progress.

[Translation]

Our commitment to the Afghan people is clear. We are working harder than ever with Afghans, and closer together as an international community, to create the conditions for a more prosperous, better-governed and more secure Afghanistan.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, colleagues.

• (1610)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was done in under seven minutes.

Minister MacKay, if you have an opening statement, please go ahead.

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll try to be just as succinct and cover some new material.

Members of the committee, *chers collègues*, it's always a pleasure to be here with Minister Cannon, Canada's Chief of Defence Staff, General Walt Natynczyk, and all of you to discuss recent developments concerning Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

I had the opportunity to return to Afghanistan recently with Minister Blackburn and General Natynczyk. This was a visit that I would describe as extraordinary, remarkable in terms of various areas of progress we witnessed. While we were there, perhaps the most noticeable area in which we noted improvement was in the area of training. We visited the junior officer staff course in Kabul, which is a key component of Canada's efforts to build the capacities of the Afghan national security forces, both police and army. We also toured a site where a new Canadian-funded facility is being built to facilitate the course itself.

We went to Camp Nathan Smith, where our Provincial Reconstruction Team provides essential training to members of the Afghan Police Force, correctional services, and the judicial system. This location has literally been the epicentre of Canada's efforts at reconstruction and development, but is also a key point for training in the country.

[Translation]

The efforts of our whole-of-government team to help Afghans build stronger institutions and more effective governance mechanisms are quite admirable. And it's always an honour and a privilege—each time—to see first hand the amazing work that our men and women in uniform—and their civilian counterparts—are carrying out on behalf of our country. Their dedication to the mission is truly remarkable. They all share an unswerving desire to make things better and to truly improve the lives of Afghans.

[English]

We had a chance to meet directly with the representative of Canada in Kandahar, Tim Martin, who gave an exceptional brief and an overview of some of the positive changes he has witnessed in his time at the PRT, along with Bill Harris, who was the United States senior representative. They have been working very closely, along with, of course, our military personnel, including Dean Milner.

This committee knows well, and having been to Afghanistan yourselves, that the parliamentary motion requires us to prepare for the drawdown of our forces at the end of the combat mission in Afghanistan. General Natynczyk will speak directly to mission transition and logistics in a moment.

Having said that, the men and women of the Canadian Forces are as committed as ever to their tasks and the whole-of-government effort. We do have, after all, nine months ahead of us and there has been great cooperation, and I would describe it as exceptional motivation, witnessed by the forces there.

Our mission in Afghanistan is going through a critical phase, and important developments can be expected in the coming months. We often hear phrases such as “tipping points”, “leaning forward”, and “front foot”, and we are seeing initiative taken by coalition forces on the ground in Afghanistan. We heard that from people as high in the chain of command as General Petraeus, but throughout our visit we spoke with senior members of the Canadian Forces and senior Afghans in leadership positions.

The Canadian Forces will remain fully engaged in conducting the vital security component of the Afghan mission until July 2011. That's nine months out. So crucial work lies ahead, and a lot will be demanded of our men and women in uniform, those currently on rotation and those training to go into theatre.

The ISAF mission, the international development efforts, and the Government of Afghanistan are increasingly focusing on the training and the mentoring of the Afghan national security forces, and as the latest quarterly report on the mission noted, important progress is being achieved in that regard. I know props are not proper, but I would commend this as good reading for all members of the committee and all Canadians, in fact. This quarterly report sets out, in a very straightforward way, the progress that has been made, but I'll focus in on the training part.

Along with our ISAF partners, we are increasingly concentrating on developing strong and sustainable leadership within the Afghan national security forces through our training and mentoring efforts. And by mentoring I mean shoulder to shoulder with Afghans in the planning, conducting, and completing of important military operations.

The Afghan National Army is expanding in size and competence, and more Afghans are expressing their confidence in this key national institution. And anecdotally, we heard of how in many of the villages where Afghan soldiers patrol, with the support of Canadian Forces, they are getting key information. Key intelligence is being shared with them, which helps to prevent, interrupt, and predict Taliban attacks.

For example, we are hearing that the Canadian Forces are now mentoring a full brigade of 4,500 personnel. This is part of the ANA's 205th Corps and considered one of the most operationally experienced and active brigades of the entire Afghan National Army. So we are working with one of the most professional and competent brigades in the country.

A well-led, well-trained, and well-equipped Afghan National Army is essential for the security and ensuring the future of a democratic Afghanistan. The expression that you around the table have probably heard is “No training, no transition”. This has been an enduring theme in Afghanistan recently and a common refrain. Given them the capacity, give them the professionalism, and they will be able to do what we do.

• (1615)

[Translation]

Ongoing operations—often jointly conducted by ISAF, the Canadian Forces and their Afghan counterparts—are seriously disrupting the insurgency. And the size of protected population areas is growing across Kandahar. Minister Cannon and I met with some of our counterparts from NATO countries a little less than two weeks ago. We can assure you that there is firm resolve across the alliance and confidence that operations in Afghanistan are going in the right direction. And, that our allies and partners are as committed as we are to the success of the mission.

[English]

Mr. Chair, the men and women of the Canadian Forces continue to accomplish extraordinary things in Afghanistan. Without sounding perhaps maudlin, I believe they're a shining example of our generation and they build on the traditions that our country has committed to in the past to bring compassion, constructive engagement in building security through active military cooperation with countries, but also this whole-of-government approach, which is being emulated, in fact, by other countries.

Although the situation in Afghanistan remains complex and challenging and fluid, I believe we are beginning to see success taking form. I believe there is a shared, cautious optimism, which the allies and the Afghans are expressing, and we certainly saw tangible evidence of it during our visit.

We are members of a select group of countries that are doing a lot of the heavy lifting in this country, something Canadians can be very proud of. The highest compliment you can pay to a Canadian soldier is to thank them and to remind them that they are keeping faith with previous generations who have contributed in conflicts in Europe, places such as Korea, and around the globe, where Canadian soldiers have distinguished themselves always.

I thank you and I look forward to your questions.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir, for being succinct.

General Natynczyk, you have the floor.

General Walter Natynczyk (Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you and good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

It's my pleasure to be here with you today.

[Translation]

I would also like to thank you for your visit to Afghanistan in June of this year. It was appreciated by our men and women in uniform.

[English]

I believe that going on these visits is very important. One of the lines I used to use when I was on operations is that the farther you were from the sound of the guns, the less you understand about the mission; therefore, when you go into Afghanistan you can see the full context first-hand and get the experience and you can also see how things have changed.

The United States uplift of forces is causing things to change rapidly in Afghanistan; they have changed even since your own visit in the spring. Since your visit, the U.S. has continued to surge more forces into theatre. Last year there were 3,000 NATO troops in Kandahar province, mostly Canadian, and three Afghan National Army battalions or Kandaks.

Today, the number of NATO troops in Kandahar province has quadrupled, and they've been joined by an additional 10 battalions or 10 Kandaks from the Afghan National Army. With the surge have come more of the essential enablers needed to change the direction of the mission. For the first time, what we're seeing is that NATO is finally approaching the point where it has the troop density and enabling capabilities needed to mount an effective counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism strategy.

Also, thanks to NATO's training mission we have seen the Afghan army leadership and capability continue to develop. They've always been brave, but now they're assuming greater responsibilities with confidence. In more and more cases they are planning, mounting, and leading their own operations.

During our Thanksgiving visit, it was compelling to see Afghan battalion and company commanders step up and brief the minister and me on the tactical situation in the Panjwaii and Dand districts.

While the road ahead remains long and hard, I think we're seeing some encouraging signs that the context of the mission may be changing favourably. We're beginning to see some signs of success. We can thank our men and women in Afghanistan, military and civilian, for the changes we are seeing. They're doing absolutely fabulous work, they're motivated to be there, and they can see the difference they are making.

I'd also like to talk about the mission transition.

● (1620)

[Translation]

We have nine months left in the mandate for the Canadian Forces mission in Afghanistan, and I've been very clear with all members of the CF that we will work to implement the direction and timelines as directed in the parliamentary motion. We understand orders. The combat mission will end in July and we will completely withdraw from Kandahar by December 2011. This is a big task, but I want to

assure you that the planning for the withdrawal of the Canadian Forces troops on this timeline is already well underway.

[English]

We'll continue to fulfill our operational responsibilities in cooperation with our NATO and our ISAF partners until the end of our military mission in July of 2011. I've told our folks that I want them to focus on making a difference each and every day—next week, next month, right until the end of our military mission. What we aim to achieve in Kandahar is a seamless transition from the Canadian Forces to our allies that will allow our partners—that is, our other government departments, ISAF members, and Afghan security forces—to continue building upon the progress made to date.

Our planners at Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command and Canadian Operations Support Command have been working on end-of-mission planning for months in consultation with all of our many stakeholders. Their planning will determine what we will do with the equipment and materiel we have in Afghanistan. Some of this equipment will be returned to Canada and some of it will be sent for repair and overhaul to facilities both at home and abroad, depending on what makes most sense. If analysis demonstrates that the materiel is deemed surplus, then we'll dispose of it. We are well on the way to developing a plan that makes good sense and has the required authorities and the appropriate oversight needed to make the right decisions about what we do with our equipment and materiel. The bottom line is that all of these decisions will be focused on delivering the best value for Canadians.

Of course, the return of materiel and equipment will be challenging. Our planners have been hard at work, and I'm confident that we have a plan that will work. Our operations in Afghanistan will not be affected during this period. We anticipate meeting all of the mission close-out timelines. We're planning to move low-priority and low-value materiel overland to a seaport, where it will be shipped by sea. But sensitive material, such as communications equipment, will be shipped directly to Canada by air. The remainder of our equipment will be transported by air to a processing facility through to Europe, where it will be processed, cleaned, and then shipped by sea to Montreal.

As we are still in negotiations with prospective partner countries, it would be inappropriate for me to provide more detail until negotiations are concluded.

[Translation]

Allow me to conclude, Mr. Chair, by stating that none of our current and future basing or logistic considerations changes the fact that I expect the Canadian Forces to continue making progress in our mission right up until July 2011, and we will be ready to respond elsewhere in Canada or the world when so asked by the government.

•(1625)

[English]

The Canadian Forces, along with our civilian partners, have made an enormous contribution and at the same time great sacrifices in Afghanistan since 2001. For this, we have heard that the Government of Afghanistan and the Afghan people, along with our NATO and ISAF partners, have expressed their gratitude. Our men and women in uniform continue to perform outstanding work, and I could not be prouder of them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

I'd like to thank everyone for their opening statements.

The first round of questions for all the parties is ten minutes long

I understand that for the Liberal Party, Mr. Rae, you're going to be splitting your time with Mr. Wilfert. You may go ahead when you're ready.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): That's correct, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

First of all, even though it's going to eat into my time, I want to express our appreciation to General Natynczyk.

In particular, General, you would I know continue to convey to the men and women in uniform, despite what they might hear politically from time to time in the House of Commons, how strongly supportive we are of their effort, how much we've made an effort to bear witness to their sense of sacrifice, and how proud we all are as Canadians. This pride does not touch partisanship. I think it's unworthy of anyone to suggest that it does.

I just want to say with some considerable emotion how struck we all were, when we went to Afghanistan on our last trip, by the courage as well as the real, deep competence, and to express the real sense of pride we had as Canadians that there was a Canadian way of doing business in Afghanistan that was shared by everyone we met. Whether they were in uniform or were civilians, whether they were diplomats or were brigadiers, colonels, or privates, it didn't matter. I think we were all struck by that, and struck with a great sense of pride in what was being done.

It's in a sense because of that sense of pride and sense of competence that I must confess I was really quite taken aback by the crisis in the relationship with the UAE, which was allowed to develop apparently over a period of many months.

So my first question would be to Mr. Cannon. It would be to ask him whether he could tell us how many times, since the arrival of the UAE ambassador earlier this year, he has had the opportunity to meet with the ambassador in private to discuss what the concerns and the issues were, which touch not only on the landing rights issue, which has been well discussed, but on a number of issues around visas and around the relationship.

Could the minister tell us how many times he met with the ambassador?

The Chair: There is a point of order.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): I know the minister is more than capable of handling himself, but I just want to remind members and witnesses that any discussions of specific interaction between the Government of the UAE and the Government of Canada would not be for public dissemination.

Hon. Bob Rae: I don't think the number of times the minister has met with someone is a matter of great secrecy.

The Chair: No, that's fine.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I understand.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Chair and Mr. Rae, I think the larger issue here is Canada's relations with the United Arab Emirates. Our relations are robust. They include cooperation in commercial, political, economic, defence, and regional security matters. The UAE is currently Canada's largest merchandise export market in the Middle East and northern Africa region. We exceeded \$1.3 billion in 2009, making that Canada's 17th-largest export market. Approximately 125 Canadian companies and organizations have a presence in the UAE. Canadian business councils in the UAE have more than 250 members. More than 27,000 Canadians live and work in the UAE.

I have spoken—Mr. Rae, if you want to listen, please—I have spoken to my counterpart, and we agreed that the bilateral relations should remain strong and shouldn't be put into risk.

Hon. Bob Rae: I didn't hear an answer to my question, Mr. Cannon.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I responded to you by saying—

Hon. Bob Rae: No, you didn't. I asked you a specific question because I have been advised that in fact you've never met with the ambassador in private. You've never had a discussion with the ambassador. No discussion has taken place at that senior level. When I heard that, I couldn't believe it, and I'm asking you if that's the case.

•(1630)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I'm telling you that I met with his boss, the minister. Is that clear? I met on numerous occasions.

Personally, Mr. Rae, I prefer meeting with the foreign minister, who indeed is the one who is the authority, not the ambassador.

Hon. Bob Rae: Is it your policy—

[Translation]

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: He is the head of delegation.

Hon. Bob Rae: I understand that.

Is it the policy of your government not to meet with ambassadors who are here, in Ottawa? Is that the position of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: That is not at all the case.

Hon. Bob Rae: It is not the case, but you have not met with any.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Rae, I told you that I met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of that country. I hope you understand that he probably has more power than the ambassador.

Hon. Bob Rae: I understand that.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Good.

Hon. Bob Rae: However, I would like to know why it is that way. Efforts were made to organize meetings to resolve an ongoing, long-standing problem. This problem is not new, and we fully understand that the government's decision to not grant an extension for military activities at the base clearly causes problems for the Canadian government, for the Canadian Forces and for our NATO allies. We cannot deny that, so why not hold specific meetings?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Rae, once again, I will repeat that I met with the minister. I will not discuss operational aspects here, I told you that our relations are robust, they are good, and we continue to have excellent relations. You are asking me, very simplistically, how many times I met with certain people or individuals. I am telling you that I met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of that country on several occasions.

[*English*]

Hon. Bob Rae: I'll pass it over to Mr. Wilfert.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Wilfert.

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

Thank you, Ministers. Thank you, General, for appearing.

In putting this motion forth, the concern obviously is the impact of the closing of Camp Mirage. I don't want to get into operational issues, but again, Minister MacKay, obviously this is very significant, given the planning that has been going on.

The general indicated that he wants to see a seamless transition. Could you first of all confirm that November 5 is still the date that Camp Mirage will be closing?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Yes, that's the date.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Is that on track?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Correct.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: If November 5 is in fact the date, how do you have a seamless transition when one major piece of our operations is now being closed? Could you enlighten us as to alternatives and their implications, both in terms of cost and in terms of the effect on personnel? The real discussion we want to have later on, obviously, will be on what happens as we go forward.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Of course.

Thank you for the question. As part of prudent military planning there are always contingencies, and if there's one thing I've come to understand and respect about the Canadian Forces it is that they are tremendously adept at adapting to circumstances, and there is a continued effort to have plans and more plans should circumstances change.

What we're talking about here, obviously, in the drawdown that will occur nine months from now is that we will use an alternative location, an alternative to Camp Mirage, which would have been the point at which we transported or transitioned a lot of the material we have in theatre. Alternative locations will now be utilized.

It's also fair to say that as part of this transition or drawdown, as General Natynczyk has indicated, these efforts will be aided in large part by the new equipment we have been utilizing, the C-17s, which allow us to transfer large amounts of equipment and large pieces of

equipment. That C-17 aircraft has been a godsend, both in its operational excellence in Afghanistan, but also, as you know, for humanitarian relief in places like Haiti and Jamaica.

So we have enabled the Canadian Forces with new equipment: new transport planes, Chinook aircraft, UAVs, heavy equipment, trucks, tanks, and artillery. All of that new equipment will be brought back to Canada through an alternative route, which will no longer include the UAE.

• (1635)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: So, Minister, you can assure this committee that this seamless transition will in fact go ahead?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Sure.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Secondly, Minister, as far as the implications are concerned, you mentioned the C-17s. At some point, I certainly believe this committee, probably in camera, needs to look at what the cost is going to be versus what it would have been had Camp Mirage not in fact closed. We clearly have seen it to have been a rocky road with the UAE for at least a number of months—

The Chair: You'll have to wrap it up there.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: —so I would think at some point it would be very helpful to know what the cost implications are going to be as well. And I certainly take the general at his word and certainly, Minister, your comments with regard to the seamless issue, because that's absolutely critical.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

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

I too want to welcome the two ministers and the Chief of the Defense Staff. I would also add, having traveled to Afghanistan on several occasions and having seen developments and having seen Canadian troops develop, that in fact, they are doing extraordinary work. Mr. Chair, I also want to take this opportunity to wish the Royal 22nd Regiment good luck. As the Chief of the Defence Staff knows, I am myself a member of the Royal 22nd Regiment, I have trained with the troops, and we are very proud of the regiment in Quebec. So we wish them good luck.

Those were the compliments, now here is the criticism. Mr. Chair, for the past six or seven years I have been hearing the same old song. The words are almost always the same. I have listed only three: "government priorities", "positive developments", and in this case, reference is made to the document that has been presented. We have also often heard that "progress has been made and we have reached a positive turning point and from now on it will go better".

I have here a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies which says almost exactly the opposite of what you have just told us. I will describe the slides, the tables which seriously compromise your point of view. The information that I am sharing with the committee does not come from "idiots", these are documents from ISAF—the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan—from NATO and from the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office. I am going to describe seven or eight tables that I have, which show exactly the opposite of what you have just said.

With respect to the escalation in the war, there has been a sharp increase in mines, improvised explosive devices, ambushes, mortar attacks and rocket attacks. Since 2004, there has been a progression and it continues.

Another table is entitled: "Time is Running Out". Mr. Chair, on that page there are tables from 2005, 2007 and 2009 which show that kinetic incidents, in other words explosions and so on, have significantly increased in Afghanistan and are taking place almost everywhere in the country in 2009.

The next title is: "Where the Fighting Is: 2009". There are red areas which indicate combat zones, and they cover a very significant part of the country.

The table entitled "Insurgent Influence and Capability by District" is covered in red and orange areas which illustrate the influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and those areas cover three-quarters of the country. So that is not extraordinary progress at all.

I have another table dealing with monthly attacks launched, and they are constantly on the rise. In 2006, there were 387 per month, and there are 1,319 monthly attacks in 2010. The situation is not good at all.

Another table deals with incidents caused by improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan, and at the end of 2009, the curve goes straight up. So that is not good either.

I also have information on the number of attacks by region: 963 in the south of Afghanistan in 2008, compared to 2,570 attacks in 2010 in the same region.

The number of members of coalition forces who have been killed in action is also sharply increasing.

Explain to me why, all this time—and these tables date back to 2004—we are being told that all is fine, that everything is dandy, and yet these tables show the contrary. The Center for Strategic and International Studies is internationally renowned, and I believe that these are valuable reference documents. Tell me why you have continued to say the situation is rosy since 2004?

• (1640)

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay: What's the date of this study?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: It was presented in Ottawa on October 5, 2010.

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay: I haven't seen that particular report. I have one in my hand that's dated October 12 of this year, Mr. Chair. It talks about public opinion trends and strategic implications. This report verifies much of what we saw and what we heard anecdotally in Afghanistan.

I personally would lean toward accepting the word of the people who have been on the ground in Afghanistan for a sustained period of time. They include people such as Tim Martin, the representative of Canada in Kandahar, who lives at the provincial reconstruction team location just outside Kandahar City, outside the base, and our

ambassador, who makes frequent trips down to Kandahar from Kabul and is in regular contact not only with our officials but also with Afghans and his counterparts in the ISAF mission. I would also like to mention the efforts of Governor Wesa, who, while born in Afghanistan, is in fact a Canadian citizen. He did a great deal of work in British Columbia at the University of B.C. in the agriculture field and has made a tremendous contribution. He is, at great risk to himself and his family, going out into villages and towns throughout Kandahar, throughout the district that he represents, and doing outstanding work on behalf of our country and on behalf of Afghans to bring about a sense of confidence in their own government and in the efforts that are being made internationally.

Yes, there will be reports and there will be continued tracking. We're doing that as well, as mentioned. Some of the same subject matter is touched upon in the quarterly report that speaks about the Canadian priorities that we have identified: immunizing children and building the infrastructure in Afghanistan, such as the Dahla Dam. That has had tremendous impact on regions such as the Arghandab, where we've opened up wadis and allowed water to flow and have brought electricity. The lights are on in villages, literally for the first time in centuries, in some cases. We are seeing work now with women, in terms of their ability to start and run their own businesses. Education is starting to flourish in places like the Dand District, where we now see 26 schools operating, and we have to try to mirror that same progress in Panjwai.

All of this happens, Mr. Chair, under the umbrella of security provided by brave men and women in uniform from coalition countries. Canadians can have full confidence that the members of the Canadian Forces, in concert with all of the government partners and the Afghans, are truly committed to seeing the security last and the implications of the reconstruction and development projects spread throughout the south.

We are seeing as well further engagement from the Afghan government, which I think is also a very encouraging sign. President Karzai, as Minister Cannon mentioned, took part in a shura in the Arghandab region that was attended by hundreds, and we are seeing increasing evidence that those participants are getting off the fence. We're seeing Afghans now accept the reality that the Taliban are not coming back. I think that also denotes a shift in public attitude. That is also reflected in this most recent survey that came out of Afghanistan, which was put forward by the SHAPE staff at NATO. It notes some very encouraging signs in terms of the public attitude and public confidence in what is happening in Afghanistan.

I tend to perhaps see the glass half full. My friend may prefer the other approach, but I know that the efforts are Herculean. I know we still have work to do, and I'm extremely encouraged by the efforts that are being put in by Canadians at all levels.

I also would ask my friend to keep an open mind about other reports that seem to indicate otherwise.

• (1645)

The Chair: You have one minute.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: To conclude, Mr. Chair, it is very unfortunate that we are denying reality. I have these charts which come from NATO and I showed eight of them today. However, I have about another 50 in my possession on various important issues in Afghanistan, including ones on people's reaction to the lack of security, and the situation as regards opium and heroin. There is a set of tables which say exactly the opposite of what the Minister of National Defence has just said.

I want to believe that the ambassador and people over there are telling the truth, I will not say they are not, but I have statistics, and tables, which say exactly the opposite.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Obhrai, please.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for coming.

First, before I go on I would like, on behalf of my colleagues on this side, to ask General Natynczyk and the minister to thank very much your forces in Afghanistan for the excellent arrangements they made for us, both for our security and in looking after us. They went out of their way to ensure that we got a very good picture. It was one of the best trips we have made, despite all the challenges, and we found that they face challenges with all this situation.

Let me just put it in a very simple form and say that it is a theatre of war. You have to be on the ground there to realize that you are actually in the middle of a war. It's not a place to go as a tourist destination. We were very proud of what our soldiers were doing, and on behalf of all my colleagues here I want to say thank you very much for the excellent job they're doing.

Gen Walter Natynczyk: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Now, coming back to the question of our involvement in Afghanistan—we've been there for a while now—and the quarterly reports that give us the advances that have been made in Afghanistan, I'd like to ask the Minister of Foreign Affairs the question on transparency that came out yesterday from Berlin about Afghanistan being the second most corrupt nation in the world.

Canadians are extremely concerned about the fact that our combat mission ends in 2011, but we are going to be staying there for the development mission. Canadians really need to know now from us where their aid money is going and that it is being well spent. Perhaps you could give us an insight there, Minister.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Well, I think that in terms of accountability and transparency, colleague, these quarterly reports obviously help to understand where Canadian dollars are being spent and on what they are being spent. My colleague referred to the progress that has been made on our signature projects, whether it be the Dahla Dam or polio eradication. Incidentally, if one looks at the report, you will rapidly see that on those two fronts there has been enormous progress.

There's been progress as well in completing and building schools so that young women can go back to education. As you know, 2.2

million women now are in schools. This is something that previously was not taken into consideration.

No, I think that when you look at the quarterly reports you can see that there is momentum, that the Canadian dollars—money that Canadian taxpayers give to the government to make sure that development and aid is well used.... The Chief of the Defence Staff referred to the important work that's being done in training security forces as well as the Afghan National Army. Those are dollars of which Canadians can be very proud.

I'll conclude by saying that I not only participated in the Kabul conference but was also present in London, as well as at President Karzai's inauguration, at which there was a commitment by the president to address this whole issue of corruption. He has taken upon himself, as well as his government, to make this a priority. Needless to say, members of NATO as well as the ISAF membership are keeping a very close watch on what is taking place.

But I want to reassure Canadians that in terms of the tax dollars that they confide to this government, we are making sure through the quarterly reports that those dollars are accounted for and that they are getting the right amount of bang for the buck literally.

• (1650)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Just before I go to my next question, let me speak about the UAE, about which the opposition was asking, and your answer that we have excellent relations with the UAE. I think Minister MacKay has stated on many occasions, in his answers at the time we were down at Mirage, that the government of UAE took very good care of Canadians. You have on many occasions thanked them. So I gather it's appropriate to thank the Government of the UAE for allowing us to use the Camp Mirage and to say that they have been a good host.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Well, Mr. Obhrai, you're absolutely correct. We've been using both military installations as well as the port in the UAE for more than nine years, and to that extent they have been very supportive of the Canadian Forces and have always treated Canadians and Canadian forces with the utmost respect and dignity. They continue to support the drawdown at that particular base. We will have a closing out ceremony to thank them and acknowledge the support that they provided us in our operations.

That was without compensation, I should add: they were not charging us for the use of that facility or the port. So we are grateful and we do extend our thanks for the graciousness and the very practical and positive support they provided to Canadians during our time in their country.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Minister, from our trip I can state that it's a very hot place—Dubai is a very hot place—and the drinking water that they supplied us as a courtesy.... The Government of UAE did take care of us. I join you in thanking them.

Now, Minister Cannon, while we look at the overall mission in Afghanistan, not many Canadians also see what other things we are doing, aside from the school signature projects that we are doing. We are also involved in helping stabilize the region with Pakistan. No matter what we say, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the big border that they have, face quite a challenge. I would ask you to advise Canadians, telling us about the role that Canada plays in ensuring that there is stability in that part of the world.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Thank you for the question, colleague.

One initiative that is noteworthy... Well, perhaps there are two initiatives that are noteworthy in terms of regional cooperation. The first one is the Dubai process. Last year when I had the opportunity to come to speak with the members of this committee, I outlined the work Canada was engaged in to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan authorities together. You know that they have an important border between the two countries, but they don't have any infrastructure, don't have any way of managing that border. And so at the very outset, we engaged both parties, to bring them to the table to speak with each other, to recognize the importance of this issue. As time moved on, we were able to get them into not only a dialogue but into actionable items that eventually will serve, I think, the purpose of better managing the border between the two countries.

As well, one of the initiatives that stem from the G-8 foreign ministers' meeting that took place in the month of March here was the Afghan-Pakistan border prosperity initiative. This initiative, colleague, was put forward in order to strengthen the economic conditions in certain areas of Pakistan.

The World Bank had a number of feasibility projects between both these countries, whether feasibility projects to look at rail linkages between two communities or projects to look at highway infrastructure. The whole idea here is to make sure that the inhabitants of these regions can prosper from economic development and growth and can get out of the dire situation in which they find themselves.

Both governments bought into this process. Both governments recognized the importance of working in a collaborative fashion to strengthen the economic areas along the border regions so that it doesn't sour and become a haven for insurgents. On the contrary, it needs to be strengthened so that people can rely upon and get a good job from this.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move over to the NDP, to Mr. Harris, please.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair. I will be sharing my time with Mr. Dewar. I'll take about half the time.

First of all, General Natynczyk, I want to thank you and all of you for being here. But I want to say to all of you that our trip to Afghanistan last June was a real eye-opener. I think that like all of our committee, I was extremely impressed with the quality of our forces: with their competence, with their professionalism, with their commitment to serving their country. Each and every engagement was of the utmost level of professionalism—with Ambassador Crosbie and others we encountered as well.

I think all who were there were particularly impressed with the work of the individuals who were involved in the counter-IED efforts. The extreme courage shown by these people to save the lives of their fellow soldiers and others who were using these roads struck me as being particularly engaging. I think Canadians have every reason to be extremely proud of the soldiers: that the men and women who serve in our armed forces in Afghanistan are taking the risks and making the sacrifices that they have done. I want to acknowledge that up front.

I address this also to you, sir. Last November you appeared before the defence committee and I must say provided with terrific clarity the plans for the withdrawal from Afghanistan in accordance with the parliamentary motion: the end of the combat mission in July and the complete withdrawal of forces by the end of December.

At that time, you indicated that not only was the combat mission ending in July but that July was the beginning of the withdrawal of forces as quickly as possible. I just want to ask you—your statement today is not as specific as that, but then, you haven't been asked the question, so I'm asking it now—are we still committed to saying that once the combat mission ends, we are withdrawing our troops?

Obviously it's going to take people to...and six months is the expected timeline to get everything out and to get the equipment cleaned up and on board. If you're going to do what you say here—continue with the mission exactly until that date and in full operation—we understand that it would take time. But are you still committed to beginning the drawdown of troops immediately, and could you elaborate on that a little bit?

Gen Walter Natynczyk: Thanks very much for the question. Right up front, the answer is yes.

Let me just put forward a preamble. First of all, thank you and thanks to everyone for the great comments about the men and women in the Canadian Forces. I think we've realized once again through this experience in Afghanistan that we don't take a back seat to anybody. Man for man, woman for woman, and in what we do as a force, from the most junior private right up to our senior leaders in theatre, we have proven ourselves once again. Things that we knew before, we have proven once again.

Again, thank you very much for the special recognition of the counter-IED folks, because they save lives every day, and you realize the number of cases they respond to is absolutely tremendous.

We are still working to the transition of the military mission next summer. I use the word "military" mission; some folks say "combat". But if you look at the PRT, the training mission, support, and development—all the things across the board involving what we in the military do—we call it the military mission. We are working with our allies, specifically Regional Command South, which is the ISAF headquarters in the south of the country, with respect to the transition dates. We're looking into the June-July timeframe next summer in order to meet the parliamentary motion's remit to be out of the country by the end of 2011.

So that's the timeline we're working to. We aren't specific yet on the actual dates of handover of various areas of responsibility, as we recognize that Regional Command South headquarters will be transitioning over the next little while from a British-led headquarters to an American-led headquarters. The new commander will get on the ground and develop his plans and then, with the troops he has allocated, will work on detailed plans in terms of what areas, such as Dand District and Panjwaii District, which you visited...at what point those areas are going to be transitioned to other NATO allies.

So we are still working to transition in the summer of 2011 and are putting that into June and July of 2011 in order to draw down, such that we are out of the country by the end of the year. Again, logistics is always tough; it's tough in this area. We saw how some of the routes into Afghanistan were interdicted these past few months. That will create challenges, if interdiction continues. But from our planning standpoint, we are working towards the end of 2011 date.

• (1700)

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you. I'll pass it over to Mr. Dewar.

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

Thank you to the ministers and to the general for being here today.

I want to come back to Minister Cannon and ask the question that Mr. Rae had probed.

I respect, Minister, your comments about meeting with the foreign minister, but I just have to say if I could give an example, if it had been the ambassador of the U.S. who said he wanted to speak with you and meet with you about an important issue regarding relations—and considering we've heard from everyone on the important relationship that we have with the UAE, on the fact that they've hosted us for free—would you actually say “No, I met with Secretary of State Clinton, I don't need to meet with you”?

I find it hard to believe that you wouldn't meet with Ambassador Abdullah. This March, he will have been here two years. Do you think it's reasonable if we're going to have a really robust relationship with a country as important as UAE that you would not meet with him?

One other thing is that there are other issues that have come to my attention. They're around visas. It's about tending to our garden, I guess. I know that he was posted before in France. He could pick up the phone and talk to Minister Kouchner. He could talk to President Sarkozy. But when he comes here, for some reason, there's no one on the other end of the line. I need to understand why that treatment with someone as important as the ambassador would be satisfactory.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: The premise of your question, Mr. Dewar, is hypothetical when you compare it with the United States. It depends on the circumstances and it depends as well on the issues at hand. You're talking about high-level diplomatic relations with the UAE. I engage with my counterpart on the specifics of those kinds of discussions depending of course on the nature of what needs to be discussed and how we engage with the diplomatic corps. I meet the diplomatic corps on a regular basis here.

But as for your drilling down and wanting to find out whether or not on this specific issue I raised it with the ambassador, no, I didn't

raise it with the ambassador. I discussed this issue with the foreign minister.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But I guess my question is how could you raise it with the ambassador if you haven't met with the ambassador, and I go back to—

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I didn't—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I go back to—

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Dewar, I didn't meet with the ambassador because there was no need to meet with the ambassador on this issue. I reiterate, I discussed these issues with the foreign minister.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But on a regular basis—

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: And on a regular basis—

Mr. Paul Dewar: —there are issues that come up. There are issues that got obviously out of hand for you, and one of them was us being able to be hosted by the UAE, along with visa issues and other issues that clearly you need to deal with with the ambassador.

I find it surprising and actually astonishing that you wouldn't meet with the ambassador. I just don't understand that, Minister.

• (1705)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I think, Mr. Dewar, you have to be able to recognize that the issues that are raised, depending on the level of the issues.... In certain cases if they're visas they can be handled by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and his people. Generally speaking, the ambassadors know full well who they need to address themselves to.

So I'm coming back to my first response: it depends on the issues that are raised. When requests are made to meet with me we evaluate them, and in some circumstances I will be pleased to meet with the ambassador, and in other circumstances officials in my department can meet with them. It all depends on the level of importance. But if you're talking—

Mr. Paul Dewar: It's a simple—

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Stop cutting me off.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm not. I only—

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: You're cutting me off.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Sorry. I've heard you clearly.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Continue then, if you want to—

Mr. Paul Dewar: It's just that it's a simple courtesy to actually receive ambassadors. It's a simple courtesy. It's a Canadian way. And I guess if you're not able to receive ambassadors it's very difficult to deal with the problems we have.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Don't be so ridiculous, Mr. Dewar. I meet ambassadors on a regular basis.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Not this one, for some reason. Why not?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I meet ambassadors on a regular basis, Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But you didn't meet with this one.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Dewar, I'm telling you that depending on the issues that are raised—

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: —we discuss these issues.

Mr. Rae, for instance, when he was Premier of the Province of Ontario and he dealt with the Province of Quebec, I know he spoke with Mr. Bourassa. I know that personally. He didn't deal with the minister, he didn't deal with another one, he dealt directly with the premier.

Hon. Bob Rae: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman—on a point of fact—Mr. Cannon is referring to my role as premier and who I met with. I met with several ministers in the Quebec cabinet.

[*Translation*]

I met Gérald Tremblay, I have often talked to him about economic relations. You are wrong, Minister, it is not like that—

The Chair: Mr. Rae—

Hon. Bob Rae: You are not showing any evidence of Canadian competence, but rather of Conservative incompetence.

[*English*]

The Chair: I would like to call you to order, Mr. Rae. That is not a point of order.

We are going to go to Mr. Hawn now, please.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the witnesses.

I'll try to stick to current events.

Speaking through you, Mr. Chair, to General Natynczyk, and going back to what Mr. Bachand talked about, quoting some statistics, I think it's important that we not just quote simple statistics but understand what's behind the statistics and what the impact is— we talked about increased IED events, increased attacks, and so on— of the fact that we have four times as many allied troops on the ground in Kandahar and ten Kandaks on the ground in Kandahar, and tens of thousands of American troops in other areas of the country. How much of an impact does that have on the number of those kinds of incidents because we are simply taking it to the Taliban more?

Gen Walter Natynczyk: I think this is the fundamental issue.

When we had just Task Force Kandahar—only Canadians, and even before the arrival of the first U.S. battalion—we were in a very small, concentrated area. Many of you visited some of the various camps. Camp Wilson, just west of Kandahar, used to have about 250 soldiers. There are in excess of 3,000 soldiers in that camp right now, and they are patrolling throughout the whole western area of Kandahar down to Zhari District. They are not only removing the Taliban from the area but they are staying. That has obviously increased the number of statistics in terms of IEDs found, IED hits, and IEDs cleared.

This is a fundamental issue: you need to have sufficient troop density in order to hold ground. What we've seen now is that the addition of the 12,000 U.S. forces, but really significantly the additional ten Kandaks or ten battalions of Afghan army, plus the

advent of more capable Afghan police, is having a dramatic effect upon what's happening on the ground.

In the short term it will be manifested through increases in violence rates. I still remember a visit earlier in the year, when I brought this up to the attention of other ambassadors. Their comment was: "When the troops hit the Normandy beaches, violence went up in France." The fact is that when you put in that number of soldiers you are going to have a significant level of kinetic activity on the ground and at the same time, as seen through open sources that I know you're all reading, a number of Taliban fighters who have been removed from the battlefield and very significantly Taliban leaders who have been removed from the battlefield not only by the troop density but also by all the other essential intelligence and surveillance enablers that are allowing the soldiers to be smart, to be precise, to be surgical. From our standpoint, if we can do a mission without firing a shot, that's success. The reality is, that is having a significant effect on the ground.

I would look to Dand District. I know we've testified here before on Dand District, just south of Kandahar; we talked about a model village a year and half ago. We had to fight to move into Dand District, but working with a very capable district leader and funnelling development aid through our DFAIT and CIDA colleagues and through that district leader, enabling him to demonstrate leadership, Dand District is now advanced far beyond many other districts in the area. That's where the minister mentioned 26 schools. Two years ago there were no schools; this year, there are 26 schools. That's because they have the density of forces.

Panjwai is the same way now. It's because of the density of forces on the ground. That's why we saw a significant change of context.

• (1710)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you very much.

This is through you, Mr. Chair, to Minister Cannon. I'd like to go back to the elections. A free election is obviously an indication of progress, but 1.3 million votes were disallowed. That's a dramatic number, but is it a sign of progress that they actually have a mechanism in place to do that properly?

Even with those 1.3 million votes disallowed, their turnout rate was 38.5%. We just had municipal elections in a number of provinces. In Edmonton our turnout was 34%, and nobody was getting shot at. So would you call it a glass half full or a glass half empty?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Well, I think, colleague, before making that final determination, we need to await the final results. Certainly we look to the Afghan electoral institutions to be able to address the challenges that come forward, particularly in a transparent fashion.

We obviously commend the people of Afghanistan for having organized, campaigned, and voted in these elections under extremely difficult circumstances. I don't know very many countries on the planet that have elections and people going to vote in the elections under military combat conditions.

They are indeed building these institutions. Yes, it is a long task. They have to keep at it. We will wait to see the final results, but I think from a preliminary analysis, we're quite pleased with the direction this is taking.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Dion.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

Since this is one of my first interventions on this committee, I would like to take the opportunity to agree with everything my colleagues have said, General, about the professionalism and the courage of our troops. We are very proud of them. I have said that many times, but I did not want to miss the opportunity to repeat it.

But as a rookie on this committee, I am also very puzzled by what I have heard. If our relationship with the UAE, as the government side has said, is excellent, what would it be if it were not excellent? I cannot believe anyone here would find it trivial the fact that we have this expulsion from Camp Mirage a few months before the end of our mission. If a friend did that to us, reasons must exist for it.

[Translation]

Minister, these reasons must be important ones. You said that you met with the ambassadors when it was important. If this situation is not important, one wonders what is.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Dion, as far as my comments are concerned, I would simply like to remind you that we do indeed maintain an excellent and strong relationship with the United Arab Emirates on many fronts. Moreover, this is quite understandable, given that the UAE is an important partner for us.

In addition, as my colleague mentioned, we are not going to be commenting on the operational aspects. However, suffice it to say that when we discuss matters on behalf of Canada, we consider Canada's interests. However, under the circumstances, we felt that the offer made to Canada was not in the best interest of Canadians.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: According to what we do know, the reasons why this disagreement took place are not related to operational considerations in the field, in Afghanistan. This was about obtaining flight or landing rights. We heard that you were defending Air Canada's point of view, which may be very legitimate, but there were also other reasons, reasons pertaining to visas and other things of that type.

It seems to me that if these reasons do not have anything to do with operations, Canadians are entitled to know what they are.

• (1715)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Dion, that is what you are claiming. I am, however, simply telling you that we felt that the offer made to the Government of Canada was not in our best interest.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: If this was not related to operational reasons, could you please tell us what this was all about?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Dion, you began your sentence with the word "if", and I'm not going to discuss negotiations that the Government of Canada undertook with the United Arab Emirates. I will simply state that this was not in the best interest of Canadians.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Will you confirm that it was also related to the awarding of flight rights?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I do not confirm nor deny this.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: If this is not linked to military reasons, why do you not want to discuss it?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: As I told you, I have absolutely no intention of discussing negotiations that Canada has undertaken with other countries.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You talk about negotiations. Does that mean that a few days before the expiry of our agreement on Camp Mirage, it would still be possible for the Government of the United Arab Emirates to change its mind? Are we now facing a *fait accompli* or are negotiations still underway?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: The general and chief of staff clearly indicated to you that the transfer procedure was well underway and that we will be meeting our objectives in this regard.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So there are no more negotiations.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: That's right.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: If there are no longer any negotiations that are ongoing, could you talk to us about those aspects that do not pertain to problems regarding military operations in the field?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: No, I will not talk to you about that. I will simply say that we have made decisions in the best interest of Canadians.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So we will learn nothing from you about issues that have nothing to do with military security. You push secrecy to that extent.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I am saying that it is not in the best interest of the Government of Canada. That is why we did not agree to continue those discussions.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You never discussed it with the United Arab Emirates ambassador?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: No.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Is that normal in your opinion?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Dion, he is not the one who was designated as the negotiator by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You made an extremely bizarre comparison earlier in saying that—

[English]

The Chair: We'll wrap it up there. I'm sorry, but your time is up.

Go ahead, Mr. Dechert, please.

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

General Natynczyk, as civilians we very seldom have the opportunity to see Canadian Forces in action. This committee, as you know, was there in June. I want to reiterate what a lot of my colleagues have said here. We saw very professional troops making a real difference to the lives of the people of Afghanistan and to the peace and security of the region, and thereby the peace and security of the whole world, including our own borders. From all of us, I hope you will take back to the people under your command how much pride the Canadian people have in what they're doing there in Afghanistan.

Gen Walter Natynczyk: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Minister MacKay, you have said that their efforts on our behalf really do equal and honour the service and sacrifice of all the veterans who have gone before them in the service of our country throughout our history. Having seen the professionalism of our troops, I certainly share that feeling, so I want to reiterate that comment as well.

Minister Cannon, I don't want to leave out the very good people working for the Department of Foreign Affairs, CIDA, and the other government and non-governmental Canadian organizations in Afghanistan. They are also making a very significant contribution to the lives of the people of Afghanistan in very challenging conditions. I was very impressed with every one of them I met there. All the people I met from other countries praised the Canadians. They praised the Canadian Forces and they praised the Canadian government officials for their professionalism and their expertise. That's something all Canadians need to know and be very proud of.

One of the things we heard about, Minister Cannon, was the Canadian-government-led program to encourage participation of women in governance. I understand, and I was encouraged to hear, that there are a very significant number of women in the Afghan parliament. Could you comment a little more on that, and on the political situation in Afghanistan more generally?

• (1720)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Thank you for that question.

Let me premise the answer by saying that yes, Canadian military personnel and Canadian civilians are present in Afghanistan, but there are over 3,000 Canadian civilians, as well as military personnel, all around the world. They are in Haiti, in Afghanistan—obviously—and in Darfur in the Sudan. They are part of UN-led initiatives, and we are extremely pleased with and proud of what our people are doing.

We have seen some improvements in the situation of women in Afghanistan over the course of the last several months. As you know, we're working to strengthen security in all target districts by ensuring full community participation in school security through consultations with community leaders and elders as part of the local council, the shura, which is a system established by the department of education.

We support, of course, a full range of projects to increase women's legal rights and access to education, maternal health, the labour market, and political office. Today Afghan women make up 27% of

elected parliamentarians. Approximately six million children are enrolled in schools nationally, and as I mentioned at the very outset, roughly 2.2 million of these are women—young girls. More than 290,000 women have access to small loans and savings services across the country. Canada continues to work with the Government of Afghanistan and with groups to improve the rights and lives of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Chair, I would like to share my time with Mr. Kerr.

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

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): That's good sharing. Thank you.

Ditto on all the thanks and all that sort of stuff that was mentioned.

This may go to either minister. It is on the capacity-building that's been talked about so much, both in terms of the military training on the ground, obviously, and in the infrastructure and so on.

At what level are we in terms of being considered successful in capacity-building, and when will we reach a point at which, as the public often says, the Afghans will be ready to take over? I know it's a quick question, but I'd like to hear an answer.

Hon. Peter MacKay: I think I'll defer this to General Natynczyk, as it really is a military measure of capacity.

What I can tell you is that as General Natynczyk mentioned, the Kandaks have demonstrated increasing proficiency in both the planning and the execution. In Kandahar in particular, because of the high level of contact, as you can expect, the capability is coming about out of necessity. We are seeing the numbers and the professionalism increase.

It is also the way in which Canadians train. I think Mr. Rae put his finger on it earlier in his opening remarks. The type of respect, decency, understanding, and cultural awareness that Canadians have is on full display in the manner in which both the military and the police train Afghans—

The Chair: We'll have to move on—

Hon. Peter MacKay: —and that is noticed. I believe it accelerates the ability that we have to impart the skills and the tools that Afghans need to take over this important security duty.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Monsieur Dorion from the Bloc. Go ahead, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Ministers and general, your appearance began with extremely optimistic presentations.

However, my colleague then brought out a study done by a serious American organization that completely contradicts that view. The organization reveals that, from one year to the next and from one month to the next, there are increasing numbers of attacks, increasing losses, and above all, more and more territories controlled by the Taliban. These observations are similar to those by serious observers, such as journalist Michèle Ouimet from *La Presse*, who, for a number of years, has had in-depth knowledge of the country.

Is it possible that we were misled in recent years, that we are seeing something similar to what occurred when the American troops withdrew from Vietnam between 1973 and 1975, which led to the collapse a few short weeks later of the regime in Saigon that the troops had left behind?

If that were true, that would perhaps explain President Karzaï's attempts to have a rapprochement with the Taliban. Perhaps he expects they will triumph and is trying to save what he can. That would mean that all our efforts, all our sacrifices, all the lives sacrificed for the past number of years would have been in vain.

Are people at the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of National Defence looking, at the very least, at this hypothesis as a serious one? And if so, are they trying to see how the damage could be limited to the greatest extent possible?

• (1725)

[*English*]

Hon. Peter MacKay: Your hypothesis draws apocalyptic comparisons to the Vietnam conflict of over 50 years ago. I don't know if the Americans—or anyone else, for that matter—are drawing any analogous information.

There have been numerous reports that track both the level of violence and the level of public confidence, as we have done in our own report tracking the indicators of progress in terms of education, immunizing children, and infrastructure investments. Those are the ways in which we are making a real and tangible difference in the day-to-day lives of Afghans. Those are the harbingers of progress, in my view.

It's difficult to quantify hope and optimism for the people of Afghanistan, but anecdotally, as I mentioned earlier, we are seeing increasing evidence of Afghans cooperating with their own security forces in identifying threat and pointing out where the bombs are being planted. The Taliban themselves are being informed upon, if I can use that term, as far as who poses threats to villages and communities that we are sworn to protect, and we are working with the Afghans in that regard.

Reports such as the one you and Mr. Bachand have relied on heavily in your questioning give us a snapshot in time. I think of General Natynczyk's very sage words about the increase in the physical number of soldiers that we now have engaged in southern Afghanistan in places like Panjwai, where we know the Taliban were deeply rooted and embedded in communities. This is, after all, the spiritual homeland of this terrorist group. There's increased contact because the contact has been initiated by more soldiers.

The reference to an increase in violence in France on the beaches of Normandy is analogous. I think those are historical lessons that we can look at. When we attempt to liberate communities and villages and engage in military operations to remove the Taliban from the battlefield, inevitably this will be gauged by groups such as the one you've referred to as an increase in violence, followed by, we hope, an increase in sustained peace and stability.

After these clearance operations have occurred in some villages, we can put forward the very real attempts at building their infrastructure, asking them—as Canadians do, which I think is a uniquely Canadian attitude—“How can we help? What do you need?”

Do you need a school? Do you need a new facility to treat people who are ill? Do you need water? Do you need electricity? What are the programs that we can bring to you? Do you need seed for crops to replace poppies?”

All these efforts that Canadians have made—

The Chair: Okay. Thank you—

Hon. Peter MacKay: —happen when we're able to create a condition for success; that is, we bring the violence down. In order to do so, in some cases we go with Afghans in an attempt to—

The Chair: Thank you—

Hon. Peter MacKay: —enforce the peace. That's exactly what's happening, particularly in Panjwai.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You have about one and a half minutes, Mr. Abbott.

Hon. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): In one and a half minutes, I'd like to mention that in my judgment this committee was originally envisioned by Mr. Manley and the others as being one that could actually assist, rather than one that would act as an inquisition committee, as has happened an awful lot here today. We could actually be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. We could be looking forward instead of backwards.

I'd like to ask the ministers or the general to give the committee, very briefly, a couple of suggestions on what you would be looking for if this committee were doing the other half of its job, which it never has done in the whole time it has been in existence. If we're to do the other half of the job, which is to make suggestions as to where the government and our armed forces could be going from here, could give us some suggestions for witnesses or ideas?

A voice: Fifteen seconds.

• (1730)

The Chair: Order.

Does anybody want to...? Just give a wrap-up, then.

Hon. Peter MacKay: We would welcome any and all advice that you might have for us at the Department of National Defence.

I want to thank this committee for the work that you do, for the personal interest that all of you have taken in travelling to Afghanistan, and most importantly for your very encouraging positive comments about the efforts of all Canadians, both those in uniform and those in a civilian capacity.

I think the committee and the staff here are to be commended. You're all part of the same team. We want to project an accurate picture of what's happening in Afghanistan, but we also want to demonstrate the support that I know is there for the important non-partisan work we're doing on behalf of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister Cannon, Minister MacKay, and General Natynczyk, we thank you very much for the valuable information you have given to us. Thank you for coming to our committee.

This meeting stands adjourned.

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