

Mounting casualties compel Canada to send Afghanistan reinforcements

Keith Jones
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Canada will soon deploy additional troops and armaments to southern Afghanistan to bolster NATO's embattled occupation force.

Canada's minority Conservative government announced yesterday that it will deploy between 200 and 500 additional Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel to the Kandahar region. The cabinet has also approved a CAF request to send fifteen heavily-armored Leopard tanks and an undisclosed number of armored engineering vehicles, called Badgers, to Afghanistan. The 42.5 ton Leopard has a 105-mm cannon, capable of firing explosive shells at long range, as well as several fixed machine-guns.

CAF chief General Rick Hillier said that four of the tanks will be shipped to Afghanistan by air as soon as possible. Although he termed the reinforcements small, Hillier claimed that they will "dramatically multiply" the CAF's "opportunities to secure and stabilize" the Kandahar region.

Reinforcing the 2,300-strong CAF contingent in Afghanistan is one of several steps Canada's minority Conservative government has taken in recent days to counter the growth of Taliban resistance in southern Afghanistan and mounting opposition among the Canadian public to the CAF waging war on behalf of the US-installed and dependent government of Hamid Karzai.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper devoted his address on the occasion of this week's fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack to arguing that the CAF should play a leading role in suppressing the Taliban as part of Canada's contribution to the "war on terror."

To serve as a backdrop to his address, Harper's aides assembled relatives of several Canadians who died in the attack on the World Trade Center and of several CAF personnel now serving in Afghanistan. Harper concluded his speech by calling on Canadians to pray for the victims of 9/11 and for the Canadian troops in Afghanistan.

Last May, Harper and his Conservatives rammed a motion through parliament that sanctioned prolonging Canada's participation in the Afghan counter-insurgency campaign by two years, till at least 2009, and expanding the mission to

include Canada assuming overall command of the NATO operation in Afghanistan for one-year, starting in February 2008.

The government also sought to use the visit that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made to Nova Scotia this week, ostensibly to thank Canadians for providing refuge to US-bound travelers whose planes were diverted on September 11, to rally support for the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan.

And on Thursday, Harper's office announced that Afghan president Karzai will visit Ottawa and Montreal September 21-23 for what it called a "working visit." The Afghan president is to be given the rare privilege of addressing Canada's parliament.

The CAF and NATO have been rattled by the strength of Taliban resistance and by the growing popular anger in Afghanistan over the treatment accorded them by US and NATO forces and the failure of the western powers to fulfill their promises of substantial reconstruction and development aid.

Recently London's *Telegraph* cited Captain Leo Docherty a former aide-de-camp of the commander of the British forces in Helmand Province as saying that the NATO-mission in southern Afghanistan has become "a textbook case of how to screw up a counter-insurgency ... [W]e've lost the hearts and minds before we've even begun."

In calling earlier this month for the NATO countries to muster 2,500 more troops for the south Afghan counter-insurgency campaign, Ray Henault, the chairman of NATO's Military Committee and a former head of the CAF, termed the NATO occupation of Afghanistan "the most complex mission NATO has ever undertaken."

Thus far his appeal for more troops has largely remained unanswered. Indeed there have increasing frictions within the NATO allies over whose troops should be bearing the burden of the counter-insurgency campaign.

While both Canadian military and government leaders warned that the deployment of Canadian troops in southern Afghanistan would result in casualties and even took a

certain perverse pleasure in the spilling of blood, believing that it would contribute to washing away the image of the CAF as a peacekeeping force that they so despise, they have been taken aback by strength of the Taliban and the mounting toll in body bags.

Of the 32 Canadian troops to die in Afghanistan since CAF troops were first deployed there in late 2001, 24 have died since the beginning of 2006 and 16 in the last three months.

No less worrying for the Harper government have been a spate of opinion polls showing that the majority of Canadians oppose the CAF intervention in Afghanistan and this despite a daily barrage of pro-intervention propaganda in the corporate media.

The anti-war sentiment is fueled by both an increasing awareness of the colonialist character of the CAF mission and skepticism, if not outright hostility, to the claims of the political establishment and media that the mission is aimed at protecting ordinary Canadians from terrorism.

Despite the pro-war bias of the media, information has seeped through about CAF troops storming villages and threatening and killing civilians—including in one case last month a 10 year-old boy. And much of the Canadian public is hostile to the Bush administration and recognizes, at least to some extent, that it seized on the September 11 2001 attacks to implement pre-existing plans to extend US power over the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia through wars of aggression.

Corporate Canada by contrast is enthusiastic about the CAF intervention in Afghanistan and the Harper government's attempt to use it to give Canada a more "robust"—read "militaristic"—foreign policy.

This is not only because the Canadian elite wants to curry favour with the Bush administration, believing that in a world increasingly fraught with explosive economic and geo-political imbalances and conflicts it best forge closer ties with the US. Through a more militaristic foreign policy, Canadian capital aims to assert its own predatory ambitions. This was spelled out in a recent *National Post* editorial that found that Harper should insist "as his quid pro quo" for allying Canada still more closely with the US that Washington recognize Canada's claim to a huge and potentially resource-rich swathe of the Arctic Ocean.

Because Canadian big business views the Afghan intervention as so important to their attempt to implement a major shift in Canada's foreign policy and geo-political strategy and because they are acutely aware of the lack of popular support for this shift, the corporate media and political elite have taken violent exception to the call made by the country's fourth party, the social-democratic NDP, for Canada to withdraw its troops from southern Afghanistan and encourage NATO and the Afghan government to seek

peace talks with the Taliban.

Without exception all of the country's major dailies in both English Canada and Quebec have denounced the NDP's position as "irresponsible." The liberal *Toronto Star* bellowed, "Pulling put of Afghanistan now would compromise Canada's credibility on the international scene."

The pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois and the official opposition Liberals have also stridently denounced the NDP.

The NDP's position—which was first announced by federal NDP leader Jack Layton in late August and endorsed by the party's federal convention last weekend—has nothing to do with a principled opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan or Canadian imperialism.

Initially Layton said he wanted the troops only withdrawn by next February so as not to undermine the efforts of Canada's NATO partners. Now he and the NDP are saying that they CAF contingent in Kandahar should be withdrawn as soon as it is "safe" to do so, while reiterating that they want Canadian troops to remain in Kabul and that they support the Karzai government.

The NDP's attacks on the CAF deployment are laced with Canadian nationalist appeals and pledges that the social democrats are ready to support the deployment of the CAF to wage wars overseas. According to the NDP, this mission is just "the wrong one for Canada;" the troops are not properly equipped; the mission is ill-defined; there is no exit strategy; the ability of Canada to assert its interests in the world is being undermined by Harper's policy of tying Canada so closely to US foreign policy. If the troops are withdrawn, the NDP argues, Canada will be able to deploy troops in other imperialist-sanctioned peace-keeping missions, like in Lebanon or Haiti.

Nevertheless, the ruling elite fears that the NDP's stand will fan anti-war sentiment and undermine its attempts to label opposition to the CAF intervention as unpatriotic, if not pro-Taliban—hence the stridency of their condemnations.



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