

Canada: Afghan Torture Scandal Deepens

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The Canadian government's moral case for waging war in Afghanistan is collapsing with astonishing speed. Its clumsy effort to deny and cover up the torture and abuse of Afghans detained by Canadian and other NATO forces has exploded in its face.

As reported in [a previous Socialist Voice article](#), on November 18, Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin told the Standing Committee on National Defence of the Canadian Parliament that in 2006 and 2007 Canadian troops knowingly turned Afghan civilians over to the Afghan National Police for interrogation and torture. Soldiers or diplomats who disagreed with the policy and spoke out were ignored or silenced. Colvin's testimony touched off a political firestorm.

Denial and stonewalling

On December 7, the *Globe and Mail* published the field notes of Canadian officers concerning one detainee who had been turned over to Afghan authorities in June, 2006 and then was taken back into Canadian custody after suffering a brutal beating. The officer wrote, "We then photographed the individual prior to handing him over, to ensure that *if the Afghan National Police did assault him, as has happened in the past*, we would have a visual record of his condition." (Emphasis in *Globe* article.)

As the notes reveal, it was common knowledge among Canadian soldiers that the captives they "rendered" to their Afghan allies were routinely abused and tortured.

The story is significant because the government and military have flatly denied Colvin's testimony, going so far as to label him a "dupe of the Taliban." But the denials have fallen flat.

On December 8, the current chief of staff of the Canadian armed forces, General Walter Natynczyk, appeared before the Standing Committee and repudiated the June 2006 field report, saying his troops were mistaken in believing that they were responsible for the detainee's condition. The Canadians were on a joint patrol with Afghan forces, the general argued, so he was an Afghan detainee over whom the Canadians had no responsibility.

Less than 24 hours later, Natynczyk hastily convened a press conference to say that he was mistaken. "*I did not have this information* [his officer's report] in May of 2007 nor yesterday," reported the *Globe* on page one the next day. (Emphasis in *Globe* article.)

The newspaper headlined the story, "In Command, In the Dark."

The focus on this single case by the mainstream press and opposition political parties leaves

the impression that the whole controversy boils down to it alone. In reality, Colvin reported routine transfers of many Afghans, and his was only the most recent such revelation.

The *Globe* shook Canada's Afghan war policy in April, 2007 when it published a series of articles detailing multiple cases of detainee abuse. After a botched attempt to deny the evidence, the Conservative government of the time announced it had reached yet another deal with Afghan authorities to ensure proper treatment of detainees. "This issue [Colvin's revelations] was dealt with 2, 3, 4 years ago," said Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently.

Now the *Globe and Mail* reveals in a December 14 front page story that, "An unknown number of Taliban insurgents captured by Canadians and turned over to Afghanistan's secret police are unaccounted for—a serious violation of the Harper government's "improved" detainee-transfer agreement..."

Defying Parliament and courts

Far from backing down after Natynczyk's public humiliation, the government is taking its obstruction of any inquiry into the scandal to new heights. It has blocked investigation by its own Military Police Complaints Commission by refusing to give it relevant diplomatic reports and correspondence as well as military reports. It has fired Peter Tinsley, the head of the commission and refused to replace him, effectively bringing the MPCC's work to a halt.

The government is defying Parliament itself. On December 10, the House of Commons voted 145 to 143 to demand that the government release the relevant diplomatic papers surrounding the scandal. The Harper government has refused. Parliament is now adjourned until January and it's not clear if or when the opposition parties will take action to force compliance.

As if the government didn't have enough critics already, its smear attacks on Richard Colvin have met with an anguished response in the foreign service. A total of 111 (and counting) former Canadian ambassadors have signed an extraordinary public statement condemning the government's attacks. They argue that diplomats must be free to speak their minds without fear of retribution or public dress-down.

The opposition parties

A political scandal of this character and scope should give a boost to any political party that opposes Canada's war in Afghanistan. Sadly, there is no such party in the Parliament. The opposition Bloc Québécois and New Democratic Party have, in the past, voiced opposition to the war and Canada's aggressive role. They have now fallen largely silent. Neither party has made the slightest criticism of the recently-announced escalation of the war in Afghanistan by U.S. President Barak Obama.

The Bloc and the NDP are calling for a public inquiry into the latest revelations of detainee abuse. But they have ducked any criticism of the war itself or the conduct of the Canadian military, saying that *it's all the fault of the political leaders*.

Their critique is so weak that the pro-war Liberal Party is able to pose as the lead voice in the call for a public inquiry. Canada joined the assault on Afghanistan in 2002 and escalated it significantly in late 2005, both times under a Liberal government.

Another critic of the war who is simultaneously loyal to the military and political institutions

prosecuting it is Scott Taylor, publisher of *Esprit de Corps* magazine, which has a wide readership in the Canadian military. He calls Afghanistan a “quagmire” for NATO forces and says that Canada is propping up a “corrupt regime.” He wants a public inquiry where the military can come forward to explain its detainee policy and listen to proposals to change it. “Then we can put all this behind us,” he told CBC Radio on December 10.

Forget, for one moment, about detainee abuse. What about the thousands of Afghans who have died, and continue to die, as a result of the NATO war in their homeland – from indiscriminate bombings, chance encounters with foreign troops, forced dislocations or hunger and disease?

The last inquiry to take place into the conduct of the Canadian military looked into allegations of torture and abuse of prisoners it captured in Somalia in the early 1990s. The inquiry was shut down by a Liberal government when its line of questioning reached too far up the political and military chain of command.

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