

Canada: Counterinsurgency Manual Shows Military's New Face

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TORONTO, Mar 22 (IPS) - Following closely behind their counterparts in the United States and Britain, Canada's Department of National Defence is preparing a comprehensive counter-insurgency field manual for its soldiers and officers.

The manual will guide Canadian Forces doctrine and training well into the future, according to a draft edition obtained by IPS.

A 250-page publication, the field manual outlines the principles and practices of fighting the kind of insurgencies that have come to define warfare for the Western powers in the 21st century, in places like Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The manual has been two years in development and is scheduled for release later this year. In it, insurgent wars are characterised by their tendency to be local and often popular movements, rather than the traditional military conflicts between states. This type of irregular warfare has confounded U.S. and NATO forces in Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, where growing insurgencies have taken a bloody toll on local populations as well as Western troops, and signs of success are few and far between.

The increased prominence of the doctrine was recently on display when Gen. David Petraeus, author of the United States Army and Marine Corps counter-insurgency field manual, took command of U.S. forces in Iraq in early 2007.

While perhaps as relevant as ever, counter-insurgency is not new a phenomenon, as the Canadian manual notes up front. Indigenous forces battled the Roman Empire in present-day Germany, Scotland and the Middle East two millennia ago. The British Empire fought insurgencies in 19th-century Afghanistan, as did the French in Algeria after World War Two. The U.S. withdrew from Vietnam in 1975 after a vicious decade-long counter-insurgency war against Vietnamese guerrillas.

Maj. D.J. Lambert, the Canadian director of army doctrine and lead author of the manual, has cited several examples of historic Canadian counter-insurgencies, including battles with George Washington's U.S. forces or the Northwest Rebellion led by Louis Riel and the Metis in 1885.

Presently, while Canada's Afghanistan mission dominates the attention and resources of the military, according to the manual, Canadian Forces are actively engaged in various levels of confrontation with at least three ongoing insurgencies — in Afghanistan, in Haiti, as well as with domestic indigenous organisations in Canada, such as the Mohawk Warrior Society.

Despite its “specific and limited aims”, the First Nations rebellions in Canada are nevertheless insurgencies because they are animated by the goal of altering political relationships with both the Canadian government and at the local level — within indigenous reservations themselves — “through the threat of, or use of, violence”, the manual states.

In recent years, Canadian Forces have been used by the federal government in high-profile land confrontations with indigenous communities and protestors, including lethal standoffs with the Mohawk community of Kanehsatake in the 1990 Oka Crisis and with the Ojibway community at Ipperwash in 1995.

Canadian Forces have been present in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, since before the ouster of popularly-elected President Jean Bertrand Aristide in a military coup in February 2004. According to the draft manual, Canadian Forces have been “conducting COIN [counter-insurgency] operations against the criminally-based insurgency in Haiti since early 2004.”

Since the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, Canadian Forces have played a key combat role in Afghanistan, both in the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom and the recent NATO mission to quell the growing uprising against the Western-backed government of Hamid Karzai.

Today in Afghanistan, Canadian Forces from the Royal Canadian Regiment in Gagetown, New Brunswick are engaged in NATO’s first major offensive of the season against what are broadly labeled Taliban insurgents. Code named Operation Achilles, the mission is characterised by NATO and Canadian officials as a pre-emptive attack on Taliban forces in Helmand Province who are reportedly preparing to launch a “spring offensive” against the presence of foreign troops.

Maj. Gen. Ton van Loon, NATO’s commander in Southern Afghanistan, said in a statement this week that Operation Achilles is the largest combined NATO-Afghan mission to date, involving 4,500 NATO troops and upwards of 1,000 Afghan National Army forces at its peak.

Meanwhile, an Afghanistan-focused policy group, the Senlis Council, released the “alarming” results of a survey this week which polled 17,000 people in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The survey showed that one-half of respondents believe the Western-led war will fail to defeat the Taliban, and 87 percent of respondents believed that the tactics used by the Western forces in dealing with the insurgency were “not right”.

“The results from the survey are extremely alarming because they indicate that the international community is in serious trouble in Afghanistan,” Senlis Council president Norine MacDonald said in a statement Monday. “A return of the Taliban into power would have grave consequences for both the people of Afghanistan and for global security.”

The counter-insurgency manual is one part of a significant modernising and restructuring of the Canadian Forces that the DND is billing as an effort to create a more effective force in fighting for Canada’s “national interests” in the post-Cold War global order. But the changes are not only doctrinal; the intensity of the combat in Afghanistan is something Canadians haven’t seen since at least the 1950s, when Canadian Forces fought in Korea.

“It is a fascinating time to be a Canadian soldier,” Lt. Gen. Andrew Leslie, head of the army, told journalists at a recent policy briefing at the Fraser Institute, a conservative research

institute in Vancouver.

“We are no longer a blunt instrument relegated solely to watching from the sidelines or inter-positioning ourselves between two formerly warring factions,” Leslie said.

Canadian generals such as Leslie, Chief of Staff Rick Hillier and retired Maj. Gen. Louis MacKenzie have been outspoken critics of the accuracy and utility of the long-fostered national self-image of the Canadian military as a neutral middle-power and “blue-helmeted” peacekeeper.

While the Canadian Forces commitment in Afghanistan is currently slated to end in February 2009, “Let’s not kid ourselves,” Gen. Leslie said. The enormous resources invested by the government in the transformation of Canada’s armed forces are clearly not for Afghanistan alone, he said, adding: “It is logical to expect that we will go somewhere fairly similar to Afghanistan and do much the same sort of activity.”

This story is part one of a two-part series on the transformation of Canada’s military and humanitarian missions. With additional reporting by Anthony Fenton in Vancouver.

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