

Canada/NATO Invasion of Afghanistan Sows Destruction and Misery

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A few months following the launch of the Canada-led NATO invasion of southern Afghanistan in late 2005, the newly elected Prime Minister of Canada told assembled Canadian soldiers in Kandahar that the goal of the foreign occupation of Afghanistan was to “create a democratic, prosperous, modern country that can be a model in this part of the world.”

An October 6 editorial in the *Globe and Mail* national daily says the military defeat of the “Taliban” is “a superfluous sideshow to the real Canadian mission of painting schools and drilling wells.”

The reality in Afghanistan puts the lie to these stated goals. Occupation forces have brought widespread death, misery and destruction to the country. The invasion and occupation of southern Afghanistan is degenerating into a military and political debacle for the four countries engaged — Canada, Britain, the U.S. and Holland.

Senlis Council report On September 5, 2006, the Senlis Council, a prominent think tank based in Britain, released a comprehensive report on the U.S./NATO occupation of Afghanistan. It says,

“Five years of international presence in the country aimed at increasing the living standards of the Afghan population have failed to make any measured improvements in the accessibility and quality of health and educational services in most of Afghanistan, beyond the confines of Kabul.”

The report was compiled by a large number of researchers based in Afghanistan and it reveals a country living a social and humanitarian disaster.

“Despite promises from the U.S.-led international community guaranteeing to provide the resources and assistance necessary for its reconstruction and development needs, Afghanistan’s people are starving to death. Afghanistan continues to rank at the bottom of most poverty indicators, and the situation of women and children is particularly grave. One in four children born in Afghanistan cannot expect to live beyond the age of five, and certain provinces of the country lay claim to the worst maternal mortality rates ever recorded in the world”

According to Senlis, more than 70% of the Afghan population is chronically malnourished, while less than a quarter has access to safe drinking water.

Human loss, social destruction The United Nations Development Program reports similar catastrophic conditions. It says the average life expectancy for the people of Afghanistan is

44 years, at least 20 years lower than in neighbouring Central Asian countries.

According to the United Nations Human Rights Commission on Refugees, Afghanistan had 2.9 million refugees in 2005. That number is growing as a result of foreign military operations.

The occupiers like to point to the region surrounding the capital city Kabul as proof of their accomplishments and good will. But progress there is as elusive as in Iraq's capital city, Baghdad. Open sewers line the streets. Rent for an intact home is too expensive for ordinary Afghans, forcing many to live in dilapidated and structurally unsound buildings. Residents of Kabul receive, at best, four hours of electricity a day.

Prison conditions in Afghanistan are reportedly worse than the horrors that came to light in the prisons of Iraq. According to a May 12 article in the Globe and Mail, six thousand prisoners were crowded into Afghanistan's 34 prisons at that time, a tenfold increase from the numbers incarcerated at the time of the fall of the Taliban-led government in 2001.

"As the Afghan court system expands, the prison population is rising sharply. Yet the jails are falling apart," the article explains.

A February 2005 story in the UK Guardian reported widespread Abu Ghraib-style abuse by U.S. forces against Afghan prisoners, including torture, taking 'trophy photographs' of detainees, and carrying out rape and sexual humiliation.

Earlier this year, Canada announced that it does not apply the Geneva Convention governing the treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan. It hands prisoners over to the existing prison system, thereby making Canadian soldiers accomplices to war crimes.

Failure to reconstruct Canada and NATO are failing to rebuild infrastructure with their "Provincial Reconstruction Teams." According to Senlis:

"there is a large and increasing gap between the massive international expenditure on security in Afghanistan, and the limited nation-building achievements.... This security-focused spending indicates that right from 2001, the priorities of the U.S.-led international community for Afghanistan were not in line with those of the Afghan population. Rather ... the international community has prioritized physical, military-focused security over the relief of Afghans' extreme poverty and economic instability."

Guillaume Fournier, Afghanistan Country Manager for the Senlis Council, told CBC Radio One in September, "The biggest hindrance to reconstruction is the weekly bombing of civilians."

According to World Bank estimates, Afghanistan needs \$27.5 billion to rebuild its shattered social and physical infrastructure. But according to Senlis, Afghanistan received only \$7.3 billion between 2002 and 2006, while NATO military spending was \$82.5 billion during that time.

A September 23 Canwest News Service article, entitled "Reconstruction in Baby Steps," described the reality of Canadian reconstruction efforts in Kandahar province. A Canadian military officer said that resources are lacking and reconstruction is still a "work in progress." "I don't have a squadron's worth of engineers here. I don't have troops that go out with equipment and build things and build bridges."

The September 26 Globe and Mail reports that an ambulance donated by Canada for use by the medical center in the Panjwaii agricultural district west of Kandahar city four months ago is instead being used by local police and government administrators. Two doctors in the medical center told the reporter they are not keen to work with NATO-organized medical clinics because of the deep resentment of the population towards the occupiers.

Similar failure surrounds the British presence, according to the September 9 Economist magazine. Citing one example, it wrote, "British troops in Helmand (a neighbouring province to Kandahar), who have \$36 million to spend this year, have built the odd bridge and market stall..."

If the failure of "reconstruction" in Afghanistan is little known in Canada, one reason is the concerted efforts by authorities to hide it. An article by Geoffrey York in the June 3 Globe and Mail described the rules for journalists working in Afghanistan who choose to "embed" with Canadian forces.

"The restrictions warned sternly that I could be ejected from the military base if I spent 'an inordinate amount of time' covering non-military activity. The Department of National Defence doesn't want the embedded reporters to write much about refugees, schools, health care or electricity - all the basic realities of life for Afghans."

Warmaking trumps "reconstruction" In early September, the 2,300 Canadian troops in Kandahar launched a massive ground assault in Panjwaii district, code-named "Operation Medusa" and backed by U.S. troops and airpower. Residents were warned in advance of the offensive to leave their homes and villages.

The assault was declared a huge success several weeks later. "More than one thousand" enemy fighters were said to be killed. But reporters saw few bodies of resistance fighters.

Canadian and NATO authorities admitted that fighters had staged an orderly retreat and appealed for more troops into the area. Canada quickly dispatched several hundred more soldiers, and for the first time it will be deploying tanks. Deadly attacks on Canadian and other NATO forces resumed within days of the "victory."

Meanwhile, some 20,000 residents were made homeless after their homes, villages and crops were destroyed in the fighting. Winter is approaching and they face an uncertain future.

The September 11 Globe and Mail reported on the use of the chemical weapon white phosphorous during "Operation Medusa." The banned weapon is now routinely used against Afghan fighters and to destroy agricultural plantings. The chemical severely burns human flesh upon contact.

Deepening resistance U.S./NATO officials say they are surprised by the scope and success of the resistance to their latest offensives. "The fighting is extraordinarily intense," said the commander of British forces in Afghanistan. "The intensity and ferocity of the fighting is far greater than in Iraq."

But the reasons for deepening resistance are not difficult to understand. The Senlis report states:

"During the past five years, there have been some limited achievements in Afghanistan....

Yet these visible achievements, frequently lauded in the West, mask the [Afghan government's] lack of independence and the growing irrelevance of the Afghan government to the Afghan people."

The Afghan puppet government and its police and army forces are deeply resented by much of the population for their corruption and abuse. Looting and wanton destruction by foreign and puppet forces routinely follow in the wake of their military operations.

On May 29, a popular uprising occurred in the streets of Kabul following yet another in a long line of civilian deaths caused by reckless driving of a U.S. military convoy. Protesters marched on the presidential palace chanting "Death to America." The protest was brutally suppressed, with Agence France-Presse reporting at least 14 protesters killed.

Canadian soldiers have killed civilians, including children, during patrols in Kandahar. Scores of civilians were killed during the recent "Operation Medusa" bloodletting.

"For 30 years, we've had this problem," Abdul Zahir told a Globe and Mail reporter in June while caring for three injured relatives in a crowded hospital in Kandahar. "Foreign troops come here and start fights."

The death toll of Afghans is so bad that even the puppet president Hamid Karzai has spoken out. In late June, during an earlier U.S./Canada/NATO offensive in southern Afghanistan, he declared, "It is not acceptable that in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. In the last three to four weeks, 500 to 600 Afghans were killed."

The poppy eradication program pursued by occupation forces is another major reason for growing disaffection and is sharply criticized by the Senlis Council. Farmers receive no alternative support when their poppy plantings are destroyed.

Support for occupation eroding at home The Canadian government is losing support at home for its warmaking abroad, according to recent polls. An EKOS Research/Toronto Star poll in mid-September shows 48 percent opposed to Canada's part in the war in Afghanistan and only 38 percent in favour.

Candidates for the leadership of the opposition Liberal Party are feeling the heat of shifting public opinion. Most now say they oppose the Canadian offensive operations in Kandahar. (The party initiated the Kandahar offensive last year while still in government.)

A major foreign policy report by the Canadian Senate that was issued on October 5 decries the absence of "reconstruction" projects in Afghanistan. "If we don't get aid in there, then we won't win militarily, " said the chairman of the committee that produced the report.

NDP convention delegates vote for "troops out" Another sign of growing antiwar opinion was the vote by delegates at the national convention of the New Democratic Party in early September to demand a withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan. The resolution calls for "the safe and immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan".

The vote was a striking victory for antiwar forces and will help broaden support for antiwar protests.

Unfortunately, the resolution also provides justification for continuing Canadian military intervention in poor and underdeveloped countries, including Afghanistan, by advocating

what it calls “peace building.” It says the party should “support the continuation of development assistance to Afghanistan and democratic peace building in that country so that reconstruction efforts and good governance are achieved.”

“Democratic peace building” is code language for continued violations of the sovereignty of the Afghan people. The same language served as justification for the invasion of Haiti in 2004 and overthrow of its popular government by Canada, the U.S. and France.

Leaders of the NDP have taken their distance from the “troops out” section of the resolution. Party leader Jack Layton told CBC Radio news on September 24 that he favours a continued military presence by Canada in Afghanistan. He said he wants an end to the current combat operations in Kandahar but a continuation of “peace-building.”

The party’s foreign affairs critic in Parliament, Alexa McDonough, wrote a newspaper column on September 17 that criticized the Canadian-led offensive in Kandahar but made no reference to a withdrawal of Canadian troops, from either Kandahar or anywhere else in Afghanistan.

Canada out of Afghanistan The Canadian government and its NATO allies have accomplished nothing for Afghans. They are propping up a reactionary and illegitimate government that has little popular support, have killed thousands of Afghans, and have destroyed crucial infrastructure and food production.

A column in the October 3 Globe and Mail by U.S. journalist Sarah Chayes underscored the dilemma of the occupation forces. She described the Afghanistan government of Harmid Karzai as, “a government devoured by corruption.” It, “seems just as hostile to [the people’s] legitimate interests as the Taliban are.”

Chayes has no solution to this problem because she staunchly defends a continued presence of Canada and NATO in Afghanistan, and those forces in turn support and defend the very government that she so harshly condemns.

The occupation forces are deeply hostile to the social and economic aspirations of Afghanistan’s poor majority. They are in Afghanistan to foster pipeline deals that will deliver oil from Central Asia to seaports and earn billions of dollars in profits for Canadian and other foreign oil companies. They are transforming Afghanistan into a military base to attack patriotic forces throughout Asia and the Middle East and to pressure and threaten China and Iran.

October 28 day of antiwar action A cross-Canada day of protest against the war has been called by the Canadian Peace Alliance on October 28. The call is supported by growing numbers of political, social, student and religious organizations, including the Canadian Labour Congress, many local and regional trade unions, and the Canadian Islamic Congress.

People from across Canada will come into the streets on that day to demand the unconditional withdrawal of Canadian forces from Afghanistan.

In so doing, we will be joining with those in Afghanistan who are resisting the pillage and destruction of their country and who want democratic government and meaningful programs to improve living standards and rebuild the shattered country.

These protests will strengthen the struggle for justice and peace at home, including the fight

to reverse the vast cuts to social programs recently announced by the Conservative Party government and the campaigns to end the abuses of democratic rights that led to the torture ordeal of Maher Arar and the indefinite detentions of political prisoners.

For more information on the October 28 day of protest, visit the Canadian Peace Alliance website at:

www.acp-cpa.ca/en/index.html.

The Senlis Council report quoted in this article is available online at http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/014_publication/

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