

The Afghan mission

NATO off course, report concludes

GLORIA GALLOWAY

OTTAWA -- A former Canadian ambassador to NATO says the war in Afghanistan cannot be won militarily and it will require negotiation with the Taliban to bring an end to the conflict.

Gordon Smith, who was Canada's NATO ambassador between 1985 and 1990, and a team of experts from across Canada will release a report tomorrow that says the current NATO policies are not on course to achieve the objectives of peace and stability in the country, "even within a period of 10 years."

Dr. Smith, who is also a former deputy minister of Foreign Affairs and is now director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, says recent announcements that will bring NATO's troop complement in Afghanistan to 37,000 will have little impact.

"One of the experts that we asked about how many troops would be needed for a military victory said, 'Oh, maybe half a million.' So adding a couple of thousand is wonderful but it doesn't do anything."

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The real objective of the NATO force is to prevent a resurgence of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organization -- a group that has moved to other areas of the world and is remobilizing in Pakistan, Dr. Smith said.

In his report, entitled *Canada in Afghanistan: Is it Working?*, he says that "the most essential goal is to isolate Al Qaeda from the mainstream Taliban and to find incentives to dissuade the Taliban from a commitment to international jihadi violence."

That may not be easy because of the close relationship between the two groups at the top levels, says the report, but it could be accomplished over time. And "while negotiations certainly cannot guarantee that the Taliban will be brought into the political process, failure to negotiate will almost surely cede the field to them."

Similar advice was offered yesterday at the defence committee of the House of Commons, where representatives of the United Nations and NATO tried to convince politicians of the value of a long-term commitment to the international mission.

One of the legacies of the Bonn agreement of 2001, in which high-ranking Afghans, working under the auspices of the UN, carved out a plan for governing their country, is that it was not a peace accord, said Christopher Alexander, the deputy special representative of the UN Secretary-General in Afghanistan.

Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, and the leaders of *jihadist* parties were excluded from those talks.

Both Mr. Alexander and James Appathurai, a spokesman for NATO, stressed that progress was being made in Afghanistan, but the NATO commitment could not end any time soon without the country plunging into civil war and without serious damage being done to the credibility of both NATO and the UN.

Canada has said it will keep its troops in the country until at least 2009. But Mr. Alexander said it is more realistic to be talking about a time frame like that in the Balkans, where NATO sent troops in 1992 and still maintains a presence of 18,000 soldiers.

"What we are all saying in the United Nations, in NATO, in individual nation states, is that this is likely to be a long-term commitment, both on the military side and in other areas," he said.

Mr. Appathurai said it is important for Canadians to realize that they are not battling alone, nor is Canada the only country to have borne the burden of casualties. And those countries that had previously refused to send troops to the dangerous southern region where Canadian forces are stationed have removed those restrictions, he said.

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