

Canada takes leading role in Afghan occupation

Keith Jones
30 August 2003

With little public discussion, Canada's Liberal government has made bolstering the US-installed regime in Afghanistan a key Canadian foreign policy objective.

Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel now comprise the largest component of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—the 5,000-man, United Nations-mandated, NATO-led military force that is charged with defending the government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul and its immediate environs.

The US has some 9,000 combat troops in Afghanistan, only 110 of them deployed with the ISAF “peacekeeping” operation. The US forces have been deployed in search-and-destroy operations against armed Afghan militias opposed to the occupation.

Earlier this month, Canada became the “lead nation” for the ISAF's Kabul Multinational Brigade, supplying 1,900 or roughly 40 percent of the brigade's 4,400 troops. And when the current Canadian contingent in Kabul returns home in six months, the CAF will “rotate” a force of equal strength to the Afghan capital, thus ensuring a major Canadian role in ISAF until at least the late summer of 2004.

Ottawa has also announced that it will provide Afghanistan with almost US\$150 million in assistance this year, making the Central Asian country the largest single recipient of Canadian foreign aid. By contrast, the US has pledged Afghanistan \$900 million in reconstruction aid.

Given the historic level of Canadian immigration, commercial and other ties with Afghanistan, Ottawa's military, financial and geopolitical support for the Karzai regime is extraordinary. In 2000, Ottawa provided Afghanistan with just \$2 million (Canadian) in aid. The embassy that Canada is now building in Kabul will house Ottawa's first-ever diplomatic

mission in the Central Asian country.

The Liberal government has justified Canada's intervention in Afghanistan on the basis of the need to pursue the worldwide “war against terrorism.” Rhetoric aside, a key reason for Canada's increasing involvement in Afghanistan is the calculation of its political and economic elites that Canada must be a “player” in the expansion of imperialist military and geopolitical power in Asia and the Middle East if they are to secure their “share” of the economic and strategic benefits.

Beginning with the 1991 Gulf War, the Canadian Armed Forces has increasingly been deployed in foreign military interventions, with or without United Nation sanction, including the US-led intervention in Somalia and the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia. The Liberal government fully supported the US invasion of Afghanistan, committing 2,000 troops, six ships, planes and elite commandos—no matter that the invasion's ostensible targets, the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda, were themselves products of the decade-long, multibillion-dollar campaign Washington mounted to arm and otherwise promote the Islamic fundamentalists in Central Asia, so as to undermine the USSR. From February through August 2002, some 750 Canadian troops participated in the Kandahar-based pacification campaign that the US military mounted after it had ousted the Taliban regime.

Canada's new military and political commitment to supporting the Karzai regime comes at a time when there are growing fears for the future of Afghanistan's “interim” government.

The Karzai regime's-foreign sponsors have long conceded that its fiat is largely restricted to the national capital region. But recent weeks have seen a resurgence of armed actions by government opponents. Some

attacks have reputedly been mounted by remnants of the Taliban regime. Others have come from elements associated with various warlords who have become bolder, partly because of increasing popular dissatisfaction with the US-sponsored regime—whose promises of a massive international reconstruction campaign have proven hollow—and partly because they have gained greater financial resources thanks to the revival of the opium trade.

Increasingly embattled, the Karzai regime has requested that ISAF expand its operations beyond the Kabul area. Meanwhile, the US press reports that the Bush administration will soon announce a dramatic expansion of its role in Afghanistan—including the appointment of senior US officials as “advisors,” read overseers, to Afghan ministers—so as to bolster the Karzai regime prior to the national elections slated for next June.

Canadian Defence Minister John McCallum has said that Canadian forces in Afghanistan will, in all likelihood, suffer casualties. At the same time, he has insisted, in the face of criticism from the Official Opposition Canadian Alliance and former CAF officers, that Canadian troops have been given the top-notch military hardware and aggressive rules of engagement needed to defend themselves.

Canada’s corporate media and the Canadian Alliance warmly applauded Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s October 2001 announcement that Canada would participate in the US invasion of Afghanistan and the CAF’s subsequent role in the US’s military’s post-Taliban pacification campaign. By contrast, the current CAF deployment in Afghanistan has been widely criticized.

The Canadian Alliance and the *National Post* have repeatedly accused the Liberal government of opting for a major Canadian role in ISAF so as to leave the CAF, given its other commitments, without sufficient military assets to join the US-British conquest of Iraq. Deploying Canadian troops to Afghanistan, claims Canadian Alliance defence critic Jay Hill, “was a means of avoiding supporting our allies in the war against Saddam Hussein.” McCallum and other Liberal ministers have replied by citing US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s warm praise for the Canadian role in Afghanistan.

It is well known that the top brass of the Canadian

military was eager to participate in the action in Iraq, while it perceives the current Afghan mission as full of dangers and little glory. According to Barry Cooper and David Bercuson, academics with close connections to both the Canadian Alliance and the military, someone has to the “dirty job” of “bringing order to Afghanistan ... but why Canada?” Participation in the rape of Iraq, by contrast, would have reinforced Canada’s position as a junior partner of US imperialism and given it a leg up on lucrative concessions and contracts in US-occupied Iraq—or so calculates much of Canada’s economic and political elite.

Whereas events since last winter have only underscored the illegal and colonial character of the US invasion and conquest of Iraq, opposition within Canadian big business circles to the Chrétien government’s failure to fully support the Bush administration has in fact hardened.

This has not been lost on the Liberals themselves. Chrétien has been at pains to distance himself from his pre-war stance. Even more significantly, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister John Manley has let it be known that he argued in cabinet for Canada to join the US invasion and Paul Martin, who will soon succeed Chrétien as head of the Liberal Party and Canada’s prime minister, has pledged to make repairing relations with the Bush administration a key, if not his top, priority.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact