

Canada engaged in colonial intervention in Afghanistan

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper reiterated his Conservative government's commitment to an expanded Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) intervention in Afghanistan last Thursday, just hours after four CAF soldiers had been killed and ten wounded by Taliban insurgents. The press, which lauded Harper's resolve, has called Thursday "the bloodiest day yet" in Canada's Afghanistan intervention. In the coming days, the World Socialist Web Site will report on the reaction in Canada to the mounting CAF casualties in Afghanistan. The following article was published in French on July 25.

Since the election of a minority Conservative government in January, the Canadian media has launched a propaganda offensive aimed at rallying public opinion behind the expanded and increasingly bloody military intervention that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is mounting in southern Afghanistan.

Two thousand three hundred Canadian soldiers are at the head of a NATO-US counterinsurgency campaign in the Kandahar region, while a team of some 20 Canadian military and civilian personnel are acting as special advisors to the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.

In the middle of May, the Conservative government succeeded in ramming a motion through the House of Commons that endorsed its decision to prolong the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan for another two years to February 2009. At the same time, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that Canada will offer to assume command of the NATO-US occupation of Afghanistan for one year, beginning in February 2008.

Like the American military, the CAF is embedding journalists in its combat units with the aim of conscripting the corporate media as cheerleaders.

Embedded journalists must promise not to report on a long list of "non-releasable information," including the rules of engagement that specify when CAF soldiers are authorized to fire their weapons. Journalists also face expulsion from their host military base if they spend "an inordinate amount of time" covering nonmilitary activities, such as the plight of the Afghan people, including the conditions in the schools and hospitals and the supply of electricity and drinking water. Nor can their articles be published without their first being vetted by CAF officers at the base.

Journalists are thus subject to immense pressure not to publish certain facts and photos. In the middle of May, for instance, the Canadian Press (CP) news agency reported that the military brass had pressed a photographer to suppress photos of the most significant group of Taliban supporters captured by Canadian soldiers to date.

Nevertheless, information is coming to light that shatters the claims of the CAF and the corporate media that Canadian troops are engaged in "muscular humanitarianism," are in Afghanistan "to help the Afghan people," and that the Canadian military presence and the Karzai government are supported by all but a few fanatical Islamicist terrorists.

Although the media was quick to dismiss the May 21-22 US bombing of the village of Azizi as "collateral damage," even the Karzai government

was forced to condemn the killing of several dozen civilians—an action undertaken after Canadian troops called for air support.

Then there is the case of the Afghan worker and father of six who was felled by Canadian gunfire in March after the taxi in which he was riding allegedly failed to stop at a CAF checkpoint in Kandahar. A Canadian army medical team refused to treat Nasrat Ali Hassan on the spot, insisting that he instead be transferred to a poorly equipped Afghan medical facility. A few hours later, Hassan succumbed to his injuries.

On July 7, the military announced that it had cleared the soldier who killed Hassan, never publicly named, of any responsibility for his death.

Earlier the Canadian authorities had rejected calls from Hassan's family to be allowed to immigrate to Canada, so as to secure education and a better future for their children.

The Canadian government and military have no intention of providing Hassan's family with any meaningful financial compensation. According to news reports, the CAF has said that by expressing its regrets and giving Hassan's bereaved family a sheep valued at \$100 it has upheld Afghan customs and fulfilled its obligations.

In an action befitting a puppet government, the Karzai regime has given the Canadian military a waiver from any legal liability for any "collateral damage" caused by its troops.

According to a July 10 CP report, on December 18, 2005, the Afghan and Canadian governments had signed a secret agreement stipulating that "Afghan civilians who are accidentally injured or killed, or whose property is damaged by Canadian soldiers, have no legal right to compensation."

The CP report continued: "Restitution to mostly dirt-poor villagers depends upon an obscure claims process that would provide payments under 'moral considerations.'" Lawyers representing the CAF are authorized to make payments at their discretion provided the amounts do not exceed \$2,000. The CP also reports that a document in their possession indicates that "any higher amount must be approved by the deputy minister. In most circumstances, ex-gratia payments should not be made."

Ongoing discussions in Canadian government and military circles regarding whether Canadian forces in Afghanistan are adhering to and should follow the Geneva Conventions and the possibility of CAF personnel being charged with war crimes shed further light on the colonialist character of the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan.

From the beginning of the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan in October of 2001, until just recently, the Canadian government has always insisted that its forces in Afghanistan are following the Geneva Conventions.

These claims were contested by legal scholars and human rights groups, because the Canadian military has handed prisoners over to the US military, meaning such prisoners could be subject to indefinite detention in the legal black hole of Guantánamo or at one of the secret overseas prisons maintained by US security forces.

In December of 2005, Canada's then Liberal government announced that it had signed an agreement regarding the transfer of prisoners to Afghan authorities, who routinely torture and even kill detainees. This agreement stipulates that Afghan forces should respect the third Geneva Convention regarding the rights of prisoners of war.

The December 2005 agreement between Ottawa and Kabul has been justly criticized for guaranteeing reputed Afghan insurgents only the rights outlined in just one of the four Geneva Conventions and for ignoring several other international treaties governing the treatment of prisoners of war. Moreover, this agreement requires no real accounting for the subsequent fate of prisoners transferred to Afghan authorities and does not prohibit Afghan forces from transferring prisoners to another power, such as the United States, which has repeatedly said it does not consider the Afghan insurgents to be covered by the Geneva Conventions.

But at the end of May, Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, the highest commanding officer of the Canadian expeditionary force in Afghanistan, backed away from Ottawa's previous claims that Canadian forces in Afghanistan are respecting the Geneva Conventions, adopting instead a position similar to that of the US.

Gauthier asserted that the Geneva Conventions do not apply in Afghanistan and that prisoners taken by the CAF will not have to be brought before a tribunal to determine whether or not they are prisoners of war according to the conventions.

The Geneva Conventions will not apply to prisoners taken by the Canadian military, Gauthier said, since "The regulations ... apply in an armed conflict between states, and what's happening in Afghanistan is not an armed conflict between states. And therefore there is no basis for making a determination of individuals being prisoners of war."

This position was subsequently defended by Canada's Minister of Defence, Gordon O'Connor, and minister of foreign affairs, Peter MacKay.

The claim that the Geneva Conventions apply only "in an armed conflict between states" is false. According to a legal opinion written by Professor Michael Byers, an expert in international law, "Common Article 3, which is found in all four of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, applies to non-international (i.e., internal) conflicts of precisely the kind that now exists in Afghanistan." "Common Article 3," he continues, "protects 'persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms,' and therefore any detainees captured by Canada."

With the help of the Bloc Québécois, the Conservative government succeeded in dodging another central question with respect to the Geneva Conventions. On the morning when Gauthier made his declaration, the BQ came to the rescue of the Conservatives, demanding that Afghan prisoners be accorded the same protections granted to prisoners of war by the Canadian military. The minister of defence immediately conceded this point: "When it [the CAF] takes prisoners," declared O'Connor, "it will always follow the rules of the Geneva Convention. There is no lower standard than that. That is in every case whether the operation is under the Geneva Convention or not."

But the Geneva Conventions are not limited to the requirement that the Canadian military treat its prisoners according to certain rules, including the permanent supervision of the Red Cross or Red Crescent. They also require that the prisoners not be handed over to other forces that do not respect the conventions. The Canadian military in Afghanistan rarely holds onto prisoners for more than a few hours.

Until recently, they were handed over to the US military, which does not recognize their status as prisoners of war. Now the CAF is giving the prisoners to Afghan forces, where they face torture and death.

That the Canadian military is well aware of the horrific fate that likely awaits some of the prisoners Canadian troops are handing over to Afghan security forces is underscored by the assurances Gauthier has given CAF

personnel regarding this practice. "Our intention certainly isn't to leave junior folks hanging out to dry at all on this," said Gauthier. "We are on firm legal ground ... we have no worries about the possibility of prosecution ... or allegations of criminal wrongdoing for having transferred detainees."

The Canadian military is not on "firm legal ground." If Gauthier can confidently assert that CAF personnel will escape prosecution for aiding and abetting the abuse and murder of prisoners taken by Canadian troops, it is because the corporate media and the Canadian political and economic elite are fully behind Canada's expanding military intervention in Afghanistan, which they view to be but a first step in a more aggressive assertion of the economic and geopolitical interests of Canadian capital on the world stage.

A recent article in the Montreal daily *La Presse*, titled "Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan to kill," was largely based on a France 2 television network broadcast.

According to the *La Presse* article, the France 2 report showed Canadian soldiers boasting that they are in the south of Afghanistan in order to find and kill Taliban—the name given all opposed to NATO's occupation of Afghanistan and the puppet regime of Karzai to many ordinary villagers who get killed in US and NATO counterinsurgency operations. A CAF soldier explains that the Canadian military hadn't previously looked for combat, but that it now does, in order to kill the "enemy" and ensure "security."

The France 2 broadcast offers a glimpse of the immense opposition that the NATO intervention has met within the Afghan population. Canadian soldiers are shown kicking in a door in order to abuse an elderly person and some women. After having insulted an old man, a soldier proceeds to threaten him with bombings and mass shootings if he does not provide information about alleged hidden Taliban supporters.

Another scene shows a soldier in the process of threatening the inhabitants of a village if they do not cooperate with him. When the soldier waves a wad of cash under their noses one man responds with a declaration that the money is unwanted and the Afghans will protect their country with all their might.

The France 2 broadcast punctures the pretensions of the Conservative government, along with those of the previous Liberal government and the Canadian Armed Forces, that the Canadian mission in Afghanistan is a mission to build democracy or keep the peace. The broadcast shows the military engaged in terrorizing a population hostile to the presence of a foreign occupation force—a force that invokes humanitarian and democratic rhetoric while advancing the predatory geopolitical objectives of the Canadian elite.



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