

Canadian abuse of Afghan POWs

Harper smears his critics as pro-Taliban

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has accused his Liberal Party opponents of being more concerned about the plight of Taliban insurgents than the 2,2000 Canadian Armed Forces personnel serving in Afghanistan.

"I can understand," Harper told the House of Commons Tuesday, "the passion that the Leader of the Opposition and members of his party feel for Taliban prisoners. I just wish occasionally they would show the same passion for Canadian soldiers."

Harper's political smear—the latest in a long-line of demagogic Conservative denunciations of the Liberals for being "soft on terrorism," more concerned about the rights of criminals than victims, and for having dismantled the Canadian military—came in response to opposition demands that Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor resign.

On Monday, O'Connor admitted he had misled parliament by repeatedly asserting that the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Society were monitoring, on Canada's behalf, Afghan authorities' treatment of alleged Taliban insurgents turned over to them by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

"If there is something wrong with their treatment, the Red Cross or Red Crescent would inform us and we would take action," affirmed O'Connor last year.

But a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross said last week there was no truth to O'Connor's claim that it is monitoring the whereabouts and condition of prisoners whom the CAF has handed over to Afghan security forces. "We were informed of the [Canada-Afghan prisoner transfer] agreement," Simon Schorno, told the *Globe and Mail*. "But we are not a party to it and we are not monitoring the implementation of it."

In the days immediately preceding and following the exposure of O'Connor's flagrant misrepresentation, the press carried a series of harrowing reports of Afghans apprehended by the CAF subsequently disappearing, being lost track of, or worse. What makes this all the more troubling is the atrocious human rights record of the Afghan military and police who, according to both the US State Department and the Afghan government, routinely practice torture and other forms of prisoner abuse.

A report by the *Globe and Mail* newspaper last week detailed the case of one prisoner who went missing only hours after being handed over to the Afghan National Army (ANA), and instances where only the presence of Canadian soldiers prevented the summary execution of two others. O'Connor nevertheless blithely

commented last week, "We use the term detainee abuse, but we're not aware there is any detainee abuse."

As for the disappearances of prisoners first captured by the CAF, O'Connor suggested that they or their families had probably bribed their way out of detention. "It's quite a revolving-door system," quipped Canada's defence minister.

Harper's accusation that his Liberal opponents are Taliban sympathizers is laughable. In the fall of 2001, the Chretien Liberal government quickly dispatched Canadian forces to join the US conquest of Afghanistan and it was the Liberal government of Paul Martin that decided the CAF should assume a major role in the colonial-style counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan, agreeing to the deployment of large numbers of Canadian troops in Kandahar province beginning in 2006.

Or rather, Harper's accusations would be laughable did they not exemplify the current government's readiness to trash traditional bourgeois democratic political norms and resort to the politics of fear and provocation. Like the Republicans and US President George Bush, Canada's new Conservative Party, an amalgam of the Progressive Conservatives and the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance, routinely use smears to intimidate their critics and imply that opposition to any aspect of the their right-wing agenda is semi-treasonous.

If the Conservatives are ready to tar their official bourgeois opponents as pro-Taliban, one must ask what type of reactionary methods they would employ if confronted with a genuine working-class challenge to their assault on public and social services and democratic rights, as well as their predatory foreign policy.

Much of the media and the Liberals, Bloc Quebecois, and social-democrats of the NDP have accused O'Connor of incompetence and laziness. In fact, the actions of O'Connor are testament to the callous disregard of the Canadian political establishment and military for the fate of prisoners of war (POW) apprehended and handed over to Afghan authorities by the CAF.

While the Liberals are now criticizing the minority Conservative government on the Afghan POW issue, under the Chretien-Martin Liberal government the CAF long maintained that Afghan prisoners were not legally entitled to the legal protections accorded by the Geneva Conventions.

Canada failed to insist on even the minimal guarantees the Afghan government has given other countries concerning the treatment of POWs. Britain and the Netherlands, for example, demanded that they be given a means to track the fate of prisoners

they handed over to Kabul and formal assurances those prisoners would not be tortured or otherwise mistreated.

In a patent attempt to defuse the POW issue and mounting public opposition to the CAF's participation in a bloody counter-insurgency campaign on behalf of the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai, O'Connor and CAF head Rick Hillier traveled to Kandahar at the beginning of last week. But even this public relations exercise exposed the government's "couldn't care less attitude" toward the fate of the Afghan detainees.

The ostensible purpose of O'Connor's trip was to meet with Abdul Qadar Noorzai, the head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). But Canadian officials had not even bothered to make sure Noorzai would be available to meet with the Defence Minister. (Noorzai was in a different part of Afghanistan when O'Connor's aides said their boss would be meeting with him.)

After O'Connor finally did meet with Noorzai, he reported with satisfaction, "He's really dedicated to human rights and he was saying he hopes that over time in Afghanistan they'll get to our high standards" Noorzai, however, told reporters that his organization could in fact do very little since they are not allowed access to prisons, have next to no staff and much of the country is too dangerous to enter.

Public attention came to be focused on the CAF's treatment of Afghan POWs due to questions raised by the *Globe and Mail* and a law professor at the University of Ottawa, Amir Attaran. After the military tried to stonewall his efforts to find out what has happened to the Afghans it has captured, Dr. Attaran, through some digging, found evidence of suspicious injuries inflicted on three Afghan prisoners in CAF custody.

As a result of Attaran's exposures, the military and government agencies have been forced to launch four investigations into the Afghan POW issue, including the treatment of those whom Dr. Attaran fears were abused by CAF personnel.

Since that time, the minority Conservative government has stepped up its public relations campaign to rally popular support for the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, touting it as means to facilitate the rebuilding of the country's devastated civilian infrastructure and as a mission to bring democracy to the Afghan people.

In fact, as Prime Minister Harper has made clear on other occasions, the CAF intervention in Afghanistan is about asserting Canada's place in the world and specifically about securing closer relations with the US. The CAF intervention allows the Pentagon to concentrate its forces on the Iraq occupation.

As for bringing democracy to the Afghani people, these claims are belied by the brutal methods that the CAF, and US and NATO forces are using in their campaign to pacify southern Afghanistan.

Recent polls show that, contrary to the claims of the Canadian and US governments, the Afghan population is increasingly hostile to the NATO occupation. This is not surprising given the thoroughly corrupt character of the Afghan government, which includes and supports large numbers of recognized war criminals, drug lords and Islamic fundamentalists who are now, directly or indirectly, shielded by the NATO forces.

According to a report released by the Senlis Council think tank

and based on a poll of 17,000 southern Afghan men conducted by fifty researchers this month, "the widespread perception of locals is that the international community [the NATO countries and their armed forces] is not helping to improve their lives." The majority are worried about feeding their families and 27 percent are ready to openly express their support for the Taliban.

In a related development, late last week it was revealed that the Department of National Defence (DND) is opposing an inquiry launched last month by the Military Police Complaints Commission (MPCC), a government-created civilian watchdog agency, into the Canadian military's treatment of its Afghan prisoners.

The MPCC investigation arises from a complaint lodged by the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) and Amnesty International (AI) Canada. It is looking into the cases of at least 18 prisoners whose fate is either unknown or in question. The military's opposition to the MPCC probe is entirely in line with its efforts to block any public review of its treatment of, and policy towards, Afghan POWs.

In its latest maneuver, the DND sent a letter to the MPCC questioning why it had accepted the BCCLA-AI complaint and announcing that it may seek a legal opinion over whether the MPCC has jurisdiction in this matter. It is entirely possible that the challenge now under judicial review will succeed in halting the MPCC investigation.

The four inquiries now underway are looking into the treatment of prisoners who were handed over to Afghan police and military over the past year, at least three of whom can't be accounted for by Afghan authorities and may well have been "disappeared" while in custody.

These revelations have cast a harsh light on the real nature of the mission in Afghanistan, even as the Harper and his minority Conservative government are gearing up for a possible federal election this spring.

No one should believe that the Canadian government was not aware of the consequences of its policies regarding prisoners in Afghanistan or that it is merely a matter of incompetence on the part of a few individuals. Such policies are consistent with the overriding project of the current government to more forcefully assert the interests of Canadian capital on the world stage—a shift that requires habituating its citizens to the violent realities of war.

Notwithstanding expressions of concern and regret from O'Connor and others within the Harper government, one can be sure that, behind closed doors, there are powerful voices within ruling circles who are saying "get used to it." The Conservatives have made clear their intention to disabuse those who still hold on to the myth of Canada as a "peacekeeping" nation and have committed billions in new funding to further this country's "national interests" by military means.



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