Six more Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan

Keith Jones
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Six Canadian soldiers and an interpreter were killed in Afghanistan Wednesday, when the armored-vehicle they were traveling in some 20 kilometers southwest of Kandahar was blown up by an improvised explosive device (IED). The deaths bring to 66 the number of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel killed in Afghanistan—a fatality total second only to that of the US among the 37 states that have participated in the US-led, NATO-backed occupation of Afghanistan.

All but seven of the CAF deaths have come since the summer of 2005, when Canadian troops were deployed to Kandahar and assumed a leading role in the counter-insurgency campaign in support of the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai. There were 31 Canadian troop deaths in 2006 and thus far in 2007 22 soldiers have been killed, nineteen of them by IEDs.

A CAF spokesman claimed that the rising number of IED deaths is proof that Canadian troops have the Taliban on the run. “They are incapable of success, they are incapable of winning,” declaimed Lt.-Colonel Jean Trudel, the CAF’s chief of staff in Kandahar. “The fact that we’ve lost a lot of soldiers from IED attacks indicates a success, in the sense that our conventional operations have succeeded against the Taliban.”

Wednesday’s fatalities came in Panjwai District, an area in which the CAF claims to have largely rooted out the anti-government insurgency. Trudel’s bluster aside, the CAF is perturbed that the Taliban succeeded in taking out an RG-31 Nyala, a patrol vehicle specifically designed to withstand landmines and considered by the Canadian military to be its best-armored troop-carrier.

There is growing unease within the Canadian elite that the CAF fatalities, along with the large number of civilian deaths caused by indiscriminate NATO bombing and the corruption and appalling human rights record of the Afghan government, are sapping public support for the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan.

A Strategic Counsel poll taken this May found that 57 percent of Canadians oppose the CAF mission, while just 36 percent favor it. Moreover, three times more Canadians strongly oppose the mission (28 percent) than are strongly supportive of it (10 percent).

The neo-conservative *National Post* and the liberal *Toronto Star* both responded to the latest CAF fatalities by publishing editorials emphatically supporting the CAF intervention in Afghanistan. Both editorials began by denouncing federal New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jack Layton for reiterating his party’s call for the CAF to withdraw from the counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan.

Echoing previous comments by Conservative Prime Minster Stephen Harper, the *Post* accused Layton of “handing the Taliban a propaganda victory.” The *Star* responded to Layton’s assertion that the CAF deployment to southern Afghanistan is the “wrong mission” for Canada, by declaring, “No. Canada is on the right mission, costly as it is ...”

The *Star* and the *National Post*, arguably the newspapers most closely identified respectively with the Liberal and Conservative parties, presented similar arguments in seeking to muster support for the war: Afghanistan is the frontline in the international war on terror; terminating the current CAF mission before February 2009 would be to dishonor the Canadian war dead and betray Canada’s allies; the Canadian military expedition is a humanitarian venture, aimed at building democracy and improving the lives of the Afghan people.

That these arguments dovetail with those the Bush administration has given for its wars of conquest in Afghanistan and Iraq is not accidental, for the motivations animating the CAF intervention are no less predatory, even if Canada’s corporate and political elite must necessarily have more modest ambitions.

Canada’s expanding military intervention in Afghanistan has had two principal aims: First, to court favor with the Bush administration and the US ruling elite by enabling the US to concentrate more of its military resources on combating the insurgency in Iraq; Second and no less importantly, to assert the Canadian bourgeoisie’s interests on the global stage, including in the oil-rich Central Asian region.

In addition to actively seeking and securing a major role in the Afghan war, the CAF has secured a powerful role in the Afghan government, with Canadian military and government representatives working closely with Hamid Karzai’s senior staff and ministers. (See “The ‘Canadian Ministers’ of Hamid Karzai’s Afghan government”). Canadian overseas military interventions, declared CAF head General Rick Hillier, in a 2006 interview, need “to have sufficient credibility that [they give] us the opportunity to get leadership appointments and to influence and shape regions and populations in accordance with our interests and in accordance with our values.”

It was the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin that initiated the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan and later tasked the CAF with taking a leading role in the colonial-style counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan. But it is the

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current minority Conservative government that has most clearly enunciated the determination of Canada's elite to be a force in world geo-politics and to expand and deploy the CAF toward that end. During the 2006 federal election campaign Prime Minster Stephen Harper said he aims to build up the Canadian military to the point that the world's major powers take notice. He has termed the CAF fatalities in Afghanistan the price Canada must pay to be a global player.

Harper and his ministers have repeatedly signaled that they intend for Canadian troops to remain in Afghanistan well beyond February 2009, when the current CAF mission is slated to terminate, and have repeatedly proclaimed that the Canadian military will in all likelihood be waging war overseas in Afghanistan and elsewhere for years to come.

In a speech Thursday in Halifax outlining a $3.1 billion plan to refurbish a dozen frigates, Harper stressed that the refitting will enable Canada to project power overseas and take the leadership role in NATO or other multi-nation military operations. "More than ever," declared the prime minister, "our Halifax-class frigates will be giant, floating command posts, standing up for Canada at home and abroad. ... One of the most important upgrades to our frigates will be enhanced command and control centers, giving Canadian vessels the ability to lead operations, not just participate in them."

Harper claimed that the mounting CAF casualties in Afghanistan "weigh very heavily on my mind," yet reaffirmed his government's commitment to prosecuting the war. "The government," said Harper, "has been very clear about the duration of this mission."

Harper's militarist course has been strongly supported by Canada's corporate elite. But popular opposition to the CAF intervention in Afghanistan and to the Bush administration are key factors in the Conservatives' failure, despite favorable press coverage and a federal budget designed to curry favor with the electorate, to muster sufficient support to risk precipitating an election and seeking a parliamentary majority.

Some press pundits have seized on a recent statement by Harper that the CAF intervention in Afghanistan will be extended past February 2009 only if there is a strong parliamentary consensus in support of such an extension to argue that the prime minister is being forced to bow to popular will and that it is now all but certain Canadian troops will be coming home in 2009.

In reality, Harper's statement was a smokescreen, meant to defuse popular opposition to the war and to give the Conservatives the option of saying during an election campaign that they will only extend the mission with parliament's or even the opposition's approval, and then, once they have secured a parliamentary majority, declaring this constitutes a popular mandate for extending and expanding the CAF's role in the Afghan war. Alternately, Harper may be calculating that he can win the support of the Liberals or a section of them, whatever their current posturing. In May 2006, the Liberals split on a parliamentary motion endorsing a 2-year extension of the CAF mission, with the current deputy Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, leading a quarter of the Liberal caucus in voting for the motion. Even those who voted against, including Dion, said that they did so for procedural reasons.

The opposition parties, meanwhile, continue to try to calibrate their statements on Afghanistan to appeal both to the corporate elite, whose interests they uphold and which is strongly supportive of the CAF intervention, and the populace, which is increasingly opposed.

Both the official opposition Liberals and the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois have condemned the NDP's call for the withdrawal of Canadian troops as "irresponsible," while saying that they are opposed to an extension of the CAF mission in south Afghanistan beyond February, 2009. On Wednesday, Liberal leader Stephane Dion called on the government to formally inform NATO that the CAF mission will end 19 months from now since the opposition parties will not agree to an extension. "It's now we should send this message," said Dion. "As long as we are unclear, they [the member states of NATO] will think we will stay."

Prominent supporters of the CAF mission have attacked Dion's stand, saying most of the members states of NATO have repeatedly balked at deploying troops in the south of Afghanistan and that a Canadian pullout in 2009 will prove disastrous for the counter-insurgency campaign and could increase strains within NATO to the breaking point.

Canada's social-democratic party, the NDP supported the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, including the deployment to Kandahar, for almost five full years. Then in late August 2006, in a bid to refurbish its tattered "left" credentials and drum up votes, the NDP sought to recast itself as anti-war party, by calling for the CAF to withdraw from current counter-insurgency mission. Subsequently party leader Jack Layton made clear that the NDP is not ready to bring down the minority Conservative government over the Afghan war issue—notwithstanding the attempts of Harper and the Canadian elite to use the intervention in Afghanistan to politically and militarily lay the groundwork for the CAF to participate in future wars.

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