

Washington urges Canada to wage war in Afghanistan beyond 2011

John Mackay, Keith Jones**13 December 2008**

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has urged Canada to continue its leading role in the Afghan war beyond 2011. Canada has deployed close to 3,000 troops, tanks, and, in recent weeks, an air wing, comprised of combat helicopters and drones, to the south Afghan province of Kandahar, which is a center of the insurgency against the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Gates' call for Canada to have a major military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2011 clearly reflects the views of the incoming Democratic Party administration of Barack Obama. Gates, who was named by US President George W. Bush to replace Donald Rumsfeld in late 2006, has been selected by President-elect Obama as his defense secretary. Obama's choice of Gates was a brazen rebuke to the tens of millions who voted for him based on the false promise that he would bring "change," and a further signal to the US elite that his administration will continue the predatory foreign policy of Bush. Indeed, Obama made the need for a US-NATO troop "surge" in Afghanistan and the expansion of the war into Pakistan one of his signature foreign policy positions during the presidential election campaign.

Speaking at the NATO military base in Kandahar on Thursday, Gates declared, "Proportionally, none have worked harder or sacrificed more than the Canadians. They have been outstanding partners for us, and all I can tell you, as has been the case for a very long time, the longer we can have Canadian soldiers as our partners, the better it is."

In response to Gates' remarks, a spokesman for Canada's minority Conservative government—which averted defeat on a House of Commons' non-confidence motion this week only due to the extraordinary and patently unconstitutional decision of the Governor-General to prorogue parliament—claimed that there is no possibility Canada will revisit Prime Minister Stephen Harper's September election campaign announcement that the Canadian Armed Forces' mission in southern Afghanistan will not be extended beyond the end of 2011. "The minister, the prime minister and the government have been very clear that parliament has spoken on this, that our mission was over in 2011," said a spokesman for Defence Minister Peter MacKay.

No credence should be given to the Conservatives' pledge that Canada will have no more than a token military presence in Afghanistan after 2011. With the support of the official opposition Liberals, the Conservative government has twice expanded and extended the CAF counter-insurgency mission in south

Afghanistan and done so in the face of massive public opposition to Canada waging war on behalf of the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.

As it stands, Canada's government has committed the CAF to playing a major role in the Afghanistan war for a further three years. This will come at considerable cost—cost in the form of Afghan lives, including those of Afghan civilians, more CAF casualties and fatalities, and money that could have been used to meet pressing social needs. In October, a report tabled by parliamentary budget officer Kevin Page calculated that the cost of the Canadian mission if extended to 2011 could be as high as \$18.1 billion.

Gates' appeal for the CAF to remain in Afghanistan past 2011 was made six days after the death toll of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan reached the symbolic and politically significant milestone of 100. The CAF, it should be noted, has suffered far more fatalities in Afghanistan than in any mission it has undertaken since the Korean War. Proportionately the CAF has suffered the highest number of fatalities of any of the foreign forces occupying Afghanistan.

Three CAF troops were killed instantly December 5, when their vehicle struck a large roadside improvised explosive device, leaving a nine-meter-deep crater in a road just west of Kandahar city. All the soldiers were from the Petawawa military base in eastern Ontario, a base that has absorbed one quarter of Canada's military fatalities in Afghanistan.

Task Force Kandahar commander Brigadier General Denis Thompson, the CAF top brass, and the much of the media sought to downplay the significance of the CAF death toll reaching 100.

"You have good days and you have bad days," said Thompson. "It just so happens that today was a particularly bad day." Thompson went on to warn that more fatalities are expected in coming months as the US-NATO occupation force intensifies offensive operations. Toward that end, the US has deployed additional troops to Kandahar and is preparing to further increase its troop numbers in Afghanistan by 7,000 by mid-2009.

CAF head General Walt Natynczyk's remarks were in a like vein. "We've got to suck it up and get on with it," declared Natynczyk, who was one of the CAF officers embedded in the US forces that invaded and occupied Iraq.

Christie Blatchford, a *Globe and Mail* columnist who has been an unabashed advocate of the Afghan war, admitted in her column the day after the soldiers' deaths that "News organizations have

been baldly planning for it for months, and perhaps fairly so, because as one of my editors once told me, there must be measures of some sort, and this is a natural one." The corporate media has enthusiastically supported the war, thus it was to be expected that its coverage promoted the reactionary claim that the fatalities are a necessary, even noble sacrifice.

The latest Canadian military deaths brought a rude end to a period of nearly three months in which no new CAF fatalities were reported. The evidence suggests, however, that violence in Kandahar continues to break records.

The *Globe and Mail* recently reported statistics showing a 62 percent increase in insurgent attacks in Kandahar province as of the end of November 2008, with 972 attacks compared with 630 in the same period last year. The ongoing attacks were evidenced by a separate incident about an hour prior to the deadly December 5 explosion, in which two other Canadian soldiers on foot patrol in the Zhari district west of Kandahar city were injured as a result of a bomb, one losing both legs below the knee.

Last week, Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette, who is chief spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, revealed that the total number of IED's in Afghanistan has increased about 50 percent this year as compared with the same period last year. Blanchette also warned that the arrival next year of thousands more US troops in southern Afghanistan will mean a higher level of violence. "There is a risk that it gets worse before it gets better," said Blanchette. "When you have more troops you have more interface between the insurgents and the forces from ISAF. This is pretty much bound to happen. We will see more kinetic activity."

A poll conducted by Angus Reid Strategies in November revealed that the war in Afghanistan remains highly unpopular with Canadians. Fifty-three percent of respondents wanted Canadian troops to be withdrawn before the government's proposed 2011 withdrawal date, while an additional 33 percent wanted most troops removed by 2011. Only 7 percent favored keeping Canadian troops in Afghanistan after 2011.

If the Canadian political establishment has so brazenly disregarded popular anti-war sentiment, it is because it knows that revival of the CAF as an instrument of war and the adoption of a more "robust" foreign policy has the strong support of Canada's corporate elite, which calculates that Canada must have a forceful, global presence if it is to be assured a place at the table in the ongoing great-power struggle for resources and geopolitical advantage. Harper, in particular, has identified his government with the war and with a massive program to expand and rearm Canada's military. Both, however, were initiated under the previous Liberal governments.

The recent political upheavals in Ottawa have underscored the complicity in the war of Canada's social-democratic party (the NDP), the Quebec nationalist Bloc Québécois (BQ), and, for that matter, the Green Party. All three parties have supported an accord under which the Liberals and NDP are to form a Liberal-led coalition government supported from the "outside" by the BQ for at least 18 months. In so doing, all three parties agreed that the current bipartisan Liberal-Conservative agreement to extend the Afghan mission will be maintained. In other words, they have

agreed to participate in, or support, a government committed to Canada waging war in Afghanistan for at least another three years.

The NDP's embrace of the Afghan war, while not surprising given its long record of subservience to the Canadian bourgeoisie, was nonetheless particularly striking. "The NDP is putting aside its differences that have existed historically with the Liberals on such issues as Afghanistan," declared Quebec NDP MP Thomas Mulcair. When the former Liberal government of Paul Martin redeployed the CAF to the more volatile southern region of Afghanistan, from Kabul, they did so with the full support of the NDP. In August 2006, as mounting casualties focused increasing attention on the brutality and colonialist nature of the Afghanistan mission, the NDP issued a call for Canadian forces to be withdrawn by February 2007.

NDP leader Jack Layton was quick to water down this call, specifying that the call for withdrawal was being made only because the intervention was "not the right mission for Canada," was "not clearly defined" and lacked an "exit strategy," and that Canadian troops should be withdrawn in a manner that did not have an adverse impact on US-NATO operations. Invoking the "peacekeeping" tradition that has long served as the cover for the projection of Canadian military force and geo-political influence in pursuit of self and power, Layton at that time went on to criticize the Afghanistan intervention as "unbalanced in that it focuses on counterinsurgency and not peacekeeping."

During the campaign for the October 14, 2008 election the NDP said that it stood for the withdrawal of Canadian troops by February 2009. In its electioneering, however, it dramatically downplayed the issue of the war. This was done out of concern to winning sections of the Canadian ruling elite over to the view that the NDP can be trusted with a share of power. The latest about-face effected by the NDP in an attempt to become the junior partners of the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, further underscores that the NDP's calls for an "independent" Canadian foreign policy have nothing to do with a genuine opposition to imperialist war.



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