

# Three more Canadian troops killed in Afghanistan

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Three Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel were killed late Tuesday in an area of Kandahar province that till now had been largely untouched by the insurgency against the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and Hamid Karzai's puppet government in Kabul.

The three were killed when a roadside bomb rocked the armored vehicle in which they were traveling. They were returning to the CAF base in Kandahar after defusing an improvised explosive device, or IED, in Arghandab district.

With their deaths, 111 CAF personnel have been killed in the Afghan war. The vast majority of the fatalities—including 32 in 2008—have come since the summer of 2005, when the CAF assumed a leading role in the US-NATO colonial-style counter-insurgency war by deploying to Kandahar, a traditional Taliban stronghold.

Among the occupying forces, only the US with 661 fatalities and Britain with 149 have suffered greater losses than the CAF. Fully 10 percent of the 1,095 US-NATO war-dead have come from the CAF, and as a percentage of troops deployed—there are currently 2,700 Canadian troops in Afghanistan—the CAF's casualties are far and away the largest.

Recent weeks have seen a significant increase in the intensity and geographic breadth of the insurgency. According to a *Globe and Mail* report based on interviews with Canadian officers, the number of insurgent attacks across Afghanistan has fluctuated between 125 and 150 a week since the beginning of February, a level not reached last year until May—that is, after the end of the harsh Afghan winter.

As for Arghandab district, the site of Tuesday's attack, it had until very recently been considered by the CAF to be effectively pacified. But like the rest of Kandahar province, it has recently experienced a spike in insurgent activity. "Specifically, we've had four IED finds and one strike [in Arghandab] in the last two weeks," CAF Major Robert Dunn told a press briefing Wednesday. "What is telling about this is we're moving from a winter campaign to a summer campaign or spring offensive."

News of the latest CAF deaths broke only hours before the Conservative government released the *Third Quarterly Report on Canada's Engagement in Afghanistan*.

The Conservatives have championed Canada's leading role in the Afghan War. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has repeatedly claimed that the Conservative's "robust" foreign policy has once more made Canada a "player" in world affairs. With the support of the Official Opposition Liberals, the Conservatives have twice extended the Canadian deployment to Kandahar, which is now scheduled to end only in December 2011, almost three years hence.

The *Quarterly Report* claimed that between October and December 2008, important progress had been made in meeting several of the military, political, and developmental benchmarks the government has established for Canada's Afghan intervention. In presenting the report to parliament, Stockwell Day, the International Trade Minister and Chair of the Cabinet Committee on Afghanistan, said that "even though you...have a rising level of conflict, you can still have a rising level of progress on some key areas."

The report conceded that "insurgent violence in Afghanistan, and specifically in Kandahar...intensified during" the quarter under review, but argued that one of the reasons that the CAF suffered more casualties in 2008 than any previous year was that it has become more aggressive in pursuing the insurgents.

The claim of progress notwithstanding, the overall picture the report paints is of a growing crisis for the occupation forces and the Karzai government and of a dramatic increase in the suffering of the Afghan people.

"Security conditions in Afghanistan," said the report, "remained especially dangerous and by some measures deteriorated during the quarter.

"The humanitarian situation worsened in Afghanistan, and the international community assisted Afghan communities (particularly in the northern provinces) to prepare for severe winter conditions and food shortages."

While the report noted that support for occupation is waning in Kandahar, it made no reference to an important factor in this, the large civilian casualties resulting from US-NATO operations.

The Canadian government believes that the US-NATO sponsored government in Kabul must at some point reach a political accommodation with sections of the anti-government militias—Prime Minister Stephen Harper himself said last week that "we're never

going to defeat the insurgency." But the *Quarterly Report* conceded that at present there is little prospect of Kabul being able to broaden its support through a combination of force and enticements.

It declared, "No prospects for early and meaningful reconciliation were apparent during the quarter. Deteriorating security left little reason to expect insurgents to renounce warfare in significant numbers, and the government seemed unlikely to pursue vigorous negotiations before reducing the violence and reclaiming some position of strength."

Alarmed about the growth of the insurgency and the isolation of the corrupt and violent Karzai regime, US President Barack Obama has ordered the deployment of an additional 17,000 US troops to Afghanistan.

But this is clearly meant to be only an initial step in a vast intensification of the Afghan War.

During last year's presidential campaign, Obama emphasized the need for the US to refocus its military and diplomatic forces to crush the Afghan insurgency, voiced support for an Afghan troop "surge," and emphasized the need to broaden the war to Pakistan's border areas.

The Obama administration is currently conducting a comprehensive review of US strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with a view to refining plans for a dramatic intensification of the war and spreading it to include ever more completely the border regions of Pakistan. Already, US forces are routinely carrying out missile strikes in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and US officials have reportedly taken to referring to the two countries, which they conceive of as a single war theater, as "Afpak."

Washington's review of its Afghan war strategy is supposed to be completed in the next few weeks, so that when Obama attends a NATO heads of state and government summit in early April, he can press for other NATO states to join the US in increasing their Afghan troop deployments and, above all, to commit to mounting counter-insurgency operations. Canada has long supported Washington's claim that many major NATO countries, including Germany, Italy and to a lesser extent France, have "shirked" their share of the fighting and thereby jeopardized the alliance's future.

When Obama visited Ottawa last month, he, to the delight of the Canadian elite, repeatedly praised Canada for its leading role in the Afghan war and repeatedly denied that he was asking Harper for Canada either to send more troops to Afghanistan or extend the current CAF mission beyond 2011.

The Canadian political establishment, however, is well aware that such a request will be forthcoming. As attested by the repeated bipartisan support for the war from its two principal parties—the Liberals and Conservatives—the Canadian bourgeoisie has seized on the war as a key means of asserting its claim to a significant role in world geo-politics. To its dismay, however, the public, notwithstanding a vast effort by the corporate media to whip up militarism and nationalism, remains massively opposed to Canada's role in occupying and waging war in an impoverished country

thousand of miles away.

Cognizant of the gulf between the interests of the ruling class and popular sentiment, both Harper and Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff have repeatedly affirmed their support for the CAF playing a leading role in the war until 2012, while carefully leaving open the door to a substantial CAF presence in Afghanistan thereafter.

Both parties are also remaining mum about CAF plans to stage a troop "surge" later this year when fighting is expected to escalate in conjunction with the staging of a presidential election. According to a report in the February 9 *National Post*, the CAF, by extending and overlapping troop rotations, could have as many as 4,000 troops in Afghanistan in the run-up to the August election.

Just as duplicitous is the role of the two other opposition parties, the social-democratic New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois. Both claimed to have opposed the extension of the CAF combat mission in Afghanistan past February 2009, but in early December they agreed to prop up a Liberal-led coalition government that was pledged to wage the war through 2011.

And while the NDP has ostensibly "returned" to an anti-war position, this is a transparent ploy in the face of a backlash among many of its supporters. The NDP has said nothing of substance about the war for months—apart, that is, from leader Jack Layton's praise of Obama's preparations to intensify the war.

In a February 19 open letter to Obama, timed to coincide with his visit to Ottawa, Layton declared, "We support your call for a full strategic review of the mission in Afghanistan and the adoption of a much more comprehensive approach that respects human rights and places dialogue at the centre of a comprehensive peace process." Thus, Layton exalts a US president about to greatly intensify the slaughter and suffering of the Afghan people.



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