

Bringing Afghanistan home:

# Canada's military launched operation to "shape" opinion amid pandemic

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Based explicitly on methods that it had used during the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan, Canada's military developed and began to implement an "information operations" plan as part of its initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The plan, according to a leaked Canadian Armed Forces' document, was aimed at "shaping" and "exploiting information," with the aim of deterring civil unrest. It included plans for military personnel to broadcast government-approved propaganda over loudspeakers and by establishing temporary radio stations; to carry out "village assessments" across the country of the potential for unrest; and meet with community leaders and religious officials.

The "information operations" plan was activated by the military's Canadian Joint Operations Command, which is a unified command centre for army, air force, and naval operations within Canada, on April 8. This was just two weeks after the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Jonathan Vance, had announced the deployment of some 24,000 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel and reservists in response to the pandemic.

The information operation was temporarily suspended five days later, amid conflicts among military officials as to the role the armed forces should play in creating and disseminating state propaganda. However, only on May 1 did Vance order the operation scrapped. Despite Vance's decision, "several" military sources were so troubled by the operation and its anti-democratic implications that they reached out to the *Ottawa Citizen* to express their concerns.

Military officials acknowledged in interviews with the *Ottawa Citizen* that the plan was about maintaining control over the population and preparing for civil unrest. Asked by the *Citizen* if the army expected riots or civil disobedience to occur, Rear Admiral Brian Santarpia, who was the Canadian Joint Operations Command's chief of staff, at the time, declared, "That was our worst-case scenario...Our worst-case scenario for COVID was that the first wave would be so much worse and that some of the 24,000 people we had would have to be called out in aid to civil power."

Several military officials said the plan drew on tactics used by

the CAF in Afghanistan to convince villagers to back the US-led occupation rather than the Taliban. Canada's military has officially denied this.

The planning document seen by the *Citizen* bluntly identified strengthening trust in the government and suppressing social opposition as key objectives. Desired outcomes included, "Canadian public is deterred from participating in Civil Disobedience," and "Canadian public compliance with suppression measures is reinforced."

Although Vance put a stop to the operation, Santarpia left no doubt that the military intends to mount similar propaganda and intelligence initiatives to "deter" and, if needed, suppress social unrest in the future. "We will develop and grow this capability over the coming years," Santarpia told the *Citizen*, "as it's really important at both home and abroad,"

These revelations, which have prompted an internal inquiry, fully confirm the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* about the real reason for the Trudeau Liberal government's commitment of about a quarter of the CAF's total troop strength to its anti-COVID-19 deployment. Calling attention to Vance's appeal to CAF personnel to be on a "war footing," we warned in an article published May 8, "From the standpoint of the ruling class, the enemies the military will need to 'fight' are at home as well as abroad. Leading bourgeois publications, including Britain's *Financial Times*, have raised the spectre of the pandemic producing social unrest on a vast scale, driven not least by the huge bailouts already given to big business and the devastating economic downturn that is accelerating internationally" (see: "Why is Canada's ruling elite deploying the military amid the COVID-19 pandemic?").

Motivated by this fear, a small military unit associated with the troops that were deployed to long-term care facilities in Ontario in May was tasked with gathering intelligence on oppositional sentiment among the population. A Precision Intelligence Team (PIT) trolled through posts on social media about relevant news topics. Posts gathered by the team included expressions of concern over the catastrophic conditions in Ontario's long-term care facilities. The team passed the information that it gathered to the right-wing provincial

government of Doug Ford along with the warning that it represented a “negative reaction” from the public.

The CAF has also had to order an investigation into the PIT unit’s spying. But top CAF officials have defended it. “We don’t constrain that sort of initiative,” Santarpia told the *Ottawa Citizen*, because “the young folks who are doing it are going to surprise us every time with something that turns out to be more relevant than any of us thought it would be.”

The armed forces’ push to employ at home methods it developed while waging a counter-insurgency war amid a largely hostile Afghan population has been all but ignored by the mainstream media. The only substantial articles to appear are the three penned by the journalist who broke the story—the *Ottawa Citizen*’s well-connected defence correspondent, David Pugliese.

For its part, the Liberal government has sought to downplay the affair. The Defence Ministry claimed that Minister of Defence Harjit Sajjan was never briefed on the military’s “information operations,” which a spokesperson labeled “mistake.” Vance also claimed not to have known about the operation until he intervened to shut it down.

If these statements are true, they raise a host of questions, all of which are carefully avoided in the accounts of the military’s activities provided so far. Does the military have a free hand to conduct whatever operations it deems fit within Canada without government authorization? If the government had no idea about the military’s plan, who took the decision to deploy soldiers in accordance with the “information operations” plan? Did the “worst-case scenario” that purportedly informed the operation include plans for the military to assume any government functions in the event of the breakdown of “law and order,” and, if so, which ones and under whose authority?

In Canada, as in all the other major imperialist powers, the past two decades have seen a pronounced turn toward militarism, a vast expansion of the power and reach of the national-security apparatus, increasing criminalization of social opposition, and a turn toward authoritarian forms of rule.

Since it participated in the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, Canada has been engaged in almost perpetual war in alliance with Washington. This includes, the Canadian Armed Forces’ decade-long leading role in the Afghan counter-insurgency war, its participation in the 2004 overthrow of Haiti’s elected president and the 2011 “regime-change” war in Libya, and its operations, ongoing since 2014, in Iraq and Syria. Canada is also deeply integrated into the US military-strategic offensives against Russia and China.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper celebrated Canada as a “warrior nation.” Trudeau’s Liberals have dressed up Canada’s foreign policy in a more “humanitarian” guise. But the CAF’s foreign deployments have continued to expand and the defence budget to swell, with a more than 70 percent increase to be implemented between 2017 and 2026.

All this has boosted the political prominence of the military

and nourished the idea within sections of the ruling elite and the national-security establishment in particular that military force provides a way to overcome mounting and increasingly intractable problems. In February, just before the pandemic erupted in Canada, the Conservatives, supported by much of big business, were baying for the military to be deployed to quell the railway blockades in support of the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs.

The most noxious expression of the ruling elite’s promotion of militarism and reaction is the growth of far-right and even fascistic forces within the military, as was revealed by the failed attempt of a CAF reservist to assassinate Prime Minister Justin Trudeau last month (see: “Further details emerge on far-right views of Canadian army reservist who tried to kill Trudeau”).

The rise of militarism and authoritarian forms of rule has occurred under conditions of a dramatic increase in social inequality. Based on data from 2016, the Parliamentary Budget Office recently revealed that the richest 1 percent of Canadians hold over one quarter of the country’s wealth—roughly equal to the share owned by the poorest 80 percent. Protecting the staggering levels of wealth held by Canada’s super-rich oligarchy under conditions of such glaring inequality is increasingly incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

The coronavirus pandemic has deepened the social chasm that separates the capitalist elite and the mass of working people, and accelerated the turn towards authoritarian forms of rule. Right-wing governments in Ontario and Alberta have passed emergency powers legislation that allows them to override collective agreements, ban protests, and punish workers who resist the reckless back-to-work campaign. These powers are all aimed at ratcheting up the exploitation of the working class to pay for the multi-billion dollar bailout of the large corporations, banks, and financial oligarchy organized by the Trudeau government in collaboration with the trade unions and NDP.



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