

## It's Worth The Sacrifice

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By Ahmed Rashid

NATO must move into Kandahar in force, says AHMED RASHID. Any sign of weakness will only bolster the Taliban

As Canada prepares to send additional troops to southern Afghanistan in the aftermath of a string of suicide bombings in Kandahar province and the death of diplomat Glyn Berry (whom I knew well), Canadians have to expect more casualties and heartache for their commitment to the Afghans. The situation on the ground is likely to get worse before it gets better, but, unlike Iraq, Western forces have the overwhelming support of the Afghan population.

The Canadian deployment lies at the heart of several contradictions. It is part of a major NATO deployment to the south, a result of the Americans' insistence on pulling some 4,000 troops out of Afghanistan by the spring. Unfortunately, that pullout has nothing to do with conditions in Kabul and everything to do with congressional elections in November.

At the same time, NATO countries made a commitment to Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. Western promises that they would not abandon the Afghans and that they would help to reconstruct their country and stave off any renewed threat from Islamic extremists took a back seat to the war in Iraq. The insurgency in Afghanistan is much worse now because of that neglect.

Today, NATO has as much of a responsibility to Afghanistan as the Americans do. But some NATO countries, such as the Netherlands, are balking at the prospect of having to carry out not just peacekeeping but also combat duties, as the south is the epicentre of the Taliban/al-Qaeda resurgence.

Afghanistan is not Iraq. For every layer of lies, subterfuge and lack of legality that we now know constituted Washington's *raison d'être* for its invasion of Iraq, there was a parallel layer of transparency, international legality and massive public support when the United Nations Security Council and NATO sanctioned the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001.

The proof lies in the fact that, five years after the defeat of the Taliban, the majority of Afghans still support the presence of NATO troops in their country. Contrast that with Iraq.

Thanks to the international community, Afghanistan has made dramatic strides in creating a political infrastructure. In short order, Afghanistan has an elected president, a democratic constitution voted in through a national consensus, an upper and lower house of parliament elected in a largely fair electoral process and elected governing councils in all 34 provinces.

Ostensibly, Afghanistan can boast of a political system that is far more legitimate than what exists in neighboring Pakistan, Iran or the five Central Asian republics. These gains in one of the most destitute but strategically important countries in the world are worth protecting.

Yet, nobody doubts there are problems. As much as 30 per cent of the parliament is filled with warlords or their nominees and drug smugglers. The international community has not given anywhere near the kind of resources it has committed to Iraq -- in Kabul, frigid in winter, there is electricity only every third day in some areas. The government of Hamid Karzai, meanwhile, has yet to make the kind of tough decisions needed to get the country moving.

But no advances can be expected with the current state of insecurity and mayhem that exists in the six provinces of southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban are now killing teachers and girl students in a bid to shut down the few social sector projects such as schools and hospitals that exist.

Last year, the Taliban/al-Qaeda insurgency claimed the lives of 1,500 Afghans and 90 American soldiers. For the first time, a wave of suicide bombers -- emulating their terrorist brothers in Iraq -- have hit urban centers in Kabul and Kandahar. The terrorist coalition has created an effective strategy, striking at the NATO contingents precisely to try to create a wave of public revulsion at home against further troop deployments.

Kandahar province was the birthplace of the Taliban movement in 1994 that arose among the Pashtun tribes as a result of the rampant civil war and warlordism that followed the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Then, there was support for the Taliban; today, after tasting seven years of Taliban rule, there is none, even amongst Kandahar's Pashtuns.

The south is also the centre of opium farming and the heroin trade, a result of the failure of the West to deliver resources to the agricultural sector quickly enough, rather than a desire by Afghan farmers to grow poppies from which opium is derived. The Taliban finance their movement with the drug trade, which, in turn, spawns a much higher level of violence because it involves the drug mafias.

This worsening situation is not likely to improve until NATO forces move into the south in force. The Taliban need to be defeated on the ground and Pakistan needs to do more to destroy their sanctuaries and logistic hubs across the border. But NATO troops also need to provide more of the security and support to aid agencies to win the battle for reconstruction. That is precisely what Glyn Berry was doing in Kandahar and what he laid down his life for.

The Taliban are prepared for a long war of attrition that will continue until NATO forces show their staying power. Any weakness shown by the Western alliance now will only bolster the Taliban's morale and claim more Afghan lives. A resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in southern Afghanistan will only help create more recruits for Islamic extremist group's right across the region, and that will ultimately strengthen such groups in Europe and the Americas.

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