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# Canadians want to exit dirty war in Afghanistan

By *Kimball Cariou*

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5-21-07, 9:37 am

Even before the full impact of revelations about the treatment of prisoners captured in Afghanistan hits home, recent polls showed that a majority of Canadians want to end our military role in that country. The Tories and the corporate media (including the CBC, with its massive coverage of the visit by retired NHL players and the Stanley Cup to Kandahar) are going all-out to support the war effort. But anti-war sentiments have crystallized as the majority view, and further Canadian casualties seem likely to strengthen that position.

A Strategic Counsel poll taken in April asked, "How long should Canadian troops stay in Afghanistan?". The largest number of respondents (46%) said "return as soon as possible; stay until original commitment in 2007 - 18%; stay until our new commitment in 2009 - 8%; stay as long as it takes to rebuild and stabilize the country - 5%; don't know/no answer/ refuse - 5%. The same survey found that 57% of respondents believe that Canadians oppose sending troops to Afghanistan, while just 36% think that Canadians support sending troops.

Also in April, Angus Reid Strategies asked about this statement: "Canada should withdraw its troops from Afghanistan before their mandate ends in February 2009." 52% of respondents agreed, 34% disagreed, and 14% were not sure.

One of the most recent polls, conducted by SES Research in early May, found that 54.6% of respondents agreed that "If the casualties continue, Canada should pull out of Afghanistan."

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SES also asked people to rate the Harper government on this issue. 18.4% of those surveyed agreed with the Conservative government's management of the mission, and another 25.5% "somewhat agreed," for a total of 43.9%. That was less than those who "disagreed" (34.0%), and another 14.3% who "somewhat disagreed," for a total of 48.3%. Another 7.8% were "not sure."

Most of these surveys came before a story by Paul Koring in the April 25 Globe and Mail revealed in late April that "the Harper government knew from its own officials that prisoners held by Afghan security forces faced the possibility of torture, abuse and extrajudicial killing... But the government has eradicated every single reference to torture and abuse in prison from a heavily blacked-out version of a report prepared by Canadian diplomats in Kabul and released under an access to information request."

The government denied the existence of the report until complaints to the Access to Information Commissioner forced it to release a heavily edited version. An unedited copy obtained by the Globe and Mail states that "Extrajudicial executions, disappearances, torture and detention without trial are all too common."

The Foreign Affairs report ("Afghanistan-2006; Good Governance, Democratic Development and Human Rights") "seems to remove any last vestige of doubt that the senior officials and ministers knew that torture and abuse were rife in Afghan jails," Koring wrote.

The findings are similar to reports by Louise Arbour, the UN Human Rights Commissioner, the U.S. State Department, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and various international human-rights groups. But the information had a huge impact in Parliament, where the Harper government veered wildly between claims that it was not aware of the fate of detainees, to the attitude that such detainees were guilty and deserved to face torture and death.

Most seriously for the government, the information makes it clear that Canada has refused to adhere to the Geneva Conventions rules for safeguarding transferred detainees from torture and abuse. The report, said Koring, "makes repeated dark references to the reputation and performance of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, or intelligence police," which receives most prisoners captured by Canadian troops.

With the blood of Afghan detainees on its hands, it will now become even more difficult for the federal government to pose as the "defender of human rights" in Afghanistan.

That problem will become even more critical for supporters of the war if the full truth about the situation of women in Afghanistan becomes more widely known.

In an April 10 speech in Los Angeles, courageous female Afghan MP Malalai Joya told listeners that "The US government removed the ultra-reactionary and brutal regime of Taliban, but instead of relying on Afghan people, pushed us from the frying pan into the fire and selected its friends from among the most dirty and infamous criminals of the 'Northern Alliance', which is made up of the sworn enemies of democracy and human rights, and are as dark-minded, evil, and cruel as the Taliban...."

"Today the Northern alliance leaders are the key power holders and our people are hostage in the hands of these ruthless gangs of killers. Many of them are responsible for butchering tens of thousands of innocent people in the past two decades but are in power and hold key positions

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in the government."

Joya listed a few of the key power-holders of Afghanistan, including Vice-President Karim Khalili, leader of the Wahdat pro-Iran party, responsible for killing thousands of innocent people, and named by Human Rights Watch as a war criminal; minister of water and power Ismael Khan, another killer warlord; Izzatullah Wasifi, Afghanistan's anti-corruption chief, a convicted drug trafficker who served time in a Nevada state prison; General Mohammed Daoud, Afghanistan's deputy interior minister in charge of the anti-drug effort, a former warlord and famous drug-trafficker; Rashid Dostum, the chief of staff of the Afghan army, named by Human Rights Watch as a war criminal; Qasim Fahim, a Senator and adviser to Hamid Karzai, and the most powerful warlord of the Northern Alliance.

"Afghans are deeply fed-up with the current situation and every day that passes they turn against the government, the foreign troops and the warlords," said Joya. "And the Taliban make use of it to increase their influence and acts of terror..."

"Seven hundred children and 50-70 women die on a daily basis because of a lack of health services. Infant and maternal mortality rates are still very high - 1,600 to 1,900 women among each 100,000 die during childbirth. Life expectancy is less than 45 years.

"The number of suicide cases by Afghan women was never as high as it is today: A month ago eighteen year old Samiya, hung herself by a rope because she was to be sold to a sixty year old man. Another woman called Bibi Gul locked herself up in the animals' stable and burned herself to death. Later her family found nothing except her bones..."

"According to a UNIFEM survey, 65% of the 50,000 widows in Kabul see suicide as the only option to get rid of their misery. UNIFEM estimates that at least one out of three Afghan women has been beaten, forced into sex or otherwise abused..."

Such information helps increasing numbers of Canadians to understand that the news from the dirty war in Afghanistan is not going to get better. Just as the U.S. role in the destruction of Iraq has dragged George W. Bush to the depths of public opinion polls, Afghanistan may well become the death knell of the Harper minority government.

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