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Support for Afghan mission can grow: Polls

Backing for Afghan role gets a boost with talk of diplomacy, rights

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ALLAN WOODS
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The federal government could significantly boost support for the Afghan mission if it were to emphasize diplomacy and human rights, according to opinion polling compiled over seven months for the Department of National Defence.



FINBARR O'REILLY/REUTERS

Canadian Master Cpl. Mike McCauley greets an Afghan boy while on patrol with Afghan troops near Panjwaii in Kandahar province earlier this month.

Of the 8,500 people contacted between September 2006 and March 2007, just 20 per cent said they "strongly support" Canada's fight in Afghanistan.

But that figure jumped 26 percentage points, so that almost half of all respondents registered their strong support, when those surveyed were told about Canada's diplomacy and development efforts, such as ensuring human rights for women and supporting democratic institutions.

Combined with those who said they "somewhat" backed a mission that is balanced between combat and aid, support topped out at 83 per cent, compared with 44 per cent who supported the mission without being prompted about the development work that is being done.

"Support (for the mission) increased significantly after hearing more about Canada's role," says a summary of the findings by pollster Ipsos Reid.

Nik Nanos, president of Ottawa's SES Research, said the government-commissioned survey is "standard ... technique for political campaigns."

"You start introducing content and you measure how you can move the dial," he said.

"Those numbers are indicative of where Canadians would be if the Conservatives managed to grab both shoulders of every Canadian in the country and say, 'I'd like to have a 10-minute conversation with you about what we're trying to achieve.' But that's not reality."

The poll, at a cost to taxpayers of \$104,575, is the latest to look at how to present Canada's military mission to a skeptical public. Others have warned the government against appearing too militaristic, presenting the mission as payback for the 9/11 terror attacks and aligning itself with the U.S. government. All have underscored the fact that combat remains a tough sell in Canada.

Compounding the government's problem is the rising death toll – 66 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat – and difficulty showing how aid is improving the lives of Afghans.

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Alex Morrison, head of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, said the challenge is how Ottawa can be honest about the military's role and still make it palatable to the public. The blame lies with previous Liberal and Tory governments that emphasized peacekeeping to such an extent that Canadian soldiers are now viewed as "simply a bunch of do-gooders," he said.

"The government (convinced) a heck of a lot of Canadians that our military weren't real military when, of course, they are and they're proving it in Afghanistan."

The poll was completed just ahead of a significant shift in the Conservative government's Afghanistan stance, marked by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's comments that the mission in Kandahar province will end in February 2009 unless a majority of MPs agree to keep the military engaged on the frontlines against the Taliban.

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