

Canada's Afghan dilemma

Canadians appear to be sharply divided about our military role in Afghanistan. Some believe the country is a "deadly sinkhole" from which the Stephen Harper government should immediately remove our soldiers who have already suffered 60 deaths, including of Stephen Bouzane, Joel Wiebe and Chris Karigiannis only last week from a presumed Taliban landmine near Kandahar.

Others say the proud and independent Afghans, who have suffered under a heartless theocracy, communism and more during three decades of conflict and bloodshed, deserve continued military support as they continue to consolidate their fragile democracy.

Canadians have an opportunity at least until early 2009 to assist this historically important country to establish a domestic peace and prosperity, which will probably also impact positively on neighbours in South Asia, including Pakistan and Iran.

Already in Afghanistan many women and girls are being educated. For six years under Taliban rule, they risked being stoned to death for not wearing a burqa or for speaking with a man on the street.

Many Afghans of both genders are gainfully employed and the infant mortality rate is significantly lower.

Two recent experiences have further convinced me that the second camp is the better option for Canada despite our heavy human and financial costs.

One is the recently published book, *Punishment of Virtue* by Sarah Chayes, an American journalist covering Afghanistan for National Public Radio, who later returned to the country to work for an NGO which rebuilds war-damaged homes.

Chayes' work is insightful, hopeful and encouraging. She respects and likes Afghans, including President Hamid Karzai, but stresses the need for better and firmer leadership by everyone involved with ongoing problems, including the Taliban, the warlords and corruption.

Following the deaths of 90 civilians last week, she would no doubt call for much better coordination in future of the Nato-led International Security Forces (ISAF) with the Afghan ones, including police, and the American "special forces," who pursue the leaders of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Few who accept her analyses and numerous telling anecdotes are likely to move to the "leave now" camp.

Friends of Afghanistan worldwide, but perhaps especially Canadians, given our own painful experience with American "friendly fire," are deeply concerned about continuing fatal mistakes, mostly by members of the "special forces." If they and the ISAF cannot be merged, which seems the most sensible way to minimise errors, the rules of engagement for both must be altered, so that combatants err always on the side of saving civilian lives.

The second experience was learning more about some of Afghanistan's democrats. Take, for example, Yunus Qanuni, who is presently Speaker of the Lower House of the Afghan National Assembly.

Following the 1979 invasion of the country by the then Soviet Union, he joined the Mujahideen forces, which with great determination and courage finally drove out the invaders in 1993. He then became joint defence minister, but was badly injured subsequently when his car was blown up.

When the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, Qanuni sought to unite Afghans opposed to their regime and eventually became leader of the Northern Alliance's main political party.

He was named interior minister and later education minister in Hamid Karzai's government, formed when the Taliban government refused to surrender Osama bin Laden following the events of September 11, 2001 and a US-led military coalition drove them out of the capital.

The United Nations sponsored the conference in Bonn, which created an interim government for Afghanistan. It was replaced in 2003 by a presidential system with a bicameral Parliament. Very importantly, everything that is happening in Afghanistan is under a UN mandate. There have been troop contributions to date at various times from 37 countries, which protect the government and continue to fight the Taliban effectively most of the time. Ultimately, only the Afghans themselves will be able to defeat the Taliban permanently or bring them into a viable coalition.

The Indian academic Dr V.P. Vaidik who specialises in Afghanistan, thinks it would be rash to withdraw the Canadian or other international forces from Afghanistan at this point. He thinks the country needs its own strong army. He also advocates a Second Bonn Conference for a grand internal reconciliation, cooperation from the neighbouring countries and restructuring of foreign development assistance.

In the first presidential election held in 2004, Karzai won 55 per cent of the votes cast and Qanuni came second among numerous candidates with about 16 per cent. The National Assembly elections were held less than two years ago, with Qanuni winning both a seat and then being elected Speaker by the members of the Lower House. He is expected to run again for President.

The issues in Afghanistan are complex. Historically, however, Canadians have sacrificed much to rescue Europeans, Asians and other peoples from totalitarian regimes, including our loss of 516 soldiers during the Korean War. We are now playing important roles in consolidating peace, development, democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan. In my opinion, we should continue to do so.

Source: David Kilgour in **THE ASIAN AGE**, JUNE 30, 2007