

Bloody summer for Afghanistan coalition

Death of Pte. Sebastien Courcy raises toll for Canada and its allies to 47 this month

MATTHEW FISHER

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan The bloodiest month for Canada and its allies in the history of the eight-year-war in Afghanistan claimed another Canadian Thursday, the nation's 125th soldier to fall in the conflict.

Pte. Sebastien Courcy, 26, a soldier in the Valcartier-based 2nd Battalion, Royal 22nd Regiment, died in a rare firefight between Canadian troops and the Taliban, when he fell from "a piece of high ground," according to Brig.-Gen Jon Vance, who commands the 2,800 Canadian troops in Afghanistan.

His death raised the toll of Canada and its allies to 47 this month. The day before, Reuters had reported that the death toll for foreign troops just halfway through July equalled the highest for any month of the eight-year-old war.

The fight in which Courcy was killed took place in Panjwaili, about 17 kilometres southwest of Kandahar City.

He was killed amid a heightened offensive that has sent thousands of American and British troops to attack Taliban fighters in small towns and villages in Helmand province over the past two weeks.

U.S. President Barack Obama has been pouring troops into Afghanistan as he withdraws military strength from Iraq.

By the end of the year, the U.S. will more than double its troop strength in Afghanistan, to 68,000 from 32,000, according to Reuters.

Meanwhile, the Taliban are fighting back with roadside bombs and sniper fire.

"I think there are going to be more and more casualties as the summer wears on," said Bob Bergen, a fellow with the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.

Fighting is always heavier during the summer in Afghanistan, Bergen said, because the Taliban fighters withdraw to their strongholds in Pakistan, behind a barrier of nearly impassible mountains, in the winter.

This summer, the Taliban also has a pressing short-term goal: to destabilize the country in the runup to the Aug. 20 national election.

"It's symbolic for the Taliban. They want to disrupt it to prove that the government is weak, and that the presence of the foreigners is not enough to hold up the government," said Allen Sens, a professor in the department of political science at the University of British Columbia. "It's symbolic for ISAF and NATO in proving the opposite."

However, though the Taliban have proven resilient and difficult to quash, they do not have the strength to defeat the Canadians in Kandahar or the coalition troops as a whole, Sens said.

As well, though he anticipates more deaths as the Taliban fights back, Bergen remained optimistic about some of the diplomatic efforts under way to stabilize Afghanistan, such as efforts to make peace between India and Pakistan, allowing the Pakistani government to focus on fighting the Taliban.

"If the Pakistan army can get free and not concentrate on India, it's called a hammer and anvil," he said. "They'll go after the insurgents and push them toward the Americans."

An Ipsos Reid poll released this week showed that support for the Afghanistan mission had remained steady over the past year, with 48 per cent of people either strongly supporting or somewhat supporting the use of Canada's troops for security and combat efforts in Afghanistan. In January 2008, the figure was 50 per cent, a difference that is within the poll's margin of error.

However, fewer now say that Canadian troops should stay on past the anticipated withdrawal date in 2011 to provide non-combat support, such as training Afghan security forces. Only 27 per cent of respondents agreed to this proposition, compared to 37 per cent in 2008.

At CFB Valcartier, the mood on Thursday was as grey as the skies above. The soldiers were bidding farewell to another of their brothers-in-arms, Master Cpl. Pat Audet who died earlier this month, when they heard of Courcy's death.

"Every time one of us falls in combat, it's very difficult," Maj. André Lessard said. "We're like a big family here."

Born in St-Hyacinthe, Que., Courcy was the fifth Canadian to die in Afghanistan this month. He is survived by his mother, Ginette, and his sister, Julie.