

Canada pledged full support for Afghanistan Compact with 2010 end date

It's time Canadians stopped focusing solely on 2009 as a possible date for Canadian troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and started thinking about the end of 2010.

That is because there is a very serious gap in the thinking of those who would pull the Canadian Forces out of Afghanistan in February 2009 or, in the case of the New Democratic Party, right now.

They ignore the fact that Canada pledged its full support for the Afghanistan Compact, a 2006 agreement between the Afghanistan government and the international community represented by more than 60 states and intergovernmental organizations, to help rebuild the war-ravaged country.

Ingrained like a watermark throughout the Compact and related documents is the timeline date "end-2010".

End-2010 is the date by which the Afghan government, with the help of the international community, is committed to achieve its benchmark of 70,000 fully-trained and equipped Afghan National Army troops capable of meeting Afghanistan's security needs.

End-2010 is the date by which they are committed to achieve the benchmark of 62,000 fully constituted and professional Afghan National Police and Afghan Border Police.

End-2010 is the date by which they are committed to achieving their stated counter-narcotics capacity benchmarks; mine action and ammunition reduction targets; public administration reform, rule of law frameworks and human rights obligations; air transport, energy, water resource management; urban development; primary, secondary and higher education goals; health and nutrition benchmarks; and plans for agriculture and rural development; poverty reduction; and on, and on, and on in order to rebuild Afghanistan's society.

A remarkable string of success stories is found in the Compact's Joint Co-ordination and Monitoring Board's first-annual, but little-noticed progress report released in May indicating long strides toward those goals.

The Afghan National Army, which is key to the country's security, is well on its way to its benchmark of 70,000 troops with a strength of 37,015, an additional 12,044 in training and recruiting of 8,208 personnel annually on track for 2010.

As of March this year, the Afghan National and Border Police numbered 62,200 with the intention of raising their number to 82,000 which is beyond the 2010 stated goal.

Since March 2006, stockpiles of 481,000 anti-personnel landmines had been located and destroyed, 132,080,792 square metres of land had been cleared and more than one million pieces of unexploded ordinance had been destroyed.

On the social side, there were 5.4 million students enrolled in schools, 35 per cent of whom are girls; 82 per cent of Afghans had access to the Basic Package of Health Services and 6,121 Community Development Councils had been established.

In terms of infrastructure, 84 per cent of Afghanistan's 2,818 kilometres of ring road network is open with 59 per cent or 1,983 kilometres paved.

That is just one year into the Afghan Compact process and there are simply too many success stories documented over hundreds of pages in the Compact's progress report to list here, but, as the report points, out numbers alone don't tell the whole tale.

The Compact's goal itself is: "to improve the lives of Afghan people and to contribute to national, regional and global peace and security."

Obviously, the picture in Afghanistan is not all rosy and difficult challenges lie ahead.

For example, a record number of poppy fields were eradicated, but poppy cultivation increased by a record 50 per cent and raw opium by 40 per cent, fuelling a corrupt narco-economy.

While the police have reached their recruiting benchmark, they remain largely corrupt and their loyalty is question.

And, thanks to Pakistan's internal woes, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have been able to reconstitute and retrain in its lawless tribal areas bordering southern Afghanistan where the Canadians operate.

What does the Afghanistan Compact's 2010 benchmark mean for Canada?

Only time will tell. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government sought and received a Parliamentary mandate to extend the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan only until February 2009.

Liberal Leader Stephan Dion says the Liberals now will not support keeping Canadians in Afghanistan past 2009.

But, the Harper government's decision to put the mission's extension to a vote was far more than Paul Martin's Liberal government did when it arbitrarily deployed the Canadian Forces to Afghanistan to fight the remnants of al-Qaeda and the Taliban alongside the Americans in October 2001.

Parliament's committee on national defence has recommended a Parliamentary debate be held in 2008 on whether the mission should be extended past February 2009.

That debate is sorely need because I think it would reveal the Liberals have a moral obligation to help Harper's government finish what the Liberals themselves helped start in light of the new successes documented in the Compact's progress report.

As for the NDP, they would turn their backs on NATO and the Afghan government's achievements, pull out now and abandon Afghanistan to the Taliban who recently kidnapped and threatened to kill 23 South Korean medical services volunteers unless Korea immediately pulls its 210 troops out of Afghanistan. Choosing between clear progress and Taliban-inspired anarchy, one would think, would be an easy choice.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or Donors.

Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org