

Summary

The mission in Afghanistan will not succeed if it is framed primarily as a mission to ensure security for Canada and the West from terrorism. While Afghanistan may have been a staging ground for terrorist attacks on the United States, these are criminal acts for which the Afghan people should not pay the consequence. Yet, Afghan civilians are bearing the burden of increasing violence. Real security for Afghan civilians should be our main priority. This requires a much stronger focus on disbanding illegal armed groups, strengthening the Afghan army and police, reforming the justice sector, and minimizing civilian casualties resulting from offensive combat operations.

Background

Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan is part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which operates under a UN mandate (Security Council Resolution 1386 and subsequent resolutions). ISAF's main job is to assist the Afghan government in extending its authority and in creating a secure environment, and facilitating the re-building of Afghanistan and the establishment of democratic structures.

So far, ISAF has not been able to establish a secure environment in provinces such as Kandahar. What's worse, civilians are increasingly paying the toll. The annual Armed Conflicts Report by Project Ploughshares estimates that throughout Afghanistan up to 19,000 combatants and civilians have died as a result of armed conflict in Afghanistan since 2001. The United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimates 1000 civilians have been killed by Afghan and international forces between January and August 2007. Almost two thirds of civilians killed by international forces were due to air strikes and almost half of the civilians killed by the Taliban were by suicide bombers. According to Human Rights Watch, most suicide attacks (70%) kill more innocent civilians than soldiers.

The Issue

In response to the increasing civilian casualties and a rising insurgency, ISAF seeks to counter growing resentment against foreign forces and to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan population by providing humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in its areas of operation. While recipients of this assistance may benefit in the short term, the long-term effects of such actions are problematic. Humanitarian aid and development assistance are traditionally provided by unarmed civilian personnel whose only protection is their image as neutral actors. As soon as armed forces use such assistance for political and military purposes, humanitarian and development efforts become politicized – no longer considered neutral. The high level of casualties among aid workers in Afghanistan (more than 80 individuals so far) is partly a result of this militarization and the blurring of lines between the military and unarmed civilians. Life saving humanitarian assistance is premised on impartiality toward civilians, neutrality in relation to warring factions, and independence from political and military goals.

When aid serves military, rather than humanitarian, objectives, it puts in jeopardy the very Afghan civilians who need it most. For example, given the cultural constraints of southern Afghanistan, aid delivered by military actors may not even reach the most vulnerable, such as female-headed households and widows.

At the same time, reconstruction and humanitarian efforts can only succeed if Afghan civilians themselves live in a secure environment. Hence, their safety must be our main priority. This means placing civilians' well-being at the heart of our efforts. It means looking at security from the perspective of Afghans – not from the perspective of 'winning the war'.

Real security for Afghans means disbanding illegal armed groups, strengthening the Afghan army and police, reforming the justice sector, tackling corruption, ending impunity for abuses by government officials, and minimizing the number of civilian casualties resulting from offensive combat operations.

To do this, Canada must re-orient its mission dramatically. Its troops must uphold international humanitarian and human rights law and put the protection of civilian life first in all their operations.

Recommendations

- The Canadian Forces (CF) must adhere to the Government of Canada Guidelines on Humanitarian Action and Civil-Military Coordination (2003) which requires:
 - Military Civic Action, such as efforts to cultivate the support of the local population (hearts and minds operations) which contribute to force protection, be distinguished from humanitarian tasks.
 - To greatest extent possible, respect for the humanitarian operating environment, recognizing that humanitarian assistance should not be conditional upon military and political support.
- Protecting civilians must become the top priority in ISAF's mandate, not aggressive search-and-destroy missions against the Taliban.
- Security sector reform by training competent Afghan police and army forces should be a key Canadian priority.
- Canada should use its influence with local and national government officials to end corruption at all levels.

Resources

ISAF mandate: <http://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/index.html>

Agency Coordination Body For Afghan Relief: <http://www.acbar.org/index.php>