

# AFGHANISTAN

## WHY ARE WE THERE ? AND WHAT ARE WE DOING ?

Let's try to remember clearly back to 2001. That September 11, a group of Muslim extremists attacked directly the United States of America by demolishing the Twin Towers in Manhattan and damaging the Pentagon in Washington. They called themselves Al Qaida and their chief was Osama Ben Laden operating out of Afghanistan.

An attack on one of their members, for the NATO member countries, was, by treaty, considered an attack on them all, so several NATO nations quickly responded to the US president, George Bush's call for a concerted attack on "terrorist" forces in Afghanistan. No resolution of the Security Council of the United Nations authorised the United States, alone or in coalition to make war on Afghanistan.

The Canadian government, under Jean Chrétien, authorized the Canadian warships, their airplanes and their 140 marines (still operating in the Persian Gulf to help enforce embargoes on Iraq after the first Gulf War) to support the American-led attack on Afghanistan to root out the Al Qaeda forces and their Taliban Islamist religious supporters in 2001-2. The heavy bombing attacks, along with the ground forces of the Northern Alliance took the capital Kabul, forcing the Taliban from power. Towards the end of 2001, a gathering of the tribal chiefs, along with representatives of certain ancestral posts, held a constituent assembly and hammered out a constitution. Elections were held and Hamid Karzai became president.

In 2003, our government, having finally refused to enter into the attack on Iraq led by the USA and the UK, found it politically expedient to commit Canadian troops to the International Force (FIAS) voted by the United Nations to help maintain security in Afghanistan. Canada sent 2500 troops and accepted to be responsible for the protection of Kabul.

Eventually, following months of high military mortalities and much greater numbers of civilian deaths, NATO countries began to be under public pressure to withdraw or at least reduce the numbers of their troops (One NATO country only allows its troops to operate in daylight.) The United States felt obliged to switch some of its forces to the Iraq theatre following its invasion of 2003.. The government of Canada, under Paul Martin later accepted a NATO rotation to take over in Kandahar, one of the two provinces where the Taliban were most active. The commitment was till February 2009, but was not submitted to be debated in Parliament. Reports began to confirm that Canada was spending five times as much money on its military operation as it was on its much touted reconstruction works.

The Karzai government proved to be weak, riddled by factional disloyalty, corruption and the major problem of dealing with the enormous opium production.

Looking back, we have changed our role in a major way from our former blue helmeted UN peacemaker role to one of occupying NATO military forces.

We should leave Afghanistan, I believe, by the end of our February 2009 contract to NATO. In place of combat military troops, we should rather send our military personnel to speed up the training of the Afghan army and police, much as we are doing in Haiti.

As to our moral commitment to help reconstruct Afghanistan, we could then increase our financial assistance from our military expenditures to the Afghan people through CIDA and Canadian NGO's.

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