

CANADA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN – A THIRD OPTION

By Joanna Santa Barbara M.D.

The mission of Physicians for Global Survival (PGS) includes 'the prevention of war'. This feels particularly pertinent when our own state is participating in waging a war, as is occurring in Afghanistan. Fewer than half of Canadians currently support this war; those who do may be partly influenced by knowledge of very real security needs of the Afghan population. The other half of Canadians believe that Canadian troops should be withdrawn, some on the basis that foreign occupation is likely to worsen conflict, and that Canada has been drawn into this situation through the wish to comply with US requests for help in war-fighting.

Third Option

A 'Third Option' has emerged which PGS wishes to recommend to our national government. We suggest that the Canadian position should be:

- Continue peacekeeping and peacebuilding endeavours
- Stop war-fighting actions
- Support peace dialogues with the armed opposition

Several of us have accumulated some years of experience working in Afghanistan, in projects organized by the Peace through Health group at McMaster University. PGS has been directly supportive to this work, especially to that part of it directed to peace education in schools. The work has been carried out at many levels, from grass-roots to political decision-makers. At the latter level, it has led to numerous contacts with civil servants, ministers of the government and highly-placed people in many political parties and factions.

Conflict Analysis

The present situation is best understood as a 'suppressed civil war', a term applied by one of us – Dr. Seddiq Weera, who has spent much of his time in Afghanistan over the last five years. Before the US invasion in 2001, Afghanistan was locked in a deadly battle between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban/ Party of Islam groups. Both groups were responsible for immense suffering of the Afghan people. The US took issue with the

Taliban and supported the Northern Alliance with arms and money, vanquishing the Taliban. There was a tendency, in imposing a 'story-line' on this episode, to see the Taliban as wholly bad and the Northern Alliance as good. There is little appreciation that these groups contain diverse factions, many of whom are more moderate than the most extreme ones.

The Bonn Peace Agreement, whereby the subsequent governance arrangements for Afghanistan were set in motion, excluded the losers from the accords. Elementary understanding of conflict dynamics would suggest that the excluded losers would be likely to take to arms to push their goals forward. That, of course, is what happened. Worse still, Al Qaeda, whose goals differ from the Taliban/Party of Islam, has joined the latter. These are not a few bedraggled remnants of a fighting force, easily 'mopped up'. The violence is worsening. Unhappy young men are attracted to join these militias.

There is no military solution to this conflict; Canada is fighting on one side of a civil war – this will embroil Canadians in an unwinnable and destructive situation. Beyond battle action, this conflict is bogging the country down in the capital, Kabul. To a large extent, the civil service does not work. Against the Bonn Agreement, the Northern Alliance entered Kabul and grabbed key ministries for itself, excluding those not connected with their parties. These ministries refuse to conduct normal civil service procedures for hiring employees, for example, offering jobs to those with the right connexions. Those from opposing parties do not feel safe in returning from the periphery, and know they will be excluded.

Political solution

These problems cannot be solved by 'search and destroy' missions to kill Taliban. Canadians have been handed the wrong script by the US. The solution must be a political one. Is this feasible? Wide-ranging informal enquiries among key players over the last few months suggest that there is considerable interest in a political solution. Elements of a settlement have even been put forward, containing legitimate and feasible bases for a settlement.

As in many lethal conflicts, it very likely requires a mediator to carry such peace dialogues forward – to create a safe environment for such talks, to get the right people to dialogues, to lend some weight to their importance. Canada could play such a role. It could save many lives and much suffering by doing so. Such a role is compatible with peacekeeping and peacebuilding, but not with war-fighting on one side of the 'suppressed civil war'.

Troops out? No

Our experience in Afghanistan has convinced us that Afghans are grateful for Canadian contributions over several years to peacekeeping, and clearly want peacekeeping extended. Even though they would prefer not to have foreign troops in their country, they do not want Canadians to abandon this role. Currently only 10% of troops are engaged in the peacebuilding activities of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and it is questionable whether the framework of that action, attempting to ‘win hearts and minds’ to one side of the conflict, is actually useful. Redeployment of Canadian troops to peacekeeping would be more helpful to Afghans. One old shop-keeper responded to Dr. Weera’s question about his view of foreign troops in the country by saying, “If it were not for them, the few women who were left unraped (by the civil war) would be raped too.”

Canada’s role

Afghans want Canada to help them achieve peace by peaceful means. Canada states its mission as ‘Three D – Defence, Development, Diplomacy’. *Defence* in the form of peacekeeping has been much appreciated; offence is harmful. It is to be hoped that the role of Canada’s armed forces will be renegotiated when the command switches from the US to NATO in the summer. *Development* in the form of police training, landmine clearance and many other functions has won Canada a good name in Afghanistan. Now let us see what our country can do with an outstanding opportunity for lifesaving *diplomacy*. Canadians would support this far more enthusiastically than the current activities.

What you can do

Write to or visit your MP to present these ideas. Use opportunities to write letters to newspapers or use other media on this topic.

Largely this debate ranges over only two options:

- War-fighting with ‘hearts and minds psyops’
- Troops out now.

This is a Third Option, and needs to be on the table for discussion. It represents peace for Afghanistan by peaceful means.

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April 2006

