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Canadians should be proud of efforts in Afghanistan

By ALEX MORRISON

FOR THE past number of months, The Chronicle Herald has given its readers information on the situation in Afghanistan from a number of sources: stories from news agencies, reprints of articles published elsewhere, reporting by its own energetic defence reporter Chris Lambie, and by publishing letters to the editor. Each of these has aided the public in formulating opinions about Canada's role in that unfortunate country. That is how it should be in a democracy.

I have just returned from Afghanistan, where I met and talked to our military commanders, troops and civilian officials who work daily in dangerous and challenging situations. While visiting Kabul, Kandahar and Camp Nathan Smith, I was impressed by how each person, military or civilian, believed the Canadians and their allies were making a positive difference in the lives of Afghan citizens.

One of the main concerns expressed to me was that they cannot understand why more Canadians do not support the government's decision to send them to Afghanistan. They know they are doing well; they know much more needs to be done. They seek patience from fellow citizens as they labour to improve the lot of the Afghans. They want the government and military leaders to speak out and reiterate why our country has made a commitment to Afghanistan.

Recently, at meetings he held across the country, one of which I attended in Toronto, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor acknowledged that the government must communicate with Canadians on a more frequent basis. To that end, he undertook to make more visits and said we would soon see military officers "speaking out more" about our contribution to the international military and civilian effort in Afghanistan. That is a welcome move, which will enable Canadians to listen, comment and ask questions – and then formulate a view. Hopefully, the Foreign Affairs and the International Co-operation (responsible for the Canadian International Development Agency) ministers will do likewise.

In my view, we are in Afghanistan to aid in the establishment of a safe and secure environment, within which Afghan citizens can freely decide on the future of their country. This is a simple statement of a noble

purpose that will take some years to achieve. Indeed, our last three prime ministers, successive ministers of National Defence and the Chief of the Defence Staff, Gen. Rick Hillier, have all emphasized that we cannot expect success overnight.

Although there have been successful Canadian relief, aid and development projects in Afghanistan, those efforts cannot expand significantly unless there are areas of peace, security and stability in which to work. That is where the Canadian military and civilian effort comes into play.

The Canadian Battle Group is in daily contact with its enemy – the Taliban members and others who seek to keep the country in a state of constant turmoil and destabilization. Our soldiers fight, and fight well, to achieve security for Afghanistan's citizens.

Next there is the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). It is composed of military personnel with civilian reconstruction expertise, military lawyers, Corrections Canada officials, and representatives of Foreign Affairs Canada, CIDA, and Defence Construction Limited, among others. Aided by a security force, members of the team work to deliver small but significant improvements to the local population.

In Kabul, as a result of an initiative by Gen. Hillier and with the agreement of the president of Afghanistan, we have a 20-member Strategic Assessment Team working with various government departments. Members advise, assist and, in some cases, prod Afghan officials as the latter strive to improve the productivity and effectiveness of their government organizations and service to citizens.

Canada is also playing a significant role as a member of the international military team charged with training the Afghan National Army. Our soldiers are responsible for the last phase of the training, involving, among other subjects, live firing in the excellent training area near its camp. I witnessed some of this training and am confident in saying that the instruction is of the highest quality and is delivered with the professionalism our soldiers show in all their activities. As has been the case with the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Auxiliary Police, great patience is required, and Afghan cultural and other traditions must be understood and respected.

There are also about 200 Canadian civilians in the Kandahar camp. They work at Tim Hortons, staff the relaxation canteen, and perform other maintenance and clerical functions. Some of those to whom I spoke are

now on their second or third three-month contract. Their sense of patriotism and duty is to be admired.

It is right and just that Canada has responded, in accordance with United Nations resolutions and North Atlantic Treaty Organization decisions, to the request of the Afghan president and has contributed military and civilian personnel to the international effort to establish that degree of peace, security and stability necessary for future civilian development to flourish. We are a substantial partner in the international effort and Canadians ought to be proud of the response of our country and of how our fellow citizens on the ground are helping their Afghan counterparts.

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