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Afghan government: cease-fire before Taliban talks

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) 9 January 2012 -- Taliban insurgents must agree to a cease-fire before formal peace negotiations can begin in Qatar, a spokesman for Afghan President Hamid Karzai said Monday

Presidential spokesman Emal Faizi insisted that the government will never give up territory to the insurgents.

Faizi laid out the government's terms days after the Taliban's announcement it would open a political office in Doha, Qatar, a key precursor to peace talks and the insurgents' first public move toward a political settlement to the 10-year-long war.

"When the talks start, there should be a cease-fire and the violence against the Afghan people must stop," Faizi said Monday on Tolo television news.

He dismissed as "baseless" speculation in Afghan media that the government might hand over predominantly Pashtun southern provinces to the Taliban in exchange for an end to the fighting.

"The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will never accept such suggestion from any side," he said

Faizi also said it is too soon to send a delegation to Qatar to discuss future talks.

Afghan High Peace Council member Mohammad Ismail Qasimyar said earlier Monday that the panel has asked the government to send a delegation to Doha "as soon as possible," but Faizi said the government has no immediate plans for such a trip.

The U.S. has been seeking to start negotiations as international troops begin to leave the country, according to plans to withdraw most foreign security forces by the end of 2014. Washington says any negotiations must be Afghan-led.

Debate over peace talks came as violence continued.

An American soldier was killed when man in an Afghan army uniform opened fire at a base in the south of the country, an Afghan military spokesman said Monday. Another American soldier was wounded in the Sunday attack. Earlier reports did not identify the nationality of the soldiers.

Spokesman Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi said the gunman was also killed in the shootout. "Right now, an investigation is going on to determine whether he really was a soldier or someone using an army uniform. And if he was a soldier, what caused the shooting," Azimi said.

Similar attacks have raised fears of increased Taliban infiltration of the Afghan police and army as NATO speeds up the training of the security forces. In some cases the attackers were Afghan soldiers who turned on NATO troops. Others involved insurgents dressed in Afghan uniforms.

The shooting brought to 11 the number of NATO soldiers killed this month.

NATO is encouraging the rapidly expanding Afghan security forces to take more responsibility ahead of the coalition's 2014 pullout target date. NATO's training mission hopes have about 350,000 Afghan troops and police trained and ready by then.

Also Monday, Taliban fighters ambushed a convoy carrying supplies for NATO in western Afghanistan, killing two private security guards and wounding three. Seven of the attacking insurgents were also killed, said deputy police chief Mohammad Ghaws Milyar.

Afghan peace council to send mission to Qatar

KABUL (Reuters) 09 January 2012- A senior member of Afghanistan's peace-making body will travel to Qatar soon to gather more details about plans for a Taliban political office in the Gulf nation, the High Peace Council's adviser on international affairs said on Monday.

The Taliban said in a surprise announcement last week they had reached a preliminary agreement to set up a political address in Qatar and asked for the release of prisoners held by the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay.

"We want to see the office with our own eyes and that's why someone from the High Peace Council will be travelling to Qatar soon," Mohammad Ismail Qasimyar, a leading member of President Hamid Karzai's High Peace Council, told Reuters.

"We want to see how big the office is and other details."

The decision to open an office, after years of insisting the group would consider talks only when foreign troops had left Afghanistan, is seen as a crucial step forward for attempts to reach a negotiated end to a decade of war.

But the announcement clearly excluded the Afghan government, describing the two parties to the conflict as the Taliban and the U.S.-allied coalition. Karzai's response was slow and muted.

Karzai and U.S. officials have said repeatedly any peace process must be Afghan-led and the president has been angered in the past when he felt excluded by foreign efforts to set up any kind of negotiations.

"Any talks without the participation of Afghanistan are not going to succeed," Qasimyar said.

Afghan officials have also warned against allowing the Taliban to use the office to fundraise or build political clout.

Afghan body hears reports of inmate abuse by U.S.

KABUL (Reuters) Sat, Jan 7 2012-- An Afghan government commission investigating abuse accusations at the largest U.S. jail in Afghanistan said Saturday that inmates had reported being tortured and held without evidence.

However, the commission said it had found no evidence of torture on the detainees' bodies. The findings came just days after President Hamid Karzai called for the facility, inside the U.S.-run Bagram Airfield just north of the capital, to be handed over to Afghan control.

"During our visit to Bagram some of the prisoners talked of misconduct, some alleged they had been tortured," the commission's head, Gul Rahman Qazi, told a news conference in Kabul.

Qazi said prisoners had complained of abuse including beatings, humiliating body cavity searches and being exposed to extreme cold. He cited the case of 71-year-old Abdul Jabar, who said he had been held in a pitch-black room and lost a tooth after being punched.

"There was no evidence of torture on prisoners' bodies but they claimed that they had been tortured," Qazi said.

A spokesman for the U.S. embassy in Kabul said they had received a copy of the commission's report and would "study it closely."

Control over Afghans captured by U.S. forces is a major stumbling block in negotiations between Kabul and Washington on a strategic partnership agreement. NATO's night-time raids on Afghan homes, which Karzai objects to, is another point of contention.

The agreement would define the terms of any U.S. military presence after the end of 2014, when foreign combat troops are due home, but progress has been slow.

The commission was set up by Karzai on January 5 when he demanded that the prison, located in one of the largest military bases for NATO-led forces fighting in Afghanistan, be transferred to Afghan control within a month.

Citing the need for Afghan sovereignty, he also asked for all U.S.-held Afghan prisoners in the country to be handed over to Afghan custody. Qazi repeated that demand.

"Foreign troops are not allowed to keep prisons in Afghanistan, which is sovereign and has its own constitution," he told the news conference.

HELD WITHOUT TRIAL?

The United States has long said it intended to eventually do this as part of NATO's handover of security to the Afghan army and police, which are being bolstered ahead of the foreign troop pullout.

The U.S. embassy spokesman said allegations of abuse would be examined. "We take seriously and investigate all allegations of detainee abuse," Gavin Sundwall told Reuters in Kabul.

Qazi said U.S. prison officials had told the commission that there were legal cases against only 300 of around 3,000 detainees at Bagram. The rest were suspected Taliban members and some were caught using intelligence that would not stand up in court, the commission said.

"The coalition forces do not provide sufficient (evidence) to try an individual," Qazi said.

He also said that some prisoners were being kept behind bars without trial, or after they had been acquitted or had finished serving their sentences.

China-funded irrigation project helps boost farming in Afghanistan

Xinhua, By Farid Behbud, Jan. 8, 2012-As Chinese workers tried to complete in a few months an irrigation canal project in Parwan province that was built by China in the 1970s but left unfinished during ensuing wars, local people were looking to its completion with great expectation.

"The completion of Parwan irrigation canal would enable us to irrigate our vineyards and farmland properly and eventually increase our income," said 45-year-old Hamidullah Khan, a native of Parwan province noted for vineyards.

"Our good neighbor China helps us to improve our living condition and increase our income by launching this project," he added.

The Chinese-initiated project would irrigate thousands of hectares of farmland in Parwan and neighboring Kapisa and Kabul provinces, said some local people.

"Having water is essential for both our daily life and our economy," 65-year-old farmer Gulabudin, who like many Afghans goes by a single name told Xinhua in a recent interview.

"As you know, Afghanistan has suffered from over 30 years of war and we are still suffering from protracted security incidents which have badly damaged all economic sectors including agriculture in the country," he added.

"The project in Parwan is a water canal project, built by China as aid to Afghanistan in the 1970s and its reconstruction begun in 2004 and would be completed by May 2012," Fu Guoliang, manager of the project told Xinhua.

"In 2009, our company got the permission from Chinese government to undertake this project, the Parwan project. By August, 2009, we have completed the preliminary preparation efforts. However, the land acquisition problem in Afghanistan was not settled until November, 2011. With the construction started one month ago, we plan to finish this project on May 30, 2012," Fu added.

China's economic assistance to Afghanistan dated back to the 1950s when the two countries formed diplomatic ties. Since 2002 China has contributed some 200 million U.S. dollars to the post-Taliban Afghanistan. It launched many major projects to help Afghanistan with its post-war reconstruction, ranging from the construction of hospitals, government office buildings, and schools to providing equipment for health care and educational institutions. Just a few weeks ago, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Xu Feihong and Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul signed an agreement on bilateral economic and technical cooperation worth 150 million yuan or 23.5 million U.S. dollars.

With over 70 percent of population engaged in farming and livestock breeding, agriculture has been the backbone of Afghan's national economy. Although only 12 percent of its total land is arable, less than 6 percent of that land is under cultivation as years of wars, violence and continued droughts have drastically shrunk the land under cultivation to less than 6 percent of the arable land. This has led to a serious food shortage. A survey conducted in 2007-2008 by National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), an Afghan government statistic organization financed by European Commission, found that 7.4 million, nearly a-third of the whole Afghan population, are unable to get enough food.

"Due to the past three decades of war, investment in the agriculture field has dropped by 43 percent," Afghan Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation Minister Mohammad Asif Rahimi said in October 2011.

"Normally, every Afghan family spends nearly 59 percent of their monthly income on foodstuff," he said.

The price of rice has increased by 3 percent and that of maize by 74 percent over the past year and half. "They haven't had enough money for other expenses like health and education," the minister added.

The tough food situation has made local people all the more eager to look forward to the completion of the irrigation project. They predicted that upon its completion, all the Shamali plain along Parwan-Kabul road will be irrigated and thus thousands of people would benefit directly or indirectly.

US reliance on Afghan paramilitaries in rural areas worries European allies

Britain wonders if local police force can keep stability, while Germans argue the units are not easy to control

Guardian.co.uk, By Julian Borger, Sunday 8 January 2012-A split between the US and its European allies has emerged over the role of rural Afghan paramilitary units, seen by American commanders as critical to the military exit strategy.

A year after the Afghan local police (ALP) was launched, the US military has announced a plan to triple its numbers from a current strength of 9,800 to 30,000 by the end of 2013, with further expansion beyond that. According to the US strategy, the lightly-armed groups of men hired to protect their villages are expected to help contain a Taliban resurgence as the US and its Nato allies withdraw combat troops over the next three years.

General John Allen, the American commander of the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) sees the ALP as the key to success in Helmand, from where some 14,000 US marines are departing in the next few months, leaving a 9,000-strong British garrison and some Georgian and Danish troops to manage until Afghan regular soldiers and police can be deployed.

British officials, however, have voiced anxiety over the strategy, particularly over the capabilities of the ALP, described by Allen's predecessor, General David Petraeus, as "a community watch with AK-47s". In northern Afghanistan, German officers have warned their American counterparts the local forces could run out of control once their US mentors and paymasters leave.

An Isaf inquiry last month into allegations of abuse by ALP units recommended that vetting be improved "to focus on hostile groups or negative actors who might inhibit ALP performance". Human rights organisations argue the problems are systemic and oppose the planned expansion of the scheme.

The issue is becoming central as the withdrawal and the transition to Afghan-run security in 2014 approaches. One senior western diplomat said:

"Whether you are optimistic or pessimistic about Afghanistan really depends on what you think of the ALP." ALP units are set up in communities where the local council, or shura, has requested them. They are screened by shura members and given a criminal check, and 40 hours' training. They wear brown uniforms to distinguish them from the grey of the regular police, earn 60% of regular police pay, and do not have the power of arrest. They are organised in 150-strong units, each mentored by about a dozen US Green Berets or sometimes British Royal Marines.

Speaking in a recent interview in Afghanistan, General Allen argued the ALP would play an important role in Helmand. "The Afghan local police has become an important component," the Isaf commander said. "It's all about community mobilisation. The ALP will hold the ground, providing stability, which permits us to use both Isaf and ANSF [Afghan national security forces] elsewhere."

British commanders, however, have voiced their concern at troops being spread too thinly as the number of US marines in Helmand are expected to be reduced from a total of 20,000 to an anticipated 6,000 by the end of next summer. UK officials have told their American counterparts that British troops will not "backfill" areas vacated by the marines, and have expressed concerns over the ability of a home guard with only 40 hours' training to keep the Taliban from taking back villages and towns from which the insurgents were driven out in the past two years.

UK officials acknowledge the ALP has contributed to the fall in violence across Helmand in the past year, but worry that the community defence forces cannot defend hard-won territory. Faced with the prospect of dwindling budgets for Afghanistan, US commanders see the ALP as an affordable, long-term security fix. The head of US special operations, Admiral William McRaven, this month backed the extension of the ALP programme beyond 2015. A British Foreign Office spokeswoman said: "The ANSF is the long-term

solution to security provision in Afghanistan. However, we recognise that local initiatives may in the short term help meet community security needs, until adequate numbers of ANSF are trained."

German officers who lead Isaf say the ALP in their zone are indistinguishable from the warlord-led groups preying on the population. A German official said: "We're not happy about the ALP. It is a half-public, half not-so-public institution and its not easy to control. The problem we find is there are too many actors in the security arenas, and they all have their own agenda."

German military officials say that although ALP units are formally under the control by the Afghan interior ministry (under a deal to overcome President Hamid Karzai's objections to their creation), their actual paymasters, at least in the north, are US special forces. The Germans have told their US counterparts they worry that as soon as the Americans leave their region, ALP units will defect to whomever pays them to fight: warlords, the Taliban or drugs traffickers.

Last month, Karzai closed down another US-back irregular force operating in the north, called the Critical Infrastructure Police, whose record of extorting money from the local population was also a cause of anxiety for the Germany army. But the Afghan president has bowed to US pressure over the ALP. Human Rights Watch has urged the Obama administration not to proceed with the tripling of the ALP announced by Admiral McRaven, pointing to its record of abuses.

"The ALP has come to be a key rationale for the US drawdown, because they can't do the training and equipping of the ANSF in time," Brad Adams, the group's Asia director, said.

"They are throwing people with very little training into securing an area that has seen some of the most fierce fighting in Afghanistan," Adams added, expressing concerned that the ALP is mutating from its originally intended form.

"The ALP is supposed to not supposed to have heavy weapons. If they now expect them to occupy space militarily to protect civilians from insurgents, they do not seem to be the right force. But if they are going to be that force, maybe they're going to be just another militia."

Afghanistan's poor face difficult decisions amid winter cold

Seasonal hardship is nothing new for Afghans, but a combination of factors is making this winter harder to bear as the number of displaced soars in Kabul. Los Angeles Times, By Laura King, January 9, 2012-In the gray light of each cold dawn, the parents of 10-month-old Shoaib hold their own breath as they listen for the rasp of his, waiting to see whether their coughing, feverish little boy has survived another night.

Winter's chill has settled over the Afghan capital, and with it, privation is sharpening, especially among the city's poor. Nighttime temperatures regularly fall into the teens, or even lower. The season's first snow is on the ground, the open sewage ditches are crusted over with ice, and in shantytowns such as the one where Shoaib's family lives, survival turns on a series of cruelly simple calculations.

"If I buy food, I can't afford to buy firewood. And if I buy firewood, I can't buy food," said Shoaib's father, Faida Mohammed, a 40-year-old laborer who lives with his family of 12 in a two-room lean-to alongside one of Kabul's busier traffic circles. "If we eat lunch, we won't have dinner. If we eat dinner, there's nothing for breakfast in the morning. All the time, you have to choose."

Seasonal hardship is nothing new for Afghans, but a combination of factors is making this winter harder than usual to bear. The number of refugees from other parts of the country, known as internally displaced people, has ballooned to an estimated half a million. Many end up in the capital after fleeing fighting elsewhere, and make their homes in slum encampments that authorities euphemistically call "settlements."

Parwan Du, where Shoaib's family lives, began as a few tents on an open lot, some using crumbling mud-brick walls as supports for flimsy shelters made of plastic sheeting and plywood. Now it is home to about 230 people, some of whom have been there for years.

With the city's population thought to have tripled to about 4 million during this decade of war, the few services on offer are stretched thin. Electricity falters; potholed streets grow more impassable as newly fallen snow turns to icy slush and then to clinging mud before the cycle begins again. Prices of staples such as cooking oil have lately jumped, driven up in part by a Pakistani border blockade, imposed after U.S. airstrikes accidentally killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in November.

As people forage for fuel, the city's few trees are stealthily denuded of low-hanging boughs. On a recent day, few looked twice at a ragged man dragging a scavenged branch three times his height along a heavily trafficked thoroughfare, its dead leaves swirling under the wheels of passing cars. Smoke from wood and coal fires used by most households for heating veils the capital in an acrid brown haze.

In a city where much of public life takes place outdoors, the cold gives many passersby a hunched, pinched look, especially as the early dusk falls.

Customers linger in corner bakeries, seeking the ovens' warmth. Outdoor vendors and beggars gather around smoky trash fires in metal barrels. Feral dogs forage for scraps, thrusting their snouts through a dusting of snow.

Afghanistan's Meteorological Authority says this winter has not produced historical lows, but is forecast to be colder than the preceding few. During Taliban times, the agency's records for most of the last century were destroyed, because the fundamentalist Islamic group regarded meteorology as a form of sorcery.

With the falling temperatures, winter aid has become more crucial. Late last month, the United Nations refugee agency handed out blankets, plastic sheeting, warm clothes and fuel to about 300 families in Deh Sabz, an impoverished district of Kabul. But the demand far outstrips the supply, aid workers say.

"The ones we are helping are the most desperate we can find," said Mohammad Nader Farhad, a spokesman for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "There are many, many others who are also suffering."

Despite billions of dollars in international assistance over the last decade, urban poverty is becoming more entrenched across Afghanistan, aid workers say. The U.N. World Food Program, which normally expends most of its efforts in the countryside, recently launched a food voucher system in Kabul, giving nearly 19,000 poor families about \$25 a month for basic supplies. Rural families, with close extended clan ties and the ability to engage in subsistence farming, sometimes fare better than their cousins in the city. "At home, in our village, we would all help each other if we were hungry or cold," said Faida Mohammed, the father in Parwan Du. "But here, if I go to my relatives or close friends to ask for a little firewood, they are very quiet, and then they say, 'Brother, I have nothing to give you.'"

The unending quest to keep warm sometimes yields deadly results. Officials from Kabul's overstretched fire department say 95% of the emergency calls involve house fires, often the result of faulty wiring or blankets hung as insulation too close to an open flame.

In many poor homes, the only source of heat is a brazier-type stove called a sandali, often used with a quilt strung on a wooden frame that traps its meager warmth, but also potentially deadly charcoal fumes. Even in more affluent households, the concrete-slab construction that is a legacy of the Soviet era carries a deep, persistent chill, and central heating is a rarity. Col. Yar Mohammed, the deputy Kabul fire chief, said leaky canisters of natural gas, used for heating and cooking, pose a particular hazard. In one home, he recalled, a recent gas explosion that killed several family members was so powerful that panicky neighbors called police to report that the house next door had been hit by a rocket.

"With all the people who die in the war, it is terrible to see more die in preventable accidents like this," he said.

But most wintertime deaths involve a quieter slipping away. In Parwan Du, where sickness stalks nearly every flimsy shelter, Shoaib's parents were filled with dread when a neighbor's baby died in the night a week earlier. The children run about barefoot, sometimes napping in the weak winter sunlight if the previous night's cold made it too hard to sleep. The only food in the house was a plastic bag filled with stale bread, begged from a nearby restaurant.

"We hope that the government will help us someday," said the family's matriarch, Faida Mohammed's 60-year-old widowed mother, Zeliha. "But these days, we think our only help will come from God."

INTERVIEW-Electricity only reaches one in three Afghans

Reuters, Jan 9, 2012-Only one in three Afghans has access to electricity despite years of spending to improve supply, and the country is still far too dependent on imported power, the head of the country's state owned power utility told Reuters.

Abdul Razique Samadi, the chief executive officer at Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), said the situation in the capital, Kabul, is far better than the rest of the country, with around 70 percent of households connected.

"Instead of having electricity for two hours, we have power for 24 hours and it is quite reliable," he told Reuters.

About half of India's 1.2 billion people have no access to power and less than a third of sub-Saharan Africa is electrified.

Connecting Afghans to power is key to boosting an economy weakened by decades of war and improving living standards in a country with a poor record on health and education.

Demand in Kabul has trippled over the past five years and is rising each year. Samadi estimates Afghanistan will need around 3,000 megawatts (MW) to meet the country's needs by 2020, compared with current supply of around 600 MW.

But demand is still so modest that his total forecast for 2020 is just 5 percent of what is consumed by the United Kingdom now -- even though Afghanistan's population is already nearly half the size of Britain's.

IMPORT SUPPORT

Power cuts are still a regular feature of life, especially at peak times, with more Afghans wanting to watch TV, use electric radiators or cook on electric stoves.

To meet its shortfall, the country has to rely on expensive, noisy and polluting diesel generators.

Access has improved since a new power line from Uzbekistan began transmitting electricity to Kabul in 2009. Land-locked Afghanistan also sources power from its other neighbours Iran, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. More than half of total supply comes from imports and that is unlikely to change in the near term, Samadi said.

Afghanistan's power stations -- mainly hydro plants -- have potential to produce around 500 MW, but actually churn out less than half because of water shortages and maintenance problems.

"For now we are quite vulnerable. We are dependent and here we have a problem," Samadi said.

Imports are also limited by an inadequate transmission network, and even though several projects are planned to strengthen power links, they will take years to complete.

OVERDUE BILLS

Despite millions of dollars of aid poured into the sector over the past 10 years, many big projects that could light up all of Afghanistan still remain on the drawing board, have faced cost overruns or have been delayed due to security concerns.

Afghanistan has the potential to produce up to 23,000 MW from its vast hydro, solar, wind, gas and thermal resources, but much of that remains unexploited due to ongoing conflict.

There is currently around \$200 million in donor funds flowing into the sector each year, but Samadi aims to make DABS more independent to negotiate the expected decline in foreign aid as most combat troops pull out by the end of 2014.

The firm, which had turnover of \$200 million in 2011, also urgently needs to strengthen its billing system, as it is currently owed around \$40 million, mainly by the government.

Samadi downplayed criticism that corruption has hampered revenue collection and the completion of projects.

"Maybe 20 or 30 percent (of the allegations are justified) . Still, the government, the donors are doing well," he said.

"This is a very difficult country to work in. Even if it is only a 50 percent success, it's still a success," he said. (Reporting by Agnieszka Flak; Editing by Sanjeev Miglani)

Canada picked its Kandahar moment

Globe and Mail, By Doug Saunders-Our decision, deeply entwined with Britain's, was made without the knowledge of NATO, according to a think-tank report

What on earth were we doing in Kandahar? Now that it's all over, that question hangs in the air. Decades hence, students will be stumped by that question in much the same way I was when my high-school textbook opened to Canada's place in the Boer War. It was full of sound and fury, but signifying exactly what? How did we pour five years, more than \$18-billion and 158 lives into something so large and nebulous? How do we avoid repeating the mistake?

The process that led from Canada's modest 2001 participation in the Kabul operation into the five-year semi-colonial Kandahar odyssey that began in 2006 remains something of a mystery. I've heard diplomatic and military officials of very high rank tell me they don't really know how Canada became embroiled. Al-Qaeda had already been banished from Afghanistan by the time we entered the south. Our soldiers were professional, extremely courageous, calmly civilized and never quite sure what had caused them to be there.

We now have some surprising answers. A team of analysts with London's Royal United Services Institute, a security think tank, gained unprecedented access to the confidential documents and British official records of the decision by NATO members in 2003 and 2004 to expand the Afghan war. Matthew Willis analyzed the Canadian decision, which was deeply entwined with Britain's. His paper, to be released this month, describes a decision made in secret by senior Armed Forces officials, without the knowledge of NATO or probably of Canada's prime minister.

"The Canadians and the British," a senior NATO official told Mr. Willis, "hammered out the whole thing without NATO's assistance, behind closed doors. ... We were not aware of the details."

While Canada was ostensibly fighting as one member of the 42-nation NATO International Stability and Assistance Force, the decision to establish a base in Kandahar, the most dangerous province, was negotiated in London without the knowledge - and against the advice - of the Brussels-based military

alliance. NATO had been pressuring General Raymond Henault, then head of the Canadian Forces, to set up a mission in the provinces of Chaghcharan or Herat.

But Canada's military officials had other ideas - and most were rooted in Canada's experience, five years earlier, in Bosnia. They had come to dislike fighting with some other countries - Mr. Willis writes of "the Canadian leadership's aversion to partnering with the Italians or certain other European nations."

The generals also felt that the Bosnia and Kosovo missions hadn't won Canada much international fame or recognition. Those had been real coalitions, and Canada had blended into the background.

"The reason went well beyond a Canadian desire to be patted on the back," Mr. Willis writes, citing his interviews with Canada's military leaders. "It was about being able to make one's voice heard in the political and military fora where mission-defining decisions were being taken, including, not least, plans for the use of Canadian soldiers. It was thus also about improving Canada's ability to exert its influence in accordance with its interests and values."

Prime minister Paul Martin must have known that Canada's troop commitment, just shy of 3,000 soldiers, was the most it could muster, and might not have been enough for a large and deadly province (it did prove to be inadequate). But the generals pressed ahead. Part of it, they told Mr. Willis, was a desire to please Washington.

He raises the "contentious question why the senior Canadian military leadership, and the defence and foreign affairs departments, persisted in pushing the mission forward. Ostensibly, the military was seeking redemption after a decade of unremarkable performances in unremarkable (read: peacekeeping) theatres; or perhaps it wanted to show the U.S., the Canadian public and other key allies that it really could do combat if called on."

"Implicit and sometimes explicit in all of the above," he concludes, "is the idea that Canadian planners were pursuing a principally national agenda divorced from the NATO plan and heavily conditioned by beliefs about what would go over well in Washington."

It is discomfoting to think that this dangerous war was prolonged beyond the ouster of al-Qaeda in order to further interests of organizational pride and stature. But this was a big part of the decision.

This may well be the reality of modern war, as we saw in Libya this year, where a handful of countries forged an ad hoc alliance in confidential meetings far outside of NATO's vision and without all its members - a

cafeteria NATO, if you will. It is a less formal process, but one whose miscalculations can cause years of damage.