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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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● (0905)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, we'll call the meeting to order.

This is our thirty-first meeting in our study on Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, and I believe it's our last scheduled meeting, so our witnesses should know that we saved the best to the last.

We welcome you. We're glad you were able to fit us into your obviously busy schedules. We appreciate the work that the clerk and others had to do to bring this together.

We would like to welcome, from the Afghan Women's Organization, Adeena Niazi; from Rights and Democracy, Ariane Brunet, coordinator; and from Open Society Institute, Rina Amiri. The other person at the table is there for moral support for Rina; she is not really a witness.

Also today, besides this subject, we have a notice of motion from Mr. Cannis that we'd like to deal with at the end of the meeting, if that is all right with you, Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Why don't we just postpone it and address it in future business?

The Chair: Okay.

What Mr. Cannis is suggesting is that we postpone this. We are going to have a meeting on Thursday to deal with future business. Is that all right?

Okay. So all we're going to deal with today is the witnesses. We'll deal with the motion on Thursday.

Thank you, John.

You'll have to choose who goes first, but the usual process is for each of you to have an opportunity to make some comments; then we open it up to a round of questioning. We have two hours allotted, until 11, and we try to finish on time because most of us have other duties to perform afterwards.

Whoever wants to start, please go ahead, and then take whatever time you need to make your presentations. Then we'll open it up for questioning. Thank you.

Madame Brunet.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ariane Brunet (Coordinator, Women's Rights, Rights and Democracy): Thank you for your invitation to appear before the committee. The issue of women's rights will shed light on the issue of security as regards women's rights in Afghanistan.

The rights of women in Afghanistan are a way of measuring the progress made with respect to the promises made to Afghans when the international community was developing its foreign policies in 2001 regarding Afghanistan and when the war against terrorism was getting underway. Women's rights are also a way of measuring progress in the promises made regarding equality, the militarization of peace and efforts to combat poverty in this era of the Millennium development goals. Women's rights in Afghanistan also lead us to ask questions about the type of security we choose to favour, about the type women first and the Afghan population generally are calling for, and the type of security required by a state of law, an effort to rebuild and develop the country.

All the reports that have come out in the past six months are clear: if there was a glimmer of hope in 2002 and 2003, if basic principles were enshrined both in the Afghan Constitution and in various programs established by the Afghan government, the international community and the NGOs, the deterioration of the tenuous relative security that had existed until then meant that violence against women assumed endemic proportions. Women's rights are, and for the time being, will remain something that is merely talked about.

What are we talking about here? The vast majority of Afghans do not enjoy such basic rights as access to water, food and housing. The shortage of electricity in cities such as Kabul remains a major problem. Last year, the per capita income of households was $13. There are no statistics, but everyone will tell you that unemployment is one of the significant factors feeding conflicts, war lord militias, drug trafficking and other types of criminal activities. The lack of infrastructure, the lack of jobs, a dysfunctional security system, the military concentration of the international community, whose first objective is to fight terrorism, the lack of a policy regarding support for the Taliban by Pakistan, the lack of coordination by the international community in the area of development and reconstruction—all of this combines to mean that women's rights are and remain the least important priority. And yet, women and children account for 71% of the population and the average age is 18.

● (0910)

[*English*]

In the 20th century, Afghani women have seen many attempts at modernization that have been structured around advances for formal rights for women. Each time, the reforms are accompanied by an ultra-conservative backlash. Women have been the bartering chip in the constant battle in the complex dispute over power throughout the 27 years of war in Afghanistan.

Today women have also been the subject of harsh turf battles, as certain forces in Afghanistan see women's rights as part of the westernization that the massive presence of the international community is bringing to the country. The continued rise of violence against women in the past five years has to do with the extreme level of stress the population is under and the profound deception of people who are confronted with a warped and distorted peace process that benefits the prolonged war on terrorism.

As they saw UNAMA's compound being built and the ISAF coming to protect the capital, Afghanis recognized that the international forces were making a valuable contribution to the rebuilding of a central state and were protecting the people from a renewed civil war. Afghanis were expecting a protective social mechanism to be put in place, as well as measures to start eradicating poverty, but security wasn't really happening in the sense in which Afghanis needed it. Women hoped for general law enforcement, and most Afghanis remain particularly concerned by the illegal occupation of land and houses by gunmen and their supporters. In rural areas, women hope to see a stop to constant threats from local armed factional groups, drug networks, and other smuggling groups.

In the spring of 2005, the report of the UN independent expert on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Mr. Cherif Bassiouni, documented illegal arrests and torture and the death of Afghanis held by U.S. forces in Afghanistan. At the same time, counterterrorist operations claimed more and more civilian victims. In May of 2005, Washington announced it would institutionalize its military presence.

A year before, the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium, a consortium of six Afghani NGOs and six international NGOs whose role is to survey the Afghan population twice a year on issues of civil and political rights, security, and economy, produced its second survey. It indicated that security was a pressing issue. Rights and Democracy is a member of this consortium. Security, in the minds of people, meant taking the guns away from militias and warlords, effective disarmament, and an increase in the national and international security prisons to keep the peace and the threatened rule of law.

The facts about security from a gender perspective are these: marital rape, sexual assault, child marriages, enforced marriages, and other forms of domestic violence are present in the lives of Afghani families. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission estimates that between 60% and 80% of all marriages in Afghanistan are forced marriages, and approximately 57% of girls are married before the age of 16. As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has noted, no relevant laws are in force and the perpetrators are never punished. She also pointed out that economic reasons play an important role in such marriages. Indeed, the practice of bride money causes girls to be seen as valuable assets that are exchangeable for money and goods.

At its 50th session in March 2006, the UN Commission on the Status of Women noted, and I quote:

> ...kidnapping, forced seclusion, so-called honour killings, and the exchange of girls and women for debt or feud...continued to be a major part of women's and girls' lives in Afghanistan and remained one of the pervasive barriers to women's empowerment and gender equality. The lack of adequate support and responses to women victims of violence has been linked to the high rate of incidents of self-immolation...during 2005. Women are often discouraged or forbidden from pursuing activities outside the home.... Cases of forced prostitution and trafficking among foreign women and Afghan women and children were also reported....

Qais Bawari, acting head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission for the southern region, based in Kandahar, said that they received 69 cases of self-immolation and murders from Helmand and Kandahar provinces in 2006 alone.

● (0915)

As reported by IRIN, the UN news service, Qais Bawari added that several "were related to marriages in exchange for drugs". IRIN also mentioned that the "head of the women's affairs department in Helmand, Fawzai Ulomi, said more than 20 women and girls had committed suicide over the past 10 months—most of them had been handed over to dealers instead of drugs, or to settle family disputes".

The Taliban and other militias continue to use death threats and physical attacks to intimidate women, particularly those working within the NGO community. Finally, as mentioned in Human Rights Watch *World Report 2007*, insurgents have carried out hundreds of attacks against teachers, students, and schools. More than 200,000 students attending school in 2005 have been deprived of an education in 2006. If a large number of girls went to school immediately after the fall of the Taliban, Human Rights Watch estimates that only 35% of school-age girls were in school in 2006. Girls' schools have been directly targeted.

The intensive organization of Afghanistan around the need for security, not only for itself but also for regional and international purposes, has changed our understanding of humanitarian assistance and of the promotion of human rights. The presence of both the International Security Assistance Force and NATO, the role of private security companies, the varied role of the U.S. Army and private security agents hired by the U.S. Army, the presence of the coalition forces, the continued control of territories by warlords working along ethnic lines, the continued tensions at the borders, the soldiers of the drug trafficking and sex trafficking trades, demands of both the donor agencies and NGOs and the capacity to frame their work, taking into account the militarization of a society that has already known over 25 years of war—this does change gender relations.

From a human rights perspective, working in Afghanistan for women's rights is a daunting task. The militarization of peace, hence the normalization of violence, combined with the effects of years of conflict, poverty, and natural disasters, the weak and contested central authority, and a population that is overwhelmingly rural and with little connection to institutions of state control renders the struggle for acceptance of democracy and human rights a multi-pronged task. It requires that we better understand the effects on women of the brutalization through militarization of their society, their community, and their families.

Women are controlled through tribal relations. As stated by Deniz Kandiyoti, “women have always been, and remain, wards of their families and communities”. The state is not central to the fabric of Afghan society, and it is within this constant tension between state and tribal law that we work on the normative framework of women's human rights in Afghanistan. “The domestic domain and the control of women are among the most jealously guarded areas in the reproduction of sub-national identities.” This is the context within which the government, development aid agencies, and NGOs have to work together in giving a sense of citizenry to Afghan women.

Finally, the combined conservative forces and the export of fundamentalist ideologies, practices still in use from the days of the edicts of the Taliban regime, and tribal and customary practices must be factored in when analyzing the ways and means to promote and defend women's human rights. Women in general, as well as women's groups, are keenly aware of the hostile and unsupportive environment within which their rights evolve.

One more stumbling block we cannot ignore is the public administration in the country. As Barnett Rubin and other Afghanistan experts have pointed out, the origin of the modern state is a recent phenomenon that lies in the confederation of the Pashtun tribes, which evolved into a dynastic state. While the state requires unity, the tribes need the state to remain at the periphery. It is in this conflicting relationship that women's rights lie. The enforcement of the shariah in the 1900s represented the modernist view, if we are to compare it with customary and tribal practices. Today, the Islamic mujahedeen victories, the years of war hero worshiping, the legacy of the Taliban regime, and the need to protect one's own culture from a western presence on Afghan soil has hardened the interpretation of shariah law.

● (0920)

Other indications of the difficulties in promoting women's rights within the state's apparatus were noted in the recent discussion Rights and Democracy had with Afghan women parliamentarians on the issue of *mahram*, the military male guardians. This was raised after some female parliamentarians were invited to participate in meetings abroad. Many male parliamentarians objected to the travel of these women without accompaniment of a *mahram*. The elected Parliament will not be an immediate ally to women's human rights struggle.

As in many other countries, tangible gains have been achieved in the area of legal rights. The ratification of CEDAW, without reservation—it's the only Muslim country in the world to ever have done so—and the guarantee of equality entrenched in the new constitution attest to this. Yet many will say that without resolving the role of Islamic and tribal laws and the requirements of international treaties without consensus-building, women's rights will continue to be a powerful bargaining chip in factional politics.

A much longer timeline is needed to be able to analyze whether those international human rights binding instruments have implementation mechanisms. Furthermore, unless these achievements are measured, taking into consideration Islamic law and tribal laws, equality and non-discrimination are principles that remain on paper only.

In her mission report of July 2005, Yakin Ertürk, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, concludes:

> Efforts to improve the status of women are closely linked to the challenge of multiple transitions confronting Afghan society today. Broadly speaking, these transitions include the transition from conflict to peace from a fragmented war economy to a sustainable growth economy, from factional struggles to national reconciliation, and from rule of power to rule of law. The realization of these tasks will take time. Asserting government control over and ensuring security in all parts of the country are certainly necessary preconditions to the establishment of the rule of law in the entire territory and to allowing all citizens to benefit from reconstruction and development. In the meantime, women and girls must be protected from violence as a matter of urgency.

These multiple transitions truly require genuine peace-building activities accompanied by security strategies geared toward state-building.

Six years down the road, women need much, much more time to be able to be counted in peace processes and the reconstruction and building of their society. Right now, they are faced with broken promises and renewed violence. Women need time to organize and build a constituency and support. They need time to heal and time to learn, time to strategize and time to trust, time to build local capacity and engage in advocacy campaigns to end the culture of impunity. Canadians have strongly indicated their support for women in Afghanistan. This should translate not into more money or military, but into more time and less pressure.

Thank you.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Niazi.

Ms. Adeena Niazi (Director, Afghan Women's Organization): I would like to start by thanking the Standing Committee on National Defence for inviting the Afghan Women's Organization to speak about the Canadian presence in Afghanistan, particularly as it relates to women.

As an Afghan Canadian woman, I am grateful for the role Canada is playing in securing and developing my war-torn country of origin. Like my fellow Afghans in Afghanistan and the overwhelming majority of Afghans in Canada, we support the presence of Canadian and international forces in Afghanistan. We are grateful for the partnership and solidarity of the Canadian people. We firmly believe that the international community has an important role to play in bringing peace and security for Afghanistan. By doing so, stability is assured for the rest of the world.

Earlier this month the Afghan Women's Organization held a national conference on the civil participation of Afghan women in Canada, during which 300 delegates passed a resolution supporting Canada's mission in Afghanistan. This resolution, which outlines our recommendations for Canada's role in Afghanistan, has been sent to the Parliament's members. It is the base for much of my presentation today.

Turning to an analysis of Canada's commitment in Afghanistan, the Afghan Women's Organization is concerned that the current debate about Canada's mission in Afghanistan oversimplifies and politicizes the very complex conflict and humanitarian crisis in our country of origin. We do not believe that the choice for Canadian policy should be limited to complete withdrawal or maintaining the current military mission in its present form. While Canada's military presence is essential, we also believe that Canada and its international partners can and must use a more balanced approach in helping bringing peace and security to the country of Afghanistan.

Concerning this need for a better balance, international assistance to Afghanistan has two essential components: military and developmental assistance. We believe the balance must be realigned in favour of greater emphasis on humanitarian and development work.

Canada's commitment of $100 million per year through to 2010-11 places it among the five top donor countries to Afghanistan. While the money allocated for reconstruction, reducing poverty, and strengthening Afghans' governance will certainly make a positive contribution, it is only a fraction of the estimated $4 billion that will be dedicated to military expenses by 2009.

The experience of other countries recovering from war tells us that more money and support are needed from Canada and the international community to strengthen governance and civil society.

At present, funds are insufficient to cover even the basic survival needs of the Afghan population. There's a $6 million shortfall in the amount requested by the UN agencies to respond to the needs of the estimated 80,000 people who have been displaced by the intensified fighting and drought over the years.

In pointing this out, we also want to recognize the efforts of the Canadian government to respond to the specific needs of women, such as the recently announced $1.75 million grant for the programs supporting the maternal health of women and literacy in Kandahar province; however, we believe Canada still needs to spend more on development.

● (0930)

A different military approach.

The presence of the Canadian military is essential to stabilize and support the current political process in Afghanistan. However, the stability of Afghan society is threatened not only by Taliban fighters but also by powerful warlords—as my friend stated very well—and their militias, who control large parts of the country and many of the drug lords. This means that the military needs to review its strategy, which targets only the Taliban. Disarmament and demobilization of armed groups in the country are necessary.

The Canadian military and its allies also need to reassess their combat strategy, which inflicts great harm on the civilian population. Current and past military operations cause civilian casualties and property damage, resulting in internal and external displacements of the people.

Furthermore, the tactic of launching operations and retreating to their bases after bombing villages is ill-advised. Afghanistan requires both security and development to exist hand in hand in order to achieve measurable success. Currently we feel there is too much focus given to combat operations. More troops are required to ensure civilian protection and stability and to promote economic and social development throughout the country.

Linking security and economic development.

So far, economic development in Afghanistan has been progressing at a very slow pace and has not resulted in tangible improvement in the lives of ordinary citizens. Basic necessities such as drinking water, electricity, and roads are still in poor condition. Expeditious development of the basic infrastructure is desperately needed. Lack of security is related to the neglect of economic development in Afghanistan. This war-torn country has an extremely high level of unemployment.

A greater role for civil society and supporting women's development.

A strong civil society is vital for the successful reconstruction of Afghanistan. However, support to civil society organizations has been inadequate over the past five years. Civil society organizations are much more efficient and effective than the government in addressing many social issues and needs. For example, the many obstacles and limitations that Afghan women confront are best addressed by community and non-governmental organizations.

Women require special attention in Afghanistan because they have experienced a great deal of hardship throughout the years of the war and continue to live in poverty and suffer from discrimination and violence. My colleague Ariane has spoken about the suffering of Afghan women. Empowerment of women can be achieved not only by giving them political rights as adopted in the constitution. Doing so also requires empowerment of their economic conditions and elimination of discrimination against them. Many women continue to live in extreme poverty. Three decades of war and destruction have created hundreds of thousands of war widows who are the heads of their households. For these reasons, providing training and employment to women should be a priority for development projects.

● (0935)

Policy recommendations for the Government of Canada.

In order to bring real and sustainable peace and security to Afghanistan, we urge the Government of Canada to coordinate with its NATO and ISAF partners to: ensure military operations go hand in hand with civilian protection, supporting good governance and rule of law and promoting reconstruction and developmental programs; comply with international humanitarian law in military operations by taking every measure to avoid civilian casualties; confront all actors responsible for insecurity and violence in the country, and this means protecting Afghan civilians from regional war lords, illegal armed groups, as well as the Taliban; implement an effective disarmament program and strategies to address the drug trade; commit sufficient resources and troops to carry out an effective security and peacemaking mission throughout the country and develop appropriate military strategies for different regions of the country; support the development of civil society institutions, particularly women's civil society; establish new and enhance existing connections between civil society institutions in Canada with those in Afghanistan; expedite economic development in order to eliminate poverty; and continue to support the professionalization of Afghan police and army through sustained and long-term training and funding commitments.

I thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Amiri, go ahead.

Ms. Rina Amiri (Lead Consultant for Afghanistan and Regional Matters, Open Society Institute): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson, esteemed members, and guests for having me and giving me an opportunity to speak about the situation in Afghanistan.

I'll speak extemporaneously because, being the last speaker, I don't want to cover points that my colleagues have already addressed. Perhaps what I might do is just reflect on my personal experiences in the last five years in Afghanistan. I'm also of Afghan origin. I went back five years ago to help with the peace process in Afghanistan, and I worked largely with the United Nations in the implementation of the Bonn Agreement.

In the last couple of years I've had several opportunities to address audiences in the United States and Europe about the situation of Afghan women. Each time it's been an opportunity to gauge our progress. What I see in the media are varying and starkly differing pictures of the situation of women. Some provide a very optimistic picture, pointing to facts and figures that appear to suggest that the situation of Afghan women has drastically changed for the better, that Afghan women are now emancipated and empowered and have a great deal more power than they've ever had.

I was recently looking at Canadian papers, where I've seen some surprising articles suggesting that no improvements have been made, that the situation of women is severely negative and has in fact deteriorated. My perspective lies somewhere in the middle.

Five years ago when I went back—and I'll even speak before that, as an Afghan woman who has looked at the situation in my country—apart from isolated periods where we've had opportunities, where we did have women in parliament, where we did have women participating in the political processes, the improvements made in the political realm in Afghanistan have been unprecedented. In fact, with our administration, created by the Bonn Agreement, we had a female vice-president. You know these facts and figures, but I would still like to reinforce them. In our first presidential election in our history we had a presidential candidate who was a woman. We had women participating in every single process, from 12% in the emergency Loya Jirga, to 20% in the constitutional Loya Jirga, to 27% now of women who will serve as representatives in parliament. I do think these are significant gains and that they're not simply symbolic.

One of the many hats I wore at the UN was serving as the liaison for parliament, and what was striking to me was the extent of women's participation in parliament. I hadn't expected it the way I saw it. Women who had been elected at a local level, and who were hitherto unknown, were speaking in an equally powerful way and taking almost equal space to men in parliament. When a woman's hand was raised, it counted the same as a man's hand, and that was not the case in the emergency Loya Jirga and the constitutional Loya Jirga. There were women representatives at those jirgas, certainly, but there was not the same level of equality. Now there are rules and procedures so that if a woman or a man, or somebody from Helmand or Panjshir or Baghlan, raises their hand, their names are taken down and each has an opportunity to speak. It isn't simply the women of Kabul who have popular media attention who speak. The most prominent members, the most vocal ones, are women I'd never heard of before, women from Laghman—Pashtun women who are often depicted as the more repressed women. That was and is encouraging.

The level of the building up of civil society I think is significant. I completely agree with my colleague that there has been a lack of attention and resources for civil society, but civil society has taken the window of opportunity to emerge and to gain a voice, particularly women's organizations.

● (0940)

Over 200 women's organizations that I know have been registered, and they've been establishing networks.

In the last couple of years the political processes have used civil society organizations to carry out civic education and to carry out information sharing about the elections, and this has provided an opportunity for women to extend their networks beyond Kabul. I think the groundwork that's been done has been significant. You do see more of a plurality of voices. These voices are not always working harmoniously, but I think, having worked with women's organizations in many countries around the world, I can certainly tell you that what we're seeing in Afghanistan in that regard is not unique.

These are significant developments that I think we should recognize and applaud. But I've also seen, as my colleagues have noted, areas where there have been no improvements, unfortunately.

The significant improvements we have seen have been, in large part, in the urban centres, particularly in Kabul, where most of the resources continue to be concentrated. The lives of women in rural areas have not improved. The situation of women's health continues to be of grave concern. Women continue to have the highest mortality rate in Afghanistan. Over 40% of women die as a result of maternal mortality issues.

As my colleagues have already noted, the trafficking of women, women being married underage, and women having to deal with forced marriages continue to be problems, and problems that have not been adequately addressed. We have laws against it. Our constitution and our civil laws specify it very clearly, and it's also against shariah law. Yet at the same time these practices are prevalent.

Domestic violence is a grave issue and something that is slowly being recognized. In fact, it has always been an issue in Afghanistan, but now it is something that everyone in the country is becoming more aware of. The awareness is there, but there is a lack of action in terms of actually doing something about it. There are a few shelters for women, largely in Kabul and Herat, I believe. There are three or four in Kabul and one in Herat, but the situation of women is desperate, and attention is overdue in this regard.

There are some areas where we've had progress. Unfortunately, that progress is no longer there, and in fact there's a decline. In particular, the area of security is where we see that the situation has actually worsened. One of the first roles I played when I went back to Afghanistan five years ago was in working on the emergency Loya Jirga process. I went to the south. I was working in Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabol. I recall that only a few days after I had arrived in Kandahar I was in my office and somebody, one of the guards, brought up a woman and said this woman wanted to speak to me. She sat down, shook my hand firmly, and said, “Now that I have found an Afghan woman in the office, I am going to ask you what you are going to do to help us be a part of the political process. We want to be a part of the emergency Loya Jirga. You're a woman, you're Afghan, and you're going to help us.” And they started the process of actually getting involved in the emergency Loya Jirga.

The international community wasn't quite sure how and to what extent they were going to involve women in the south because of the perceptions of how conservative the culture is in the south. I ended up with a female national colleague travelling, just the two of us, to Helmand and to Zabol to meet with women. And I remember, once when we went to Helmand, that within an hour of arriving there, over a hundred women gathered in the school to hear how they could participate in the emergency Loya Jirga process. There was a hunger, an anticipation, a great desire to participate and a recognition that this was a window.

● (0945)

That school I went to is closed down now because of security conditions. It's one of 165 schools that have been closed down in Helmand. Six per cent of women were attending school before that, so you can imagine what the situation is right now in terms of education. This is one of 290 schools that have been closed down in Afghanistan due to security concerns.

Over 130 schools in the country have been the target of arson attacks in the last two years. As both my colleagues noted, of the three million students that we had celebrated going back to school, 200,000 are no longer going to school. A significant number of those who are deprived are women and girls. I think that's one of the great tragedies, looking back, and where we have encountered a significant loss.

One of the first women I worked with in Kandahar, Safia Amajan, was killed in September 2006. It was a national tragedy, and a personal tragedy for me, to see this woman gunned down who had sacrificed so much. She had asked for protection, as you know, and they refused. Eleven departments—out of 34—of women's affairs in Afghanistan and in the provinces...30% of them have received threats. Most of these threats are in the form of night letters. There hasn't been the type of systematic action that would be required to address it. This is a serious concern.

What I hear a lot from the west, when I come to the west, is a real desire by the international community to do something about the situation in Afghanistan. In 2001 this was the appeal that was made: look at the situation of women; look at what women in Afghanistan have suffered; we have to mobilize and do something. This was the rallying cry. But you cannot improve the situation of women without improving the security situation as a whole.

I find it ironic that on the one hand people speak of the situation of women and the need to address this, but at the same time they say, no, we shouldn't engage militarily in the country; we should not send soldiers. There is a hesitation. You cannot isolate the situation of women. They're not an island; they are part of Afghan society. As in every conflict situation in the world, those who bear the brunt of conflict, those who bear the brunt of instability are children and women. We have seen what the women of Afghanistan have endured in the past. Unless there is a resolute commitment to put soldiers on the ground and address the security situation in Afghanistan, the situation of Afghan women will not improve.

I'll make a few more points because I know we're running out of time.

The other issue that's significant in addressing the situation of women in Afghanistan is the fact that women's rights have been a red line for the international community. I agree that to some extent it's made women's rights a western issue, but that's always been the case. That's always been the reaction that hardline conservatives have made throughout our history—that women's rights are artificial; they're not part of our culture. But I think we have enough of a foundation in Afghan culture to counter that.

This argument was made in the 1920s when Amanullah Khan, our first progressive king, was trying to institute progress. In the 1950s, our king, who is in Afghanistan right now, tried to institute reform. They laid the foundation, and now you actually have a large number of Afghan women and men who believe women should have some rights and who believe women should have the right to education. Now, there are variances and views in that regard. Some will say just until the sixth grade and that's it, and others will say no to high school, and then probably a lesser portion would say to advance the education.

● (0950)

But that is a part of our culture. The right to work is a part of our culture. I contest those who say if we bring this in and if we make this argument, this is something that Afghans will reject. Afghans don't want western feminism in Afghanistan, but Afghans accept that women should have rights. The international communities should continue to keep women's rights as a red line. The Afghan government faces two serious constituencies right now that it has to address. One is the conservatives and one is the international community. Quite frankly, these are the two that have power. While our civil society remains weak and nascent, we need the international community to leverage it. That's very important. It has been pressure from the international communities that has created that space.

The hardliners have also exerted pressure and have been effective. The fact that the ministry of vice and virtue has now been reinstated as a department in the government is because of the pressure from the conservatives. But the international community has to be there to leverage civil society to ensure that there's monitoring of such activities so we don't go backwards in terms of the reforms we've created, and also to ensure that civil society and the women's organizations have a power behind them. They need that at this point.

I would also say it is very important, when you're looking at women's issues in Afghanistan, to engage the men. In some cases there has been a polarization, where men have felt resentful that there's so much emphasis by the western communities on women's rights, to the point where they feel excluded. Bring the men in. When I went on missions around the country, oftentimes it was the men—because I would have to meet the men first before meeting the women—who would argue that they wanted school facilities for women in their areas. In fact, once I went with the World Bank on a mission where they were looking at where to put some reconstruction projects. We were in a village, and there were people from another village there. They were each arguing very forcefully to get us to go to their village to establish a girls' school—probably up to the sixth grade. Nonetheless, they wanted that.

Engage the men. If you engage the men and you engage the community, you're going to have less resistance because they are going to feel they have input.

Canada has been very good in this regard, particularly in Kandahar, in the reconstruction projects. I know that CIDA has engaged the communities in identifying which projects to support. That's something that should continue and should be applauded.

Direct support going to the communities is important. While I think it's good that Canada has given $1.2 million to UNICEF to address maternal mortality issues, at the same time giving money directly to communities is important to people. The micro-credit support that the Canadian government has been giving is something that I think is a very positive measure and should be supported. That will go a long way. Finding mechanisms to give a little bit directly is going to go a long way. It's very important to identify how to do that type of economic empowerment of women and communities in Afghanistan.

Finally, the note I want to make is that one of the arguments I've heard, which I've found deeply disturbing, is from some who say that the situation in Afghanistan is not going to be changed, that maybe one of the things that should be done is to just have a negotiation with the Taliban and perhaps let them have control of the provinces in the south; let it be. But I'd like for us to go back five years to why the international community engaged in Afghanistan in the first place. They engaged in Afghanistan because the Taliban was an ideological movement that was not open to negotiations. It was not open to a discussion on any issue.

● (0955)

If you recall, the blowing up of the Buddhas was one such incident, where the international community from throughout the world tried to engage the Taliban, and they were not open to it. The Taliban has never shown an inclination to stay only in the south. What we hear in Afghanistan is that the Taliban will not be satisfied until they're in their vehicles driving into Kabul.

It's an ideological movement, and we have to remind ourselves of that. It is not a movement that's there purely for political gain. It's there for ideological gain, and ideological gain will not happen until they gain control of the country. Those who will suffer the most will be the women, once again.

I will conclude with that note. Thank you.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thank you all very much.

We'll open it up for questioning. It's a seven-minute round.

Mr. Coderre.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I would like to tell you that it is a great honour for me to be part of the national defence committee in my role as the new official opposition critic on defence. I'm extremely pleased and honoured to see the emphasis placed on the issue of women's rights in the committee's hearings.

I would like to take this opportunity, Ms. Brunet, to extend special greetings to my friend, Jean-Louis Roy, a person for whom I have tremendous admiration. I also have tremendous admiration for your organization, as a former minister responsible for the Francophonie and because of my work as a special advisor to the Prime Minister on issues involving Haiti.

[*English*]

What I realize.... First things first. The women's issue is not the only important benchmark for evaluation of our situation from the perspective of the international community on whether we succeed in a mission. I truly believe that the first thing we have to do—and it's true in any country—is understand and be sensitive to the cultural complexity of the country.

It's not that we're coming here to your country with, as we say in French, a *projet clé en main*. We're not coming here to tell you that this is our definition of democracy and this is how things will work, or that if you want to succeed, this is what you have to apply. There's so much complexity that we have to understand that if we don't have that first reflex as a start, we don't give ourselves a lot of chance to succeed.

I truly believe, though, that the quality of life—equity, awareness, education for women—is an international issue. It's not from the *occidentaux*; it's for everybody. That's a minimum that at least we have to go for.

I noticed that President Karzai has this weekend what you call a Jirga, a gathering with the elders. I believe that in certain countries the role of women is key to seeking liberty, freedom.

I would like to hear you on that issue, Madame Brunet, on *droit et démocratie*, because that's kind of an overall issue.

But also, Madame Niazi and Madame Amiri, what should the role of women be with the elders? If you have the conservative.... That's a word I don't necessarily like, for other reasons, but if the conservative or the historical reality of the women's role in Afghanistan is that there is an issue with the elders, if you truly want to be an actor or an actress of change and stability, what should the relationship be?

That's my first question. What should the relationship be vis-à-vis women and the elders, and how can you be part of that process to make sure that we achieve it?

We are there only to accompany; we are not there to impose ourselves. We are there not as an act of retribution, as the minister of defence used to say; we are there to stabilize and provide the proper security environment. To accompany means that it's your responsibility also to be part of the solution.

So first, what should the relationship be with the elders? And how can you be part of that process to achieve what we all want?

Madame Amiri?

Ms. Rina Amiri: I'll make two points.

One, Afghanistan is an evolving society, and before, with the Loya Jirgas, you didn't have the participation of women. Eventually, in the seventies and eighties, you ended up having an increased level of involvement at a symbolic level. The 2001-02 process, the emergency Loya Jirga, was one in which a quota was established to ensure that women's participation was included, both in the emergency Loya Jirga and the constitutional Loya Jirga.

I hope with time there is going to be a recognition that women are part of this process, of these traditional mechanisms, and that these traditional mechanisms should continue to evolve and change to include plurality—plurality in terms of ethnic groups, in terms of regional representation, in terms of gender representation.

Practically speaking, if you have a delegation going into a province and they're going to be seeing a group of elders, you can't request that women be a part of that. You should sit and just meet with a group of elders, ask them what can be done with regard to improving the situation of women, but not stop there. In addition to that, you should have women on your delegation, and you should request to meet with a community of women. The women representatives should be those who meet with a group of women and ask them specifically what improvements can be made with regard to their situation.

● (1005)

The Chair: Madam Niazi, you have about one minute to reply—or whoever wants to.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: First, I'm talking about the involvement of women, which wasn't something new that happened after September 11. The women of Afghanistan were involved throughout the liberation struggle from the former Soviet Union. They were even leading the wars and motivating the freedom fighters during the British war—all women from all over the country.

Malali Joya is one of the prominent Afghan women who had a very important role in bringing liberation to the whole Afghan nation. She is a Pashtun woman from Kandahar. Tajik, Pashtun, and all women have participated.

Also during the Taliban rule, when women had no or very limited resources, they mobilized their own organizations. I worked with the women during the Taliban rule from 1997 onwards, and they were amazing. It's not something very new.

I left Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion. I was teaching at Carleton University. I never changed my lifestyle; I was the same. I felt highly respected and secure being a woman.

What's happening now is a culture of war. When the Soviet Union was defeated, women's strength and activities were a big part of that. Then they were completely ignored, because the new regime targeted women.

Today the women's issue in Afghanistan has become very political. One reason that's cited is that the west entered Afghanistan to change the situation of women. I am very glad that there have been positive changes, such as those my friend Rina Amiri mentioned.

Those are the advantages and privileges...that even one person in the total population of women in Afghanistan will have and enjoy advantages. When we are talking of women of Afghanistan, it's women from the entire Afghan nation, of which a large number are still suffering.

While having women's rights in the constitution is a very positive step, we shouldn't make it a showcase. When we are talking about the women of Afghanistan, we should consider each woman.

Rina Amiri talked about women in the Loya Jirga. I was part of the Loya Jirga. I was the Canadian Afghan woman elected to the Loya Jirga. The women who participated were amazing. They were very strong and articulate.

It doesn't mean that just in the Loya Jirga they were interested. I worked with women in refugee camps. I remember during the Taliban rule women who were deprived of all of the basic necessities. They were so strong.

I remember once when I took a UNHCR representative to the camp to show the condition of women. The person said, tell your country leaders to stop war and you can go back to your country. An uneducated woman responded, I cannot do that. She said, you are representing the UN; you have to take action at the international level to stop war in Afghanistan.

So having said that, you're very right, and I'm glad you mentioned that. When we are talking about women, we have to take into consideration the cultural complexity and the history of Afghanistan.

● (1010)

The Chair: I'm going to have to stop you there. We're well over the time. Hopefully over the questions we'll give you a chance to finish.

Mr. Bachand, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): First, I would like to thank you for your presentation which I found extremely interesting. I would also like to start by stating the position of my political party, the Bloc Québécois.

We are in favour of military intervention in Afghanistan, but we think that if it is not combined with reconstruction and humanitarian aid efforts, General Richards is right when he says that the war cannot be won in military terms only.

I am not opposed to the fact that there are armed forces there—in fact quite the opposite is true. The issue of security is omnipresent in Afghanistan. In fact, I and some of my colleagues have just returned from Afghanistan—you must have seen that in the newspapers this week—and we spent most of our time confined to the camp there. We only left it once or twice to see the military aspect of our work there only.

Let us consider for a moment all of the armed forces present in Afghanistan at this time: there are 2,500 soldiers, six people involved in Foreign Affairs and six others working with CIDA. We would like to see a balanced mission. Clearly, without that, we are going to miss the boat in Afghanistan. If the Afghans cannot see an improvement in their quality of life, we think that we will lose this war. That is why we are stressing that the mandate of our mission in Afghanistan must be rebalanced.

I would also like you to talk about the jirgas, as distinct from the Parliament. Mr. Karzaï is often given the nickname of the mayor of Kabul, because he is having a great deal of difficulty imposing his authority outside of Kabul. My personal impression is that the further away one gets from Kabul, the more the authority of Parliament is weakened, and the further one goes south, for example, where the Canadians are located at the moment, the more the jirgas play a significant role. Unfortunately, when I see photos of the jirgas, I do not see any women sitting with the group of Afghan elders. So I would like to hear your views on that.

Moreover, I think it is wrong to say that women are making tremendous progress. We often hear that there are 68 women in the Afghan Parliament and 186 men. We might be inclined to say that that is excellent, because women account for more than 25 per cent of the members of Parliament. However, how much real authority does Parliament have over the country as a whole? That is the fundamental question. Even if there were 100 or 150 women in Parliament... My impression is that Parliament's authority does not extend beyond Kabul. I would like to hear your opinion on this.

I share Ms. Amiri's views regarding the ideological aspect of the Taliban, but we should also remember that in the last World War, the Nazi regime was viewed somewhat as the Taliban is today—it was an ideological regime that wanted to invade and control. And yet, at certain times there were some openings, some channels of communication that made it possible to see how far they had gone.

I can assure you of one thing at the outset: from what I saw in Afghanistan, the Canadian armed forces will not agree to opening the door to the Taliban to let them come back to Kabul with the oppressive regime of the past that was so opposed to women, and so on. I do not think they will go that far, but I do think that it is important to open a door, and I think President Karzaï has done just that. I would like you to tell me how you react to the fact that President Karzaï opened the door to the Taliban.

Finally, I would like you to talk about Ms. Safia Siddiqi, who is the Minister responsible for the Status of Women. I read this morning that she will be arriving in Canada. What is this woman doing to promote the status of women in Afghanistan? She is working within the Afghan Parliament, but I am wondering whether my reservations regarding the Afghan Parliament should apply to her as well? Is she unable to garner any respect for her authority outside Kabul, as is the case with President Karzaï?

● (1015)

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ariane Brunet: I want to thank Mr. Bachand for his questions. I will let my Afghan colleagues answer your questions about the jirga, they are in a better position than I am.

You are right, Parliament and the government have little influence in Afghanistan. Often we hear Afghans saying that Karzaï is in fact the mayor of Kabul, which is right. This does not mean that there is no rule of law at all in Afghanistan.

I think that we Canadians have a very harsh attitude. I think that I explained this in my document. Is it because we are in a hurry to get out of Afghanistan? We will need quite a bit of time to do this. This is why I stressed the point.

Yes, for the time being, Karzaï does not have much power outside a few provinces, there is no doubt about that. That being said, implementing democracy in Afghanistan involves supporting the government, but we must also be clear with regard to the powerful war lords who are still operating in Afghanistan and who cannot be ignored. The Taliban are not the only ones, Hekmatyar and others are still powerful in Afghanistan, we must not ignore that fact. Thus, we must take these factors into account when dealing with security.

When I am asked about the influence of women and of the Department of Women's Affairs, I answer that it is weak. Let us not forget that this is, after all, an instrument created by the Bonn accords and that all these things require a long-term commitment to a gradual adaptation process.

Let me tell you, as one who has been involved in the women's rights movement for 30 years, that I do not believe that there are many national mechanisms for women's rights that have any influence. We must look at this honestly. Therefore, why should we expect the Afghans to have a department that has more influence than ours do, especially at this time? Let us try to see things in perspective.

Finally, I think that there is another very important point. Of course, negotiations are important, this is what peacemaking is about. I know that peacemaking is not very fashionable at this time, but it is crucial that we make peace with the Taliban. We have made peace with others with whom we were not very eager to associate, but this is what peacemaking requires. On that basis, we can settle other matters.

One of the problems with the Bonn accord is that it was only concluded with the Northern Alliance, which created further problems. We must learn to compromise.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm allowing these answers. We're running a little over time on the seven minutes, but if either one of you has a short comment to make, I'd appreciate it.

Ms. Rina Amiri: I'll try to be very quick.

In regard to what you noted about development and having more balance in terms of the military development work, I completely agree with you. In fact, I think one of the shortcomings in the last five years has been that there has been a great deal of attention on the political process without adequate attention paid to reconstruction. In the absence of real and tangible changes in people's lives, you're not going to see people continue to strongly advocate for this peace process, as we've seen. They've been doing it with the hope that it's going to translate into real changes in their lives.

In terms of where the parliament is and how much power it has, it just celebrated its one-year anniversary. It's a mason institution in a country that hasn't had institutions in a substantial way for the last three decades. I think we have to be aware of that.

In terms of the role it plays, I think right now it's more at a national level in terms of a national dialogue. In the long run I think it's going to be important in terms of, hopefully, national reconciliation.

But you're right, at the local level what counts right now is the local institutions more than the national institutions. I do think that whether you're talking about shuras or jirgas, which are largely assemblies of men in most areas, those are significant parties that you have to talk to.

I will reinforce the point I made before: you shouldn't just simply conclude that because these are the traditional mechanisms that work, women cannot be included. As my colleague said, women are active, they are present, they have very strong perspectives as to what should be done, and their voices should not be excluded. So make sure, just to reiterate, that you have women on your delegation who do reach out to the women in the community. That's going to be very important.

In terms of negotiation with the Taliban, I'm really glad you brought that up, so that my point is clear. I certainly think there should be efforts to reach out to the Taliban. We have to make a distinction between the Taliban...there are moderate Taliban. Perhaps even make a greater distinction. There are the Taliban who are foot soldiers who are in it for the money. There are Taliban who've been opportunistic, who have simply joined the bandwagon when it has been conducive to their political gains at one point or another. Then there are the hardline ideological Taliban, like Mullah Omar and those in the leadership. Those distinctions are very important to make.

In the last several years, yes, the President has repeatedly made appeals to the Taliban to come and join the government, and I think that should be commended. In fact, the Taliban are representatives in Parliament, as well as a number of savoury and unsavoury characters. We also have a national reconciliation process in the President's office, where there is a formal process in place, led by Mr. Mojaddedi, to bring the Taliban in. Those efforts should be promoted. I also agree that one of the shortcomings of the Bonn process was the exclusion of the Taliban.

My point was going to discussions where I've heard that the way to address or to resolve the situation in Afghanistan, or to disentangle the international community from the Taliban, is simply by making a deal with the Taliban, where they get a few of the provinces and the rest of the country is left as it is. That, I would again say, is unrealistic.

In regard, finally, to Safia Siddiqi, she's a member of parliament, a very vocal and active member of parliament, and she has been doing quite a bit of work. In terms of her role, of how powerful she is, again it goes back to what the parliament is. Despite the fact that, yes, it's still a weak organization, I think overall in the country people have been impressed at the extent to which the parliament has been active. It's been limited, and there has been some frustration at the same time by those who anticipated that once we had a parliament in place there would be significant changes. But it is a parliament where they are quite earnest about playing a significant role in the process, particularly in terms of monitoring the government, in terms of being able to become a better advocate.

● (1020)

I think those types of efforts should be supported by the international community and that their capacity should be strengthened in this regard.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you.

Ms. Black, I'm afraid we're really running over time. If you want to give her an opportunity with your question, that would be good.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): I'll do my best.

I want to thank each of you for coming and for your presentations today. I found them very interesting and quite helpful.

As my colleague said, we just returned on Sunday from Afghanistan. One thing that struck me when we did go outside—although we weren't able to go too far, to a village or a city—was that I never saw one Afghani woman. I watched very carefully, to see if I could see a woman, and I did not. I confirmed that we hadn't been able to see a woman with other people on the trip.

I want to thank you, Ms. Niazi, for the recommendations. I think it's very helpful to the committee that you came with specific recommendations.

Each of you talked a lot about the different factions in the country, the complexity. The more I become aware of the situation there, and the more I read, the more I understand how incredibly complex each and every step forward is in terms of the tribal culture and the difficulty in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

I want to ask you to elaborate on what you really think an actual peace-building process would entail. If you could have a blueprint that would bring the people of Afghanistan to real peace and security and an opportunity to live their lives with some sense of a future of peace, what would that entail? I think we also need to keep in mind the whole situation in Pakistan, where we know that people are moving back and forth across the border with some sort of impunity, and how that factors into a peace process.

The final comment I want to make is to ask what is going on with the ministry of vice and virtue? I think all of us were surprised to see a ministry called “vice and virtue”. I understand what Ms. Amiri was saying about the balancing act that President Karzai has to work with in the conservative factions of the country, to try to make his government work. I do understand that. However, for most of us, just the title of it brings the hair on your arms up. You get very apprehensive about it.

You said there has been a decline in security—all of this with so many international soldiers and the big NATO operation there. It doesn't fill me with hope when you tell me that.

So could you talk about the peace process and what you think may work? I think each of you talked about the peace process, so if Ms. Brunet could start.... I would like to hear from Ms. Niazi, too, because she obviously has something to say that she hasn't been able to get through.

● (1025)

The Chair: Ms. Brunet.

Ms. Ariane Brunet: The first issue is there is more military than we can count in Afghanistan, between the U.S. coalition, ISAF-NATO, private security, drug trafficking and their soldiering activities, warlord activities. That's why I'm saying there's a brutalization of the society that has already gone on for 27 years. So gender relations are affected by that.

In that sense, there is no coordination that we can see—true coordination—between those armies on the ground and the different objectives those different armies have. That is crucial—coordination of the international community on the security issues on the ground is paramount. Afghans do not know to whom they address themselves. One uniform against the other is not automatically something that they can grasp—who's doing what on the ground. And that does affect the security of people on the ground. In my view, this is paramount.

So, yes, the decline of security...the rule of power versus the rule of state makes it so that indeed there is a decline; you see that the rule of law has difficulty seeing the light of day in Afghanistan. So the need for security, for social measures.... Yes, indeed, we have seen—I have seen in my travels—farmers who are Taliban at night, for simple security issues, but also for employment. There is no employment.

So that's another issue that needs to be addressed—and yes, the meshing of development with security is paramount.

When you're talking about the department of vice and virtue, the way I'm looking at it is that right now they are in the business of staying quiet. There are a lot of watchdogs around the vice and virtue department right now.

I worry more about the fact that Karzai needs to set up vice and virtue to calm some of the extremists. Because there are so many other issues that need to be addressed, I presume that Karzai has decided to do that to calm X, Y, or Z. Yet it is an indication, and it's not an indication that one should take lightly.

But I think the most important things in terms of women's rights and security are that Afghans need clarification and there needs to be coordination. There is no coordination in development in this country and there is no coordination among the different goals and mandates of the different militaries.

● (1030)

Ms. Adeena Niazi: I'll try to brief.

I agree with all my friend, Ariane, has mentioned, and I have also given my recommendations to the members of Parliament. If they haven't received them so far, they will receive them in the mail.

I truly believe that one of the reasons for insecurity in Afghanistan is the poverty and unemployment. Especially if the youth are unemployed, it is very easy for the Taliban to recruit them for economic benefits or whatever. Another reason is the major displacement of the Afghans. Recently 10,000 Afghans were displaced as a result of the war, and there is no adequate compensation or assistance available. Some of them go back to Pakistan, where they can be recruited by the Taliban.

To fight the Taliban is not just to target them in Afghanistan; they have to be targeted at the source, the roots, where they get their training before they come here, which is mostly outside the Afghan border. It doesn't help; they come and go.

There's another reason for insecurity. I know insecurity, poverty, crime, and drug deals go hand in hand. We have to tackle the drug problem in Afghanistan. Recently it has increased to seven times more than it was in 2001, so this is a big issue that the international community has to tackle.

Also, I do believe in the empowerment of women. Women constitute more than half of the Afghan population. When I mentioned the strong women, I mentioned Malalai of Maiwand, who was in the war against the British, and all the great women we had. We still have such women in Afghanistan. Half of the Afghan population—who are women—are paralyzed. They have to also be encouraged and empowered, and assistance should be available—training, jobs—to tackle the poverty.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Amiri.

Ms. Rina Amiri: I have about four brief points in terms of peace-building. One is that vetting of government officials is very important. We need to inspire more confidence in the government, and one of the ways to do that is to have a system of meritocracy and vetting to ensure that the people who are in positions are those in whom the people will have some level of confidence.

Reconstruction and income generation is going to be absolutely critical, as we've already noted.

I agree with my friend Adeena that the anti-narcotics campaign is absolutely critical. The aerial spraying that is being suggested would be a disaster and would only exacerbate the conflict. You would end up having many more recruits for the Taliban. It would really add a whole additional layer of terrible complexity.

Finally, on coordination, I completely agree with you that we need more coordination of the donor community and more effective strategy development in that regard.

Then, with regard to vice and virtue and where it stands, I have the same information: that they're keeping a low presence and that the President did this as a means of appeasement to the religious community. They argue that in every Islamic country you have some sort of vice and virtue, largely looking at gulf countries, and they noted that it was needed in Afghanistan. They have developed it, but it's a department, not a ministry. It's a department within the ministry of religious affairs, and right now I think it's simply a real indication of the sway that the religious and the ultra-conservative communities have in Afghanistan.

That's going to be a reality that we will have to deal with for quite some time to come, but it requires the monitoring that the international community has been doing, in support with civil society.

Thank you.

● (1035)

The Chair: Good. Thank you very much.

Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Rina Amiri: I'm sorry. Can I just add one more point? It was really an important point.

The final point concerns the military. Unless you stop the source of the Taliban, you're not going to get peace in Afghanistan. This means engaging Pakistan. If we do not engage Pakistan, we can send as many soldiers to Afghanistan as is possible in Canada, but it's not going to stop the war in Afghanistan. You have to go to the source.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Thank you, all of you, for your fascinating presentations. They have been really interesting to listen to, and I've taken copious notes. I have to narrow my questions down to the limited time I have.

I'd like to start with Ms. Amiri, if I could. I hear you loud and clear when you say that unless we improve the security of Afghan society as a whole, it's going to be difficult to improve the situation for women, as they cannot be isolated from the Afghan society. That's the message I got when I was in Afghanistan earlier this month.

But then you raised the interesting topic about negotiation. If you've been following the debate in Canada, you know that some have suggested that we simply negotiate, and you have differentiated between the moderate and the extreme or hardline members of the Taliban.

My first question to you would be, if you cannot negotiate with the hardline Taliban, if they're simply ideologically motivated, not politically motivated, how then do you deal with them? Or is it simply a matter of, as you say, putting more soldiers on the ground? That's my first question.

My second question has to do with micro-finance. As you know, and as a number of you have acknowledged, the minister for CIDA has emphasized programs for women and children, and you've both talked about the $1.75 million for maternal health and literacy. The minister also put forward $5 million for the vaccination of seven million children. That's certainly an indication of where this government is going.

But what you may not know is that Canada is the largest donor to the micro-finance program, even ahead of Norway, the U.K., the U. S., and the World Bank in our contributions, at $40 million. You mentioned that this was a positive measure that needs to be supported.

Could you elaborate on how it empowers women in particular? We have external examples, but I'd like to hear it first-hand from what you've experienced.

My last question is to Ms. Niazi. It has to do with your comment about supporting professionalism among the Afghan National Police and in the Afghan National Army. During my brief visit to Afghanistan, I had a chance to visit the Afghan National Army base and to talk with some of the soldiers. I was incredibly impressed with their motivation and discipline and their desire to serve the country.

I am wondering whether you have any suggestions on how we could increase the professionalization of the army and the police.

Those are all my questions.

Ms. Rina Amiri: In regard to negotiations with the hardline Taliban, what has to be done is what has been done, what is part of negotiation strategies in any civil war. You have to compel the hardliners to understand that the objectives they seek cannot be gained, that their war cannot be won. The way you do that comes both politically and militarily.

Right now, as I noted before, the reason the Taliban have such confidence is that they have some machinery behind them. They have resources, they have money, and they have training that is coming from the Pakistani border area. As long as they have those things, the Taliban are not interested in negotiating because they perceive themselves to be in a winning position.

The Taliban see the wavering of the international community in terms of troop presence in Afghanistan. They see a reluctance in the international community to engage Pakistan on the issue of the Taliban. They see themselves to be on the winning side. In fact, they're rather optimistic that they're going to have Kabul by this summer. Negotiating in a situation where there is such a level of confidence in terms of their strategic position is not going to get you anywhere, in my view.

The other point I'd make is that in terms of negotiation and having discussions, there's not a problem with that with any group. Bargaining is the issue. Bargaining and giving away the south of Afghanistan is what I have heard in some discussions that I have found very disturbing. I think that's a failed strategy.

In terms of micro-credit, I think this is something Canada should absolutely be applauded for, because often it takes very little money to change lives. What I've noted in the refugee camps, where my colleague Ms. Niazi worked, is that you saw the dynamics change in terms of women's positions when they had income. When they brought food to the table, their power in the house changed. This was where a lot of the women emerged as leaders. They're the civil society leaders in Afghanistan today, because once you gain earning power in any country, you end up getting more power. Oftentimes it takes very little money.

In addition, one of the reasons why the micro-credit program would be so effective is that it enables the women themselves to figure out how they can earn income while respecting the cultural constraints they have to live with. If they can't leave the house but they can sew fabrics at home and that's the way they're going to bring money in, then they can do that. But you leave it up to them to figure out how that's going to be done, while at the same time giving them earning power to change their power position in the house.

● (1040)

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Before responding to your question, there's just one point that I have to add, because I forgot to earlier.

When we are talking about security in Afghanistan, the Taliban are the biggest and most major threat to Afghanistan, but we cannot ignore the other warlords. We never talk about them. Mr. Karzai, in one of his speeches last year I think, mentioned that there are bigger dangers to Afghan society, sometimes even bigger than the Taliban. If we ignore them, there won't be peace. Of course, I reinforce and repeat myself again that the sources of Taliban that are outside of the borders have to be targeted.

In terms of the police and army, the national army, which is in the process of establishing itself and recruiting more members, is very much welcomed by the Afghan people. It's a good army. In terms of police forces, some of the policemen are former militia who have been recruited in the police. Sometimes these forces cause insecurity for the public and for the people.

I was in Afghanistan last year. One of my colleagues, an Afghan woman, was a very strong woman. She has worked there throughout. She doesn't cover herself. She doesn't wear a chowdry, but when she was going home, she had a chowdry in her bag. She said she was wearing the chowdry when she went there because her house is opposite the police office. I said that's secure, that's good. She said no, she was scared of the policemen, because if they saw her face, anything could happen. She secured herself from the police.

Some of the people have stopped looking to the police for their security and safety. They're scared of the police because of the individuals they have recruited. I think it should be ensured that the individuals are not members of former militias, whatever group they were in. And they also need adequate, ongoing training and financial assistance committed to them.

Ms. Ariane Brunet: If I may add, an embedded police trainer in all provinces is really something essential, not only in big cities, but in all provinces. So if you embedded police trainers, it would help greatly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hiebert, are you okay?

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Yes.

The Chair: Good.

Okay, the problem with being generous on the first round is that it shortens up the second round. So in order to get four spots in—one more from each party.... I guess we don't need four; we need only three. Ms. Black is way down on the list, and I'd just like a couple of minutes at the end, if I could, to ask a question.

Ms. Bennett, go ahead.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thanks very much.

In the washroom consultation I learned the difference between the formal process around the jirga and the shura process in the local villages. How do we do a better job in terms of process?

Almost half of our development money for Canada is going to Afghanistan now. How do we make sure that money is being well spent? How do we track the dollars to make sure we're getting results for the money that's being spent? It seems to be a lot of money. The money we give to UNICEF or the money we give in these big cheques, compared to money being spent by the military in their cash-for-work program, and compared to the kinds of things that we know in micro-credit could be changing the lives of women—are we giving the money to the right people? Are we tracking it enough?

In terms of balance, it seems that we have lots of boots on the ground in soldiers, but the staffing for CIDA and Foreign Affairs is extraordinarily thin and doesn't seem to have the capacity to actually track what happens when you give the money. As they said, does this group of women really get the money to make this, or did somebody just go to the bazaar and buy it? I think that was what Sarah Chayes had said to us. Without that kind of accountability and tracking, we may not be doing what you would want. Do you feel that our dollars are making as much of a difference on the ground as they could be? Is there anything in terms of process that we should be doing differently?

A voice: If I may, because I was the one who spoke to you in the washroom—

● (1045)

The Chair: I don't know if we can do this. Just hang on.

In order for you to speak, we have to be able to record who you are, where you're from, and all that. If it's all right, maybe somebody else can deliver your message.

Go ahead, Ms. Brunet.

Ms. Ariane Brunet: In the meantime, I could answer.

One of the things that's striking in terms of accountability—because I've been on that end of things—is the importance of ensuring that there are more people on the ground, but also, you're asking a lot. Some of those women NGOs haven't done this type of work before. So when CIDA comes up and says to give them accountability on a results-based management basis, and nobody's willing to train those people as to what results-based management might mean, you have a huge problem. I have to transform the reports I receive at Rights and Democracy so I can give them back to Parliament in words that you can understand and in accountability terms.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think we're pretty impressed that there are people who haven't even ever had experience with chairing a meeting, or taking minutes, or an agenda, or all of those. Surely, at all levels we need the kind of mentoring we're doing for the police and the auxiliary police, which I thought was spectacular, and that takes bodies.

Ms. Ariane Brunet: I'll be extremely happy if that is one thing we get out of this meeting today, because no, there is no training for NGOs on the ground as to what accountability systems are about or what results-based management is, and those things are dearly needed. So you can't be expecting results the way we in Canada are accustomed to seeing them from Afghans who don't have the base.

Also, if there was coordination...because you may ask, from a Canadian point of view, for accountability under system A, B, and C, while the Dutch ask for C, D, and Z and the Germans ask for V, W, and Z, etc. So at this point there's confusion. It's extremely difficult, and they end up working more for our taxpayers than for the needs on the ground. That needs to be taken into account, and I am very grateful that you asked the question.

The Chair: Just make a short comment, please. Go ahead.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: I can't start without thanking Dr. Bennett, because she has been a long friend of Afghan women, and she stood beside us while we were struggling under the Taliban. Thank you for that.

Thank you for your question. In terms of how to use the money efficiently and effectively, some of the money that goes to constructing roads and big projects, a big chunk—I'm not talking really about Canada, I'm talking about the international community—goes back to the country in terms of contracting with the companies. Also, in terms of some projects that go through UN bodies in Afghanistan, the cost for administration is too high. Also, for most of the projects that are in Afghanistan, they are decided from the top to the bottom. It terms of being more efficient and meeting the needs of the grassroots women, it has to come from the bottom to the top.

I have not been funded. Our organization is not funded by any government body. We raise our own funding, but I know that with a little money there could be a big change if the real needs of the women or the people on the ground were really evaluated in consultation with grassroots organizations.

Women's groups, as Ariane said, need more training and they need more support. If tomorrow something happens in Afghanistan and the UN bodies leave Afghanistan, there will be a big gap. There is a big gap between the high-level UN bodies and the grassroots women's organizations. That's why, sometimes, the money is not going to the most needed projects.

● (1050)

The Chair: Thank you.

We have to move along in order to get all the spots in here.

We'll have Ms. Gallant and then Mr. Bachand.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you.

I'd like to address my question to Ms. Niazi.

I want to specifically address the comment you made about our military presence in its current form and there needing to be a balance between the $7 billion you stated was being spent militarily versus the $100 million per year for development. Is that correct? Is that the balance you were referring to?

You stated that people are being displaced from their homes due to damage arising from combat operations, that more civilian protection is needed, and that we must stop the warlords and the Taliban from inflicting hardship on the people.

As you know, Canadian soldiers are training Afghan volunteers to become a cohesive force while teaching them about human rights and the Afghan constitution. At the same time, the Canadian Forces, together with the RCMP, are teaching Afghanis, who line up for days in hopes of being recruited to be Afghan National Police people. They too are being schooled in human rights and are being given the skills to investigate, and they're being taught how to read and write as well. They don't even have that. They can't make reports, because right now they don't have the skills to read or write.

The Canadian military personnel are treating Afghanis. And presently, in areas controlled by Taliban warlords and the drug lords, the schools to educate children cannot be constructed, nor can any development, for that matter, proceed. So the Canadian Forces mount operations to drive the oppressors away. Prior to these operations, they distribute pamphlets and let the civilians know that there is going to be an operation so they can move out while the soldiers clear the area of the aggressors. The Taliban have guns, and they shoot at our men and women. The aggressors launch their offensives from structures and can only be stopped if the structures are eliminated.

Our soldiers are digging wells to provide water, which was mentioned here today as part of women's right. They are building schools, training police, assisting the Afghan National Army to be self-reliant, and constructing medical centres, including those dedicated to prenatal and obstetrics. The Afghan people themselves are being hired and paid to provide the labour in the construction projects and to be workers on the Kandahar airfield, thereby assisting in the economic situation of the Afghan people. Labourers, farmers, and shopkeepers are using the bubble of security created by the Canadian forward-operating bases to rebuild their lives.

Could you tell the Standing Committee on National Defence, from the military perspective, what you would be doing differently?

● (1055)

The Chair: The question was addressed to Ms. Niazi.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Thank you for stating that. Actually in my presentation I did mention that we are grateful for Canada's role. Canada is playing a major role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. But I tried to say there is not a real balance between the construction and the combat. Also I mentioned that we need more troops in other parts of the country. As my friends mentioned, and I also repeatedly mentioned, only targeting a specific place where the Taliban repeatedly keep coming and attacking will not bring real and sustainable security to the country. We have to consider the country as a whole.

I also mentioned that Canada's approach should be the whole government's approach. Rule of law in all parts of Afghanistan has to be re-established; it has to work on that judiciary system. I also mentioned again and again that for the economy, the economy for women, we need more programs specifically for women; we need women's power, because if women are in power, if women are having discussions and working, it will reduce poverty, and if poverty is reduced, crime and insecurity will be reduced as well.

In terms of the military, I mentioned military or more troops committed to Afghanistan, to all parts of Afghanistan, to deal with the other major issues. Again I am repeating myself, but we shouldn't turn a blind eye to warlords, who are a big threat to Afghan people. This is something mentioned by all my colleagues and myself also: Afghans are wondering, why fight the Taliban and not go to the source of the Taliban? They are not going to the root of the Taliban, which is out of Afghanistan's border. It's obvious they are coming from Pakistan. They are receiving training. Why is the international community not fighting with them from there? This is also a major issue with Afghans.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bouchard, to wrap up, five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I also thank the three of you for your presentations.

My first question is addressed to Ms. Niazi. You said that we must put an end to drug trafficking, which has increased considerably over the recent years.

I do not know whether you are of the opinion that the poppy fields must be destroyed, that the poppies grown by the Afghans must be destroyed. Would it not be better to adopt regulations or legislation that would allow poppy growers to sell their products to western countries for medical purposes? Would it be good to take measures of this kind? Moreover, if we destroy the poppy fields, would it not be good to have other crops to grow instead?

I would like to hear what you have to say about this. What should we do? You want to put an end to drug trafficking, but obviously, the poppy fields are at the source of the trafficking.

[*English*]

Ms. Adeena Niazi: The source of the problem, as you mentioned, is the poppies. Behind that, there are big warlords and drug lords. I don't think legalization of the poppy will help the illegal use of the poppy. What I mean is that the farmers see very little money from that; they benefit very little from poppy cultivation.

The farmers should be given training, adequate equipment, and some other options for growth. For poppies, the soil doesn't need to be very well prepared. Poppies can be grown anywhere; it's very easy to grow poppies. But I think if the farmers have an alternative to that, if they have the equipment, if they have money, if they have training, that could be.... And it's not only the farmers. There was a refugee who came from Afghanistan and claimed refugee status here, and the basis for his claim was that one of the drug lords was forcing him to cultivate poppies. When he refused, he and his family were beaten. That's why he fled Afghanistan and made his refugee claim here, because his life was...and that man was powerful.

We have to see what happened, what went wrong, that after September 11, the poppy cultivation went so high in Afghanistan. Despite all the crimes the Taliban committed in Afghanistan, I can say that during the Taliban, the poppy cultivation was almost zero. What happened? We have to find the main reason for that increase. We have to tackle the source of that, and also provide assistance to the farmers.

I hope I answered that.

● (1100)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Thank you, madam.

My second question is for Ms. Brunet. You spoke of improving security for women. You said that security is a permanent problem. Do you think that the missions sent by Canada and other NATO countries are basically too involved with solely military operations and that some basic changes are needed for implementing security measures that are not so military?

Ms. Ariane Brunet: In fact, there are many aspects to security. We are talking about women's rights and it is not by concentrating on terrorism that the security problems of women can be solved in the towns, villages and schools. That is not true. It means that the numerous commitments to security made by various donor countries must include the security of the Afghan people in exercising their rights under the rule of law. It means that we must focus on justice and put an end to impunity regarding current issues like the harassment of women using public transit, so that women can live a normal daily existence and make social progress.

Currently, we have all kinds of security plans that do not work because they are not coordinated, because security means different things in different places, because we think that things are going badly in the south but that things are going well in the north, which is not true. Therefore, all these disparate views on security in Afghanistan create problems for women on the ground. Another problem for women on the ground is the constant presence of men with guns. This must end at some point. This completely changes one's concept of society. The Afghan people are criticized for having traditional cultural standards for women, and so forth. This is not true. The problem also comes from the 27 years of war. And we have added five years to this, without being able to show these women on the ground that we are moving towards greater equality and not only on paper. Of course, the principles are good and efforts are being made, but on a daily basis, we need to have fewer guns.

When we interview these women in these seven regions that we visit every two years with the consortium, we always get the same answer. Naturally, there is some difference between the condition of women in the city and women in rural areas. In the city, women need less harassment from the police and more respect of the dignity of women. In rural areas, they do want to have a strong national army, but basically, as a woman who has to live with [*Editor's note: Inaudible*], what I am to do? If I feel treathened, I will go back to my tribe, to my closest relations and the war lord of the area. In that way, I will be much more secure. With all these armies and all these different kinds of security, we end up having no security at all.

I do not know if I am being clear.

● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to acknowledge Ms. Samad, the wife of the ambassador, for being here. I know you wanted to get into the debate very badly, but I will give you the opportunity, if you have comments that you would like to make, to do them in writing and offer them to the clerk so we can include them in our study.

Thank you all very much. It was a very good session. Hopefully you had the opportunity to say the things you wanted to say when you came. I know some of you came from a distance, and we appreciate that.

To the committee, this brings to an end our study on Afghanistan. Now it is in the hands of our trusted research staff to come up with a very concise and accurate report. We have some time to do that.

Thank you all very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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