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Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): *Bonjour, mes collègues*.

This is the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, meeting number 5, Thursday, November 29, 2007.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108 and a motion adopted by the committee on November 20, 2007, we will continue our study of Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

We are very pleased to have with us here today Gerry Barr, from the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, who is no stranger to this committee. We've certainly appreciated his input over the years on other bills and other studies we've done. Also, we have Emmanuel Isch, World Vision Canada; and Lina Holguin, advocacy officer, Oxfam Québec, who also has already appeared before our committee.

Forgive me if I mispronounce some of these names, but we also have Mirwais Nahzat, program officer, World University Service of Canada; and Graeme MacQueen. I don't see him here, but perhaps he is in the back.

They're coming later. Good.

So we welcome you here this morning.

Before you begin, I have a couple of announcements for our committee.

First off, the Minister of Foreign Affairs will be available to meet with the committee next Tuesday, from 3:30 to 4:30, on issues of Afghanistan. We aren't able to have this meeting during our regular scheduled slot, so just be aware of that.

For the second hour, Angela, have we made the switch of times?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mrs. Angela Crandall): Yes, we have.

The Chair: So this would not be a new time?

The Clerk: It's a new time for the committee.

The Chair: All right, we've switched over. For the second hour, we have already agreed to meet with the Canadian Food Security Policy Group. So this is a change of time.

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): We're not sitting at eleven?

The Chair: We will not sit at eleven. This meeting will be changed to 3:30 till 5:30.

Mr. Bernard Patry: On Tuesday.

The Chair: On Tuesday.

Take note of that, as it does not mean an extra meeting. We will just cancel the first meeting, and we'll take it from the 3:30 to 5:30 slot.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Why don't we adjourn and go to listen to Mr. Schreiber?

The Chair: Secondly, the minister from CIDA will be available to meet with the committee on Tuesday, December 11, from 3:30 to 4:40.

Now, this would be an extra meeting, because on that day, if you recall, we are going over to the University of Ottawa, which has their international conference at the Chateau Laurier, so that time is taken.

So you can reflect on this a little bit, and we can maybe discuss it later in committee business.

That being said, my intentions today are to cut this off at about five minutes to twelve and bring in our next group. They will be cut off basically at a quarter to one, and then we will have committee business. So those are my intentions for today.

Madame Barbot.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Chair, I'd like us to come back to the scheduling issue just to make sure everyone agrees and has understood. It was glossed over a little too quickly for my liking.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go over it at a later date; I don't want to take any more time away.

We have one group here today.

A voice: They're all part of the Afghanistan Reference Group.

The Chair: Good. We will move into the first round.

We welcome you folks again. We apologize for our announcement time. The time is yours.

How many different presentations will we have?

Mr. Gerry Barr (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Council for International Cooperation): Seven, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: All right, continue. And then we'll go into the first round of questioning.

Mr. Gerry Barr: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know most of the committee. I won't introduce myself again. I'll just say that today I'm here with a number of civil society organizations that have come together as a network called the Afghanistan Reference Group.

The group will offer a range of perspectives on Canada's role in Afghanistan. Not all of these perspectives may be common perspectives, but they do have in common the fact that they are rooted in on-the-ground experience in Afghanistan and other conflict zones around the world.

We've been asked to share our thoughts on Canada's mission in Afghanistan, including CIDA's role and approaches to establishing a lasting peace.

Our first recommendation for you is to sharply reorient Canada's role in Afghanistan to emphasize development and diplomacy, and to treat negotiating humanitarian access as a top priority.

Why? Well, it's because Canada's integrated three-D or whole-of-government approach has been skewed toward the military and has served to militarize peace-building and humanitarian and development assistance. It's a fundamental flaw in an integrated whole-of-government approach, and it has serious implications on the ground for the delivery of aid and for the prospects for peace.

The last two years have seen an increasing shift towards putting security first, on the assumption that development will follow. Security is, of course, naturally important, but it cannot come at the expense of development and diplomatic efforts. Indeed, the way in which we are currently pursuing security efforts is hampering the effective delivery of aid. There continues to be a troubling blurring of lines between the international development efforts and the international military efforts.

One of the most disastrous ways this is playing out on the ground is as growing threats to aid workers. This year alone, at least 40 aid workers have been killed. On top of that, 76 humanitarian workers were abducted, and 55 humanitarian convoys and 45 humanitarian facilities were attacked, ambushed, or looted by gunmen. Clearly, the majority of victims are Afghans. At the same time, there is an increasing reliance on Afghans to deliver aid, because the security situation is so precarious and because internationals are seen as part of the military effort against the Taliban.

The current situation is the worst agencies have had to cope with. We are talking of organizations that have been active in Afghanistan for decades, through the Soviet era, the mujahedeen, the Taliban, and even the 2001 ousting of the Taliban by U.S. forces. In almost 30 years of war, only now has the threat to aid workers reached these kinds of levels.

Aid worker insecurity poses a major challenge in at least two ways: first because, if aid workers are threatened, abducted, or killed, they are of course unable to deliver assistance; second because aid agencies have to decide whether their staff are able to operate with reasonable levels of safety.

The more aid staff are targeted, the less likely it is for organizations to actually engage in programming. In both instances, it means that aid can't reach those in need, and that has severe repercussions on the country's ability to make vital progress in development.

According to Afghan sources, female aid workers are particularly affected and are having an even more difficult time in being able to do their work—with obvious implications, of course, for many of those in the beneficiary population who are among the most vulnerable Afghan women.

In response to this dire situation, some will suggest and have suggested that the military should take up the role of delivering humanitarian and development assistance. CCIC and its members, including those active on the ground, say this will only make a bad situation worse.

● (1115)

It's imperative that Canada refocus its efforts to place humanitarian access at the top of its agenda and to support a more concerted effort in development and diplomacy. Speakers today are going to offer some practical alternatives on how development and peace can be supported in Afghanistan.

I'd like to introduce you now to Ms. Lina Holguin, the policy director of Oxfam-Québec.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barr.

Welcome again, Ms. Holguin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lina Holguin (Advocacy Officer, Oxfam Quebec, Afghanistan Reference Group): Mr. Chair, members, I'd like to begin by thanking you for having given Oxfam-Québec the opportunity to give its perspective on Canada's role in Afghanistan. I'll be speaking on behalf of Oxfam Canada today also.

[*English*]

Oxfam has worked in Afghanistan since the early 1990s providing humanitarian and development assistance. We currently have operations in Hazarajat, Badakhshan, and Kandahar, and we fund local organizations across the country.

I will focus my presentation on three areas: the protection of civilians, the role of the provincial reconstruction teams, and community peace-building.

On the protection of civilians, the manner in which international forces are prosecuting the war has caused far too many civilian casualties, at least 1,200 this year alone according to Human Rights Watch and UN figures. The high proportion of civilians killed has occurred in international forces' operations.

The high proportion of civilian casualties can in large part be attributed to air strikes, which occur in Afghanistan four times as frequently as in Iraq. Searches conducted by Afghan and international forces also have on a number occasions involved excessive use of force, destruction of property, and/or mistreatment of suspects.

Thousands more civilians are casualties in another sense. On top of the 130,000 long-term displaced people in Afghanistan, recent fighting in the south has displaced up to 80,000 more. The war has affected people's ability to farm, forced the closure of education and health facilities, and curtailed the availability of humanitarian relief workers.

Canada, therefore, should reorient its military approach. Protection of civilians must be the top priority in order to minimize the killing and displacement of civilians and the destruction of civilian property. Canada must ensure proportionate use of force and advocate for the same with its allies, particularly in regard to air strikes and house searches.

Canada should sponsor a new cross-sector body to monitor and investigate civilian casualties, destruction of property, and alleged abuses, and ensure timely and sufficient compensation is paid to civilians who have suffered from military operations.

Canada must help people remain in their villages and help respond to the needs of those forced to leave, providing them with protection, support for resettlement, and long-term assistance.

On the provincial reconstruction teams, these teams were set up as an interim structure to facilitate a stable and secure environment. They have since overstepped that mandate to engage in extensive short-term development and relief work. Communities appreciate any help they can get, but PRT projects are too often driven by the desire to win hearts and minds and fail to fulfill the minimum standards of good development or humanitarian practice. These rapid-impact projects usually lack community participation, and as a result are inappropriate or unused. The development process needs to be owned and led by Afghan communities. PRTs are no substitute for long-term development work, and the military has neither the expertise nor the staying power to engage in it.

PRTs also blur the distinction between the military and aid workers, placing our staff in considerable danger and reducing our ability to operate. Association with the military has also turned PRT projects, such as school buildings, into targets.

Canada's PRT should be refocused. PRTs should exist only where security conditions make them absolutely necessary. They should concentrate on achieving security, stability, and law and order, which is their primary expertise. They should engage in relief activities only where lives hang in the balance and no civilian alternative exists. They should not engage in development work.

In accordance with the interim status of PRTs, Canada should develop an exit strategy for its PRTs, with downscaling and closure plans for when areas become comparatively secure.

● (1120)

On the issue of community peace-building, almost all efforts to build peace in Afghanistan have occurred at the level of national politics. The capacity of Afghan communities to resolve their own disputes and to build and sustain peace has largely been neglected. The recent deterioration in security, particularly in the south and southeast, is evidence that top-down approaches are by themselves inadequate without parallel, nationwide peace promotion in communities. A participatory, bottom-up approach to seeking peace can strengthen the communities' capacity to resolve disputes and conflicts, develop trust, and promote inter-ethnic and inter-group dialogue as a basis for peace.

Existing community peace-building programs implemented by Afghan and international NGOs, including Oxfam, have been highly effective, but they benefit only a tiny proportion of Afghans. Canada and other donors, therefore, should significantly expand support for NGOs and civil society actors carrying out such work and they should promote the development of a national community peace-building strategy.

Finally, peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without improving the lives of ordinary Afghans. This requires strong leadership by the Afghan government and substantial and long-term commitment on the part of the international community, including Canada, not only to secure development progress, but to halt the spread of insecurity. Canada can play a crucial role in pressing all players to meet the challenges that Afghanistan faces. Millions of lives depend upon it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to our next presenter, Mr. Ish.

Mr. Emmanuel Isch (Vice President, International and Canadian Programs, World Vision Canada, Afghanistan Reference Group): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to make known our point of view and to put forward some comments and analyses. We know that you are addressing many different issues and we'd like to take advantage of this opportunity, over the next couple of minutes, to give you our viewpoint and recommendations regarding Afghanistan.

[*English*]

Like the Canadian government, we as NGOs also want to contribute to helping realize an Afghanistan that's peaceful, stable, and self-reliant. World Vision, as a child-focused agency, has a particular interest in the plight of girls and boys and their families and communities. We want to make sure they have a brighter future in this country after many years of turmoil and poverty. All of us as NGOs here share the same hope and aspiration.

There are a number of issues I want to raise today, and I will focus on three particular recommendations.

World Vision and other NGOs present here today have various levels of involvement in Afghanistan for ourselves. We've been operational since 2001 in the northwest part of the country. We are involved in various programs in the areas of agriculture, livelihoods, food security, nutrition, health, and water. We are currently assisting over 500,000 people and operating on roughly a $17 million budget. Our six-plus years of being on the ground have given us the opportunity to interact at different levels, but especially at the grassroots level, and to gain an understanding of the realities that exist on the ground in that particular part of the country. We've learned this also through operating in similar environments in other parts of the world, including Darfur, south Sudan, Sri Lanka, the West Bank, and so on.

I'd like to briefly preface what I'd like to emphasize today by having a bit of a distinction about the context of humanitarian assistance and what this means.

When we talk about humanitarian assistance, what we're really referring to is saving lives and alleviating poverty. When we do this, it must be provided in accordance with issues of impartiality, neutrality, independence, and humanity. When we talk about long-term development, especially in the context of Afghanistan, we're talking about a much more complex set of processes that involve a community-based, long-term approach, but one that is also focused on building the capacities of individuals, communities, and the local and national governments. Ultimately the goal is to see these communities become self-sufficient and productive, and it is in this framework that I'd like to make my recommendations this morning.

Our first recommendation is that as you consider ongoing Canadian support for development work in Afghanistan, we would recommend strongly that funding decisions and supports be primarily driven by needs and priorities identified by the Afghan people, especially within the communities where they reside. This means for us that there has to be a broad strategic approach with an overall country perspective in mind, ensuring that results are happening at the grassroots level.

What we are seeing over the past two to three years in Afghanistan is that donor resources have been unevenly distributed, often favouring areas of high poppy cultivation or regions of so-called heightened security, and this uneven distribution has created and probably worsened grievances that have existed historically in communities but that have now been heightened as a result. Often the failure of development actors to ensure that the quieter provinces in the north and the west receive a tangible peace dividend has played into the north-south fault line within the country and contributed to an increase in security that we are seeing in more and more parts of the country. Poverty levels are extreme throughout the country, so for us it's critical that all parts of the country receive tangible benefits from international and community support, and we encourage Canada to do that as well.

We want to make sure as well that donor funding not only is more equally distributed, but also is not primarily focused on urban centres, as often there is little trickle-down within the grassroots. We want to make sure that the population, wherever it is located in the country, gains confidence and hope that they will also benefit from international and government aid efforts. I'm not suggesting that Canada should support programming in every province or district of the country, but certainly that the bilateral assistance should be more evenly spread as a result of the comments that I made, and again I want to emphasize community base and grassroots.

Second, we would like to further emphasize that Canadian aid strategies should recognize that development funding delivered in partnership with NGOs can often be the most effective and sustainable way to fight poverty, and this also applies to Afghanistan.

● (1125)

Right now, we estimate that less than 15% of humanitarian development funding is channeled through NGOs and civil society groups in Afghanistan, which means the rest goes to the multi-laterals, such as the UN or the World Bank, or to private contractors. We often see some leveraging capacity that we have as NGOs, which those larger institutions don't have, especially in terms of our ability to interact and relate and sustain our presence in local communities. I think that gives us a comparative advantage in terms of our ability to implement activities, but also to show results from those activities. As well, we are often able to work in areas the large institutions are not necessarily able to work in. Sometimes, the cost of assistance through a number of NGOs may be a bit higher, but we have to again take into account the benefits as a result of that as well.

Just to offer a quick word on military involvement in the context of developing assistance, we increasingly note the trend to channel more resources through military actors, including the provincial reconstruction teams. While well-intentioned, the military too often employs approaches that don't actually cultivate community ownership or capacity-building or allow them to engage in a longer term. We have to balance the need to get some quick activities or a job quickly done with the need to have a longer-term, sustained presence.

Finally, the last point I want to make is that sustainable development needs stable local governance. Canada's approach to developing Afghanistan should support the development of strategies that can build up subnational governance structures. We often refer to some issue-related corruption and lack of capacity in that country, and we're aware of it, but what we would like to see happen more is that there be more investment in the capacities of local governments and local communities.

I myself witnessed this when I travelled to Afghanistan a few months ago and met with different ministries in the areas where we work. They're very much understaffed and they have a lack of capacity. We need to invest not just at the national level but also within the communities so that the local authorities can more effectively provide and deliver services to their own people.

That's an issue we need to be more aware of. It's what we refer to in speaking of investing more in subnational capacities for the government. As World Vision and I'm sure others who are present in this room have seen through our work, as we invest more in local capacities, we can see some more tangible benefits at the end of the day.

In conclusion, I just want to state that contributions and commitments that Canada has made towards Afghanistan are important and need to be recognized; however, such initiatives must be more evenly spread, supported by actors who guide the experience and power Afghans at different levels, especially locally within communities, and be implemented according to Afghan community needs and priorities. Only if we channel our assistance to Afghanistan with those principles in mind will long-lasting, positive development take place in that country. I'm sure we need to recognize that Canadian aid commitments will probably be used more effectively if we take this broader approach.

At the end of the day, what we can see is that Afghan children, families, and communities that we work to assist will have a brighter and better future.

Thank you very much.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thank you for your presentation.

We'll move to Mr. Nahzat.

Mr. Mirwais Nahzat (Program Officer, World University Service of Canada, Afghanistan Reference Group): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As an Afghan Canadian, it is an honour for me to share with you my personal reflections on ways to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan. I feel equally obliged to openly underscore the complex challenges, achievements, and unfulfilled dreams of impoverished Afghans.

Afghanistan has achieved remarkable political, social, and economic progress since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Born and raised in Afghanistan, I personally never experienced peace, but consistently encountered images and daily realities of poverty, bloodshed, conflict, and human vulnerability. After fleeing from Afghanistan almost 15 years ago with my family, I returned to my native country in October 2007, in order to assess first-hand some of the major challenges and changes in ordinary Afghans' lives. It was a rewarding and eye-opening opportunity to return to a destitute society that was gradually recovering from the legacy of war and neglect. However, we also know that rebuilding Afghanistan remains an extremely daunting task.

I would underline the four crucial challenges that merit your particular attention.

First, as outlined, Afghans are increasingly becoming disenchanted and frustrated with relentless deterioration of the overall security situation in Afghanistan. Afghans do continue to perceive security as the most striking challenge for the nation. My colleagues today have eloquently addressed the issue of security. But allow me to add a pertinent question to the analysis, and that is to say, what is the perception of Afghans about the overall security? The answer to that question appropriately would indicate that Afghans are fed up with the incessant showering of bullets, aerial bombings, and increasing risks of civilian casualties and to properties.

They advocate for a more comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to security, namely, an emphasis on personal security. From a human development perspective, personal insecurity means persistence of human rights violations, injustices towards women, the growing narcotics trade, institutionalized corruption, land mines, and land disputes. Long-term prosperity and stability in Afghanistan, the region, and globally are not possible without addressing these interrelated challenges of personal security in a balanced and coordinated manner.

Secondly, nearly 70% of Afghanistan's population of 30 million is under the age of 25. In spite of the international intervention in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, Afghan youth, according to the United Nations, remains largely disenfranchised, under-skilled, highly neglected, and worse, without a clear voice on their own behalf. If the international community continues to underestimate the severity of youth vulnerability, the Afghan youth will most certainly be exploited by drug lords, war lords, and extremist elements with irreparable consequences to national, regional, and global peace and prosperity.

Thirdly, a protracted quarter century of conflict and instability combined with the symbolic existence of fragile and dysfunctional state institutions have contributed tremendously to the lack of human resources in Afghanistan, something my colleague just emphasized. During my recent trip to Afghanistan, officials of Afghan ministries and representatives from Kabul University and civil society organizations explicitly identified sustainable capacity-building and investing in Afghan human capital as the most crucial components missing in development assistance in Afghanistan. The lack of capacity is particularly of grave concern in rural areas, where an overwhelming 78% of Afghans live. Over the years, significant resources have been concentrated in mostly urban centres like Kabul, fueling the urban rule and divide among Afghans.

Fourth and finally, the plight of the chronically vulnerable population in Afghanistan remains alarming. For instance, Kabul, also known as the capital of widows, is home to approximately 30,000 to 50,000 war widows. There are over 70,000 street-working children across Afghanistan. Afghanistan's adult literacy rate ranks among the lowest in the world. Only 12% of women are literate, compared to 34% of men. WUSC, CARE Canada, and the partners in this room today are working with these vulnerable groups.

For the sake of time, I will offer three recommendations that Canada should consider as we determine our role in the future of Afghanistan.

● (1135)

First, Canada should provide additional resources for achieving the development goals identified by the Government of Afghanistan, while underlining aid effectiveness in line with the Paris Declaration. Greater pro-poor contributions should be made specifically towards job creation, capacity-building, alternative livelihoods, and community-based initiatives, effectively bridging the urban-rural divide in Afghanistan.

Second, Canada should support enhanced participation of Afghan youth in governance, development, and socio-political processes. Special mechanisms should be put in place to engage the largely neglected Afghan diaspora in Canada's development efforts.

Lastly, Canada should continue to strengthen its partnership with trusted Canadian NGOs in order to assist the Government of Afghanistan in achieving its development goals. Most Canadian NGOs are highly effective, cost-efficient, and have the resources to connect the Canadian public with the development efforts in Afghanistan.

In conclusion, dear committee, saving Afghanistan is, I believe, within our grasp and we owe it to Afghans and to the Canadian public to leave behind a meaningful legacy of Canada in war-battered Afghanistan.

As an Afghan Canadian, I urge you to remember the plight, problems, and dreams of the people of Afghanistan as you make your decisions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nahzat.

We will go into our first round of questioning. Again, I remind you of the timeframes.

Mr. Wilfert, we're going to try to cut the first round of questioning down to about four minutes so everyone gets a question.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Okay, I'll ask my question and let Mr. Chan ask his question.

● (1140)

The Chair: Then we'll wait for both answers.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Thank you for coming.

With regard to capacity-building at the village level, we're pumping $15 billion into Afghanistan in aid. We don't seem to have a clear handle on the CIDA projects that are there.

The last speaker certainly talked about capacity-building. What could we be doing better in terms of ensuring that the money that goes to the Afghan government, of which about 45% of what they have they can't spend, is actually going to achieve the goals that we say we'd like to see?

Mr. Chan will ask the next question.

Hon. Raymond Chan (Richmond, Lib.): Thank you very much for coming.

I fully understand the challenge of the capacity-building side, and also the challenge of being able to do the work you need to do under the security problem imposed by the Taliban.

I want to understand, if the PRT, the military operation, is creating a higher risk for the NGOs, can the NGOs work in capacity-building and whatever without the military participation? If there's no PRT in that region to give you the security support, is it possible for you to continue with your work as an NGO to deliver the humanitarian work and also capacity-building? Is that the approach we should take to divide the role of the military and the NGOs?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chan.

I guess whoever wants to answer can hit their button first.

Mr. Nahzat.

Mr. Mirwais Nahzat: Thank you for the question.

Very briefly, how do we ensure that the aid money trickles down to the Afghan population who deserve it the most? From my discussions with Afghans on the ground very recently, I think some points came up very prominently. The first is the continued need to invest in education, particularly higher education. The unemployment rate among youth remains the highest in Afghanistan. That's one area.

Second, a lot of Afghan ministries emphasized the need to engage the diaspora, professional Afghans living abroad, to return to train other Afghans, because they have an understanding of the culture, challenges, and ways to work with Afghans.

The related emphasis should also be placed on building sustainable capacity of Afghans rather than policing. A lot of contractors, consultants who go in there, are locked in closed rooms without really leaving Afghans with the capacity. So more efforts should be put to build and provide training for Afghans, particularly in rural areas; that's where the capacity is missing.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Isch.

Mr. Emmanuel Isch: Thank you.

One thing I want to add to what my colleague said, and one of the points I made earlier, is that if additional or increased amounts of assistance are channelled through NGOs and civil society groups, I think we can see a more effective use of those funds, because we work in the communities. As well, without getting into a huge discussion here, there are areas of Afghanistan that are more secure and that allows us to do more activities. There needs to be greater investment in those areas where longer-term development activities can take place. I think this will allow us to see greater results and address some of the issues that were raised in the question that was asked earlier.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Isch.

Mr. Barr, our time is up, but I'll allow you an answer, and we'll give a little extra time to the Bloc as well.

Go ahead.

Mr. Gerry Barr: To Mr. Chan, who raised the question of the distinction between development workers and the military effort, I would encourage you to go along this line further. Yes, NGOs do wish to see greater clarity of role between humanitarian and development actors and the military.

The problem is this. When that line is blurred and when those things come together and it becomes a sort of common enterprise, as one group recently suggested, when there's a close coordination of aid with counter-insurgency, what happens is that development gets the signature of the military on it and the development itself becomes a target. Also, those who are the beneficiaries of development themselves become targets. So we undermine the objective, which is to benefit and also ensure the security of non-combatants.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barr.

We will go to the Bloc question.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Barbot, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to thank you for once again appearing before our committee.

In reference to the current state of affairs in Afghanistan, you said, Mr. Barr, that development had been somewhat neglected. The talk is of striking a new balance in the Canadian mission, so I'd like to hear your opinion as to the impact, on the ground, of Canada's withdrawal from the war zones, in humanitarian and development terms.

Mr. Gerry Barr: You're right: it's a dilemma. It's hard to determine what the consequences of a withdrawal would be for the Afghan people. Security, and mainly personal and civilian safety, is very important for the Afghan people. They don't see it necessarily as being part and parcel of a possible military victory. We need to make a distinction between the two notions. In our opinion, the key message is that Afghanistan once again be at peace. According to a poll, Canadians' top priority is a return to peace in Afghanistan, and not victory over the Taliban leaders. It is a fairly old poll, but I am sure that if it were conducted again today, peace would unequivocally be the number one priority.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: That was the crux of my question. Canada has expertise in terms of peacekeeping missions. So we're talking about redirecting our efforts on what we know best, that is a mission to rebuild peace rather than to continue to wage war in the south. How will this new direction be perceived, in your opinion, by the Afghan people who, I'm sure, also need peace?

Mr. Gerry Barr: To answer you properly, one needs to have a military background, but from the perspective of someone working in the field of development, I can tell you that you're on a slippery slope when you pit military and development objectives against each other. It is a veritable minefield and traps abound. We did pay the price for having confused the two roles. I know that it is an incomplete answer, but I would go so far as to say that an approach must be developed that is based on separation of these two roles.

[*English*]

It's really a life-saving matter, actually, at this point.

The Chair: Madame St-Hilaire.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): I'd like to thank our witnesses.

I'd like to know what you think of CIDA's work in Afghanistan. You touched on this, but it is always hard for us as parliamentarians to get a concrete answer on this and to know what is really going on over there.

[*English*]

The Chair: If nobody knows the answer to that, then you're like the rest of us, I guess.

Most of these groups are funded by CIDA; we're all aware of that. Mr. Nahzat's group had some funding, I know that.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gerry Barr: I'd simply like to say that if I were the current CIDA's director I would further strengthen the development and diplomacy role under our current national formula. We have a 3D formula, but each “D” is not of equal importance. In our opinion,

[*English*]

the failure of CIDA has really been to not be sufficiently assertive about the development role in this equation of three-D.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll get it in a second question. They've already had six minutes.

We'll go to the government. Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Thank you very much.

You are an NGO doing development work, and Afghanistan is one of our major development countries. We've put millions of dollars in, and it is the number one priority, so it's understandable that you guys would like to look at some of the money to do what you have expertise in. However, I never hear from the development people anything about the international compact, the Afghanistan Compact, the road map that the international community has laid out for the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

You have rightly pointed out that it is crucial and very important that we support the Government of Afghanistan in building the judiciary, the police force, and the military, but most importantly the judiciary and the police force, because of the corruption and all those things. It's a long process. And the Afghanistan Compact is the effort of the international community to come over there, collectively, to build the whole society.

It's understandable that you have certain areas of expertise as NGOs and you want to focus on that, but that is not going to be the government's approach. The government's approach is going to be collectively working with the international community, the Government of Afghanistan, and all the other partners, including yourself—many of you are already there—to move collectively toward that.

So it is critically important. That's why the Prime Minister got this independent panel to come out with a report that would indicate which direction we go in. We are mired here with this business of security and insecurity. You have said that security forces have created an unsafe situation for workers. During the period of the Taliban and all those things, you just couldn't do anything out there in that part of the world.

Yesterday I saw a movie. I recommend that everyone see *The Kite Runner*. It was good.

The Chair: Most of us read the book.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: You had time to watch a movie?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: The première was last night. So when it does hit the screen, please go and see it.

The Chair: *The Kite Runner*.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: *The Kite Runner*.

What I'm saying is it's important to recognize what the international community, through the Afghanistan Compact, which goes to 2011, is doing to achieve some milestones.

The Chair: Are there any comments?

Mr. Nahzat.

Mr. Mirwais Nahzat: Thank you, Mr. Obhrai, for the question and comment.

I think what I alluded to during my presentation was a complete focus on supporting the Afghan government to achieve its national development strategies. As you rightly pointed out, the London compact and the Afghanistan national development strategy were presented together at the international conference. The Afghanistan Compact is the international donors' and the Afghan government's commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan, but the core document that dictates that compact is actually the interim Afghan national development strategy, ANDS, which is currently being worked into a full program.

I can speak on behalf of WUSC. Care Canada might have other perspectives. For example, the program we have for 2,000 vulnerable widows in Kabul directly contributes to the Afghan social protection strategy, which is a part of the Afghanistan national development strategy and tied with the London compact.

My recent trip to Afghanistan was to sit down with the government ministries to make sure the Canadian effort is in line with the strategies of Afghanistan. I know that is the effort that's being deployed by a lot of Canadian organizations, not to replace, but as I've emphasized, to build the capacity of Afghan institutions.

● (1155)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Goldring, you only have a minute.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Isch, thank you for being here today.

According to World Vision, more families want their daughters to attend school. Progress on this front has been slow. Mr. Nahzat, you commented that there's a 34% literacy rate for adult males and 12% for females.

I would suggest that adult literacy starts with school. My understanding is that over six million Afghan children are now in school, and that 40% are women, which is a 500% increase over the past years. To me that would indicate real progress under trying circumstances in challenging areas. I'm surprised you would say that progress on this front has been slow.

The Chair: Mr. Goldring, unfortunately we don't have time for the answer. They can maybe incorporate it in someone else's response.

Mr. Dewar, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank our guests for coming here today and providing us with updates and insight on the mission in Afghanistan.

One of the concerns our party has is that the mission we're currently in, the counter-insurgency kind of search-and-kill mission, is not helping. In fact it's doing more harm than good. We're hearing that today. According to local reports, 14 workers who were engaged in building roads were killed by NATO bombs today. We hear about civilians being killed, not by the Taliban, sadly, but by allied forces. To be clear about that, this is not the intention, but this is the result.

My concern is when we hear statistics like that of the investment of the Canadian government of $1.36 billion in official development assistance in Afghanistan over a one-year period and that only about 31% has a local impact. I think it speaks to the problems you've outlined. We're having problems plugging in the money. In other words, we don't seem to know, notwithstanding the money and the commitment, where to put the money.

I'm hearing from you, as a group, that we need to look at grassroots. We need to look at NGOs to help plug in the money. I couldn't agree with you more.

We talked about the compact. I must remind friends from the other side that part of the compact is to promote regional cooperation, to combat corruption, and to ensure public transparency and accountability. I'm not seeing that from our own government in terms of accountability and transparency of where the money is going. I'm sure the intent of the compact is to do what you're advocating for.

How do we get over this dilemma of having security trumping development? How do we plug in at the local level?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Isch.

Mr. Emmanuel Isch: I think that would partly answer the earlier question. In French we say *rééquilibrage* . We have to readjust some of the priorities, and that includes CIDA.

There has been an overemphasis on certain types of activities that are confined within the framework of security. I think we have to recognize those issues. But if we broaden our reach, our sectoral approach, and the partners we connect with, I think we will be able to achieve some of these.

With respect to the progress we're noting with education, we have to recognize that at the end of the day it's not about the number of kids who are enrolled in school, although that has to be recognized; it's about the quality of education. These are some of the nuances we have to look at. It's not the quick fix approach that we're building *x* number of clinics or schools that's important; it's what happens within the schools. It's the ability for children to not only go to school, but the future they have in terms of livelihoods and jobs.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Isch.

Did anyone else want to touch on that? If not, Mr. Dewar, you have more time.

Mr. Mirwais Nahzat: Very briefly, I would emphasize that while that percentage of progress has been made in education, we also must understand that almost half of the Afghan children of primary age are not able to go to school, and that's their fundamental right—to have access to schools in a safe environment.

We must also emphasize the long-term commitment to education. I have been involved with development efforts in Afghanistan. What happens is that the donors contribute a six-month package for a school, and after six months the project priorities shift, and those children are left alone without schools and without teachers. Where does that take us in terms of the future of our country? The emphasis must be on long-term commitment, and on making sure that those who are left behind are actually put into the front lines of development.

● (1200)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Chair, this is for whoever would like to take this question.

A rude, kind of crude analogy is that we our folks have a gun on one shoulder and a shovel on the other, and that's what you see if you're an Afghan civilian. You're probably going to see the gun over the shovel, and I guess that's kind of where we're at.

In your opinion, are the security provisions we're providing—and I'm talking about the Canadian government—making things more dangerous or less dangerous?

Mr. Gerry Barr: The answer is more dangerous. I don't think we can emphasize strongly enough, but I'm happy for the chance to do it, that this confusion in role between humanitarian and development projects and military projects is a toxic brew. It is dangerous. It leads to failure, and it is an actual mistake. Development is hard to do, of course, and one sees problems and reversals everywhere one looks, partly because of the circumstances in which the development is going on. But there are very few things that are actually exclusively a mistake. This is a mistake, and it puts aid workers and civilians at risk.

If I could leave you with only one message, it would be this: negotiating humanitarian access, protection of civilians, and Afghan-led development, which is both long-term and sustainable, is what we want to see, and it is crucial that we correct this fundamental error that we have made in putting the security foot first.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our panellists for being here this morning.

We are going to suspend for a few moments to allow you time to switch places with the new witnesses. There is lunch provided for the committee first, so if you want to avail yourselves of that very quickly, my intentions are to come back here within two minutes to hear from our next guests, and then to have committee business beginning at 12:45.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1205)

The Chair: Committee, welcome back.

For the second hour of our committee meeting we have before us Gerry Olsen, who is with the Group of 78; Graeme MacQueen, who is with McMaster University; and Stefan Lehmeier, from the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee.

I think you all are part of the umbrella group, but welcome here. We look forward to your opening statements and then also having question time.

Mr. Lehmeier.

Mr. Stefan Lehmeier (Coordinator, Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee, Afghanistan Reference Group): Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

Members of the committee, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Stefan Lehmeier. I am the coordinator of the peace operations working group of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee.

Before I begin with my presentation, I would like to inform you that all the witnesses who appear before you this morning, as you've said, are part of the Afghanistan Reference Group, a network of Canadian civil society organizations with involvement in Afghanistan.

The views shared by the witnesses have been informed by a large number of Canadian NGOs, but they do not necessarily represent the views of all the agencies involved in the Afghanistan Reference Group.

The following three presentations will focus on the military, political, and diplomatic dimension of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

It is clear today that the West's involvement in Afghanistan has contributed to an ongoing deterioration of the situation as far as national security in Afghanistan is concerned. In September, the secretary general of the United Nations declared that, based on statistics, 2007 was the worst year since the fall of the Taliban regime when it comes to public safety. There was a 20% increase of violent incidents compared to last year. Several NATO commanders publicly stated that there was no military solution to solve the multitude of problems facing Afghanistan. Without a fundamental review of the international community's efforts in Afghanistan, foreign forces will remain in the country for decades and will be caught up in increasingly difficult and intense combat operations against the insurgents.

The root causes of the problem, which has only got worse, are linked to the international community's inability to understand the nature of Afghan society and its internal conflicts, which go back decades, even centuries. These conflicts were further complicated by the arrival of foreign forces in 2001. These foreign forces openly became allies of the various parties involved in the conflict. In my opinion, it must be stressed that the armed violence we see in Afghanistan today is much more than local insurrection in southern Afghanistan. It indicates that civil war between the Taliban and Hizb-e Islami, and also the Northern Alliance, has not been resolved.

[*English*]

No provision was made in the Bonn agreement in 2001 for comprehensive reconciliation and inclusive peace negotiations involving all key parties to the conflict. Part of the reason for that was that al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Pashtuns were conflated with each other and considered spoilers that could only be dealt with by means of violence.

In the absence of a comprehensive political settlement, the engagement of the international community in Afghanistan's reconstruction and stabilization has been fragmented and therefore weak and incoherent. From the beginning, there have been two distinct and fundamentally incompatible military missions: the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force.

The primary mission of Operation Enduring Freedom was and is counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. It came to Afghanistan to assure first the security of Americans from al-Qaeda, and only then the protection of the Afghan government from the insurgency. This approach is fundamentally different from ISAF's mission of providing a secure environment for the establishment of a self-sustaining, democratic Afghan government able to exercise its sovereign authority throughout the country.

In the beginning, in late-2001 and early-2002, there was a strict separation between the two operations in terms of both geography and mandate. But after ISAF's expansion to all of Afghanistan, which took place between 2004 and 2006, its nature began to change, and it got more and more drawn into Operation Enduring Freedom's counter-insurgency campaign, which was, as I said, not part of its original mandate.

One of the results of this unforeseen transformation of ISAF has been that NATO is today more divided than ever over the purpose of its presence in Afghanistan and over an acceptable way to share the military and financial burden.

Just as the international military intervention in Afghanistan is fragmented, so is the political effort. The UN was initially confined to a very narrow humanitarian coordination role, while key stabilization tasks were parcelled out to a series of individual lead nations that turned out to be unequipped to handle their responsibilities. I think the reform of the Afghan National Police has been the most striking example of these challenges.

Despite all these lessons learned over the years, even the recently established coordination mechanism to oversee the implementation of the Afghanistan Compact, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, is proving to be largely ineffective in its current set-up and with its current procedures.

Regionally, Afghanistan has long-standing conflicts with Pakistan over relations with India, the border, ethnic issues, and transit trade. The issue of Taliban insurgents receiving safe haven in the tribal areas of Pakistan is inextricably intertwined with fundamental issues of governance in those areas. These are political issues that will not be resolved militarily, yet few attempts have been made so far to bring relevant parties to the negotiating table to find political solutions.

In view of the above, we believe that a reorientation of the international focus from the current counter-insurgency campaign to the development of a comprehensive multi-dimensional peace process is urgently needed, and the following two presentations will elaborate on that.

Thank you.

● (1215)

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. MacQueen.

Professor Graeme MacQueen (Associate Professor, McMaster University, Afghanistan Reference Group): Thank you, Mr. Chairperson. I'm privileged to be with you today.

My name is Graeme MacQueen. I'm from the Centre for Peace Studies at McMaster University.

This is part two of this presentation and will follow directly from Stefan's.

What changes might we Canadians make in our approach to peace and security in Afghanistan? Once we are clear that our chief goal and highest priority is the well-being of Afghans and Afghanistan, we must acknowledge that this goal cannot be achieved until the root conflicts in Afghanistan have been identified and addressed. We have heard much over the past few years about the need to increase humanitarian assistance, to contribute to the reconstruction of the country, and so on. l support these aims. But there are reasons countries are reluctant to increase these forms of assistance: they do not want their new building blown up; they do not want their aid workers killed; they do not want their contribution to come to nothing. Before we can expect these positive contributions—meaning, for example, humanitarian aid—to increase, we must address the country's root conflicts.

Having acknowledged this, we must next admit that seeking military victory is not the best way to address Afghanistan's root conflicts. This may be a painful acknowledgement, but it is time we made it. We need not debate the morality of seeking victory, because the fact is that victory is daily becoming less likely. It is time for a new approach.

As we adopt the new approach, we must change the public discourse about our mission in Afghanistan. Why not stop speaking of victory? Why not abandon counter-insurgency language such as "winning hearts and minds"? Why not emphasize the goal of sustainable peace, the need for a serious peace process, and the necessity of a comprehensive peace agreement?

A planned, phased peace process for Afghanistan need not take the familiar three-stage form of ceasefire, face-to-face negotiation, and peace agreement. Rather, we might think of the process as dialogue and problem-solving, first stage; negotiation, second stage; and reconciliation, third stage. It would probably be very unwise, in fact, to go directly to negotiation between leaders of main belligerent groups. This would encourage undemocratic backroom deals, which is not what we are advocating.

A serious peace process might start with numerous dialogue and problem-solving sessions throughout the country. Afghanistan is a complex society with many conflicts and many grievances. The process of identifying these and seeking solutions should not be restricted to elites and armed adversaries but should be extended widely. It should reach all ethnic groups and political tendencies, and it must, in accordance with justice and in the spirit of UNSC 1325, include women.

If all this sounds ambitious, it is; but it need not be chaotic. The dialogue process can be carefully framed, given clear guidelines, set on a timeline, and led by trained facilitators. The purpose of this phase of the peace process is to give people safe spaces in which to express their feelings and be heard, to begin building trust, and to encourage a culture of listening and problem-solving instead of the culture of anger and blame that tends to dominate societies, not just Afghan society, that have suffered long-standing warfare.

Everything suggested here, by the way, everything I have mentioned, belongs to the best practices of peacemaking developed over the years by conflict practitioners and set forth in numerous publications and practical manuals. But are such dialogue and problem-solving sessions really possible in Afghanistan? Can Afghans get together in groups and speak about their conflicts? The organization to which l belong, based at McMaster University, participated in numerous dialogues of this sort with Afghans during the period 2001 to 2003—actually, that's incorrect, because it began in 2000; we began to work well before the events of 9/11—with financial support from CIDA. We have found Afghans to be creative and enthusiastic in addressing their conflicts.

● (1220)

It's important to note that this stage of the peace process should include not only groups inside Afghanistan but also regional powers, as well as other states, such as those in NATO, that have decided Afghanistan is important to them. What would be the point, for example, of coming up with a proposal that Pakistan would immediately reject? It is better to listen to the perceived needs of Pakistanis at the outset.

Only after the dialogue process has had time to unfold should the more formal phase of negotiation begin. The aim of the negotiation is to strive for a comprehensive peace agreement, especially among armed belligerents, that will address key conflicts that have been identified. Negotiations should build on the prior stage of broad-based dialogue and problem solving, and the negotiation partners should be accountable to the wider society.

Now a key question: should the Taliban be partners in the negotiations? Answer: yes. While we recognize the concerns of groups that wish to exclude them, the Taliban must be included as valid stakeholders if there is to be a meaningful peace agreement. Impartial and expert third-party facilitation will be a key element at this stage of the peace process, which should result in a peace agreement that lays the political, security, and socio-economic foundations of a sustainable peace.

Thirdly and finally, a process of national reconciliation should be launched in order to address the deep individual and social wounds of the last three decades of war, and to bring Afghans together in striving for a common future. The 2005 action plan on peace, reconciliation, and justice in Afghanistan by the government of Afghanistan is an excellent step in this direction. It will have more meaning, however, once the crucial conflicts of the country have been identified and addressed. Reconciliation engages the human heart, but it requires that the mind also be engaged in actively resolving key conflicts and outstanding issues.

Thank you.

Now we turn to Gerry Ohlsen for Canada's specific role.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacQueen.

Mr. Ohlsen.

Mr. Gerry Ohlsen (Vice-Chair, Group of 78, Afghanistan Reference Group): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Gerry Ohlsen. I work with a group called the Group of 78, which is a foreign policy development, analysis, and advocacy group. I spent 35 years as a diplomat without ever setting foot in Afghanistan, so I'll state my expertise.

I'd like to elaborate a bit on what Professor MacQueen has spoken about in terms of the overall direction that must be taken in Afghanistan, and I'd like to elaborate on a more promising role for Canada than what we have followed over the last six years.

As Professor MacQueen said, Afghanistan does not need another back-room deal forged by political elites to save their political hides. But that's what it's going to get if the international community doesn't change direction soon. What Afghanistan does urgently need is a UN-supported, broadly based political dialogue, one that engages all sectors of the society and all communities of interest. They didn't get it at Bonn or at London. They need it now.

The words “UN-supported” are key. The UN may or may not ultimately lead the peace negotiation. UN blue helmets may not ultimately provide the security assistance during the implementation of a peace agreement. But only the UN, only the Security Council, can actually mandate a multi-dimensional peace operation. Equally importantly, only the UN can notionally lead that peace implementation process, if for no other reason than that it's the only body that is acceptable to the international community.

An operation of that nature will be required to oversee and assist in the implementing of an agreement that the parties to a peace agreement might sign. Simply put, only the UN can mandate a political framework to legitimize international action and bring about peace in Afghanistan. That's where we have to turn.

● (1225)

[*Translation*]

Regardless of how we proceed with peace negotiations, the needs of those people who have suffered in the conflict will have to be met. That means that the fundamentals of a justice system must be put in place, that general amnesties must be discouraged and that arms control measures must be taken with a view to the disarmament, the demobilization, and the reintegration of combatants. All of that is crucial. All these steps must be taken as part of a robust international undertaking where the necessary resources are guaranteed. This cannot be achieved without those resources.

[*English*]

As this process goes forward, it will have to address the needs as well of the internally displaced, of refugees. Community level peace-building will be needed to resolve local disputes and to support reconciliation and social cohesion.

From this moment, from right now, we need to begin the pre-negotiations and support them with inter-ethnic and inter-group dialogue at the local and national level. Capacity, mediation, negotiation, and conflict resolution have to be developed at all levels. Afghan civil society, in particular Afghan women's groups, will have an integral role to play in this whole process at the national level, but at the village level as well.

Canada, Mr. Chair, has really made an extraordinary commitment to Afghanistan. Janice Stein's recent book tells us that this was as much by accident as by design, but we're there and we've committed. Hundreds of young Canadians have been killed, scarred forever by what they've seen and done and what they've suffered physically. Billions of dollars have been spent. The prospect, if we continue in the way we're going, is for more of the same.

But that doesn't need to be the case. It's time for Canadians to give a new direction to that commitment. It's time to infuse it with political energy and the tangible resources needed to support Afghans as they themselves seek a sustainable peace.

Mr. Chair, if Canada wants to exhibit international leadership, as our political leaders tell us it does, there is a vacuum right now when it comes to constructive, responsible promotion of a political settlement in Afghanistan. It's never had one, and no one is doing it now.

Canada can—and we should—fill that vacuum. We should take the lead among our NATO allies, including the Americans: within NATO, within the UN, within the region, and with the Afghan government, as well as with the Afghan people. We can help lead to shape a comprehensive peace process.

To do that, we should be prepared to provide the political and military support it requires, on a scale that reflects the huge investment we have made in time, money, and the lives of young Canadians to build a stable Afghanistan.

At the military level, we can lead in the preparation for the redirection of ISAF from its current combat role to what it was meant to be: a robust peace support operation, an operation deployed to facilitate negotiation and implementation of a peace agreement.

Among Afghans, we can support the creation of conditions favourable to dialogue and negotiation. We can provide technical and financial resources to the political class, to women, and to others in civil society that will allow them to participate in the peace process at all levels.

Peace-building must be a key element of Canada's civilian effort in Afghanistan and of CIDA's programming in Afghanistan. The stabilization and reconstruction task force established by CIDA and by the Department of Foreign Affairs provides us with a tool that already exists to carry that kind of work forward.

Canadian civil society organizations have roles to play in this activity. They can build capacity and skills, both in government and with their civil society counterparts. They can support grassroots peace-building. They can apply conflict-sensitive community development programming across the gamut of activities in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chair, Canadians have a profound interest, one we purchased at great cost, in the future of Afghanistan, in its peace and its stability. Let's work together; let's work with Afghans, our allies, the global community as a whole, to bring peace and not a continued war to Afghanistan.

Thank you.

● (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ohlsen, and indeed, thank you to all our presenters here.

We'll quickly move into the first round.

Mr. Patry, you have between three and four minutes. We break at a quarter to one.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Patry: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

My question will be for the group. Thank you very much for being here, Mr. MacQueen and Mr. Lehmeier.

You talk about dialogue, peace agreements, negotiations, and trying to reach a comprehensive peace agreement. But my question —and you touched on it a little bit—is dialogue with whom? Dialogue within the different ethnic groups, the Tajik, the Pashtun, etc., living within the country, or with the warlords, in a certain sense —because there are many warlords over there—and also with the drug dealers? Why not with the drug dealers in a certain sense?

In my comprehension, the problem also includes all the neighbouring countries. You start with Russia, Iran, and mainly Pakistan. Since the partition of India and Pakistan and in 1949, you will see that Afghanistan doesn't recognize the Durand Line there. You say you need to negotiate these things, but there's a lot of geopolitics over there.

My question is very simple. You just mentioned that we should negotiate with the Taliban. Fine, but can you tell me, who are the Taliban? Are they coming from the Middle East, or where do they from? Who are they? They're not an ethnic group. I just want to know with whom you're going to negotiate in the Taliban. It's as simple as that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Patry.

Prof. Graeme MacQueen: Well, I'll briefly start us off.

To your question about who we will dialogue with, I would say yes, with all the groups you mentioned. What we're thinking about here is very widespread dialogue throughout the country, which would certainly involve ethnic groups. It would involve different political tendencies. I've attended such sessions, so I know very concretely what they look like.

What you're trying to do is to have an impact on how people are thinking about their country. Instead of getting up and speechifying, which is their initial tendency, you try to get them to think about problem solving. So, yes, the dialogue process is serious. It has a time limit; it's not going on forever. But it's crucial before you move into formal negotiation.

Now when you ask the second question about who the Taliban are, I think most of them are, for sure, Afghans. I know the Taliban movement grew up in Afghanistan, in Kandahar. It was in fact welcomed by many people in Kandahar at the time in the early nineties, for very clear reasons, given what it offered. It is in that sense a stakeholder in Afghanistan. It is certainly not sufficient to dismiss it as a terrorist group, as we have tended to do. It did not arise as a terrorist group; it does not have an ideology and theology of terrorism, and especially of international terrorism. Yes, by our standards, it is fundamentalist. It had a limited aim of an Islamic Afghanistan. It's quite different in its origins and aims from al-Qaeda. If it has been driven together with al-Qaeda, that's because of necessity: they both feel attacked. But it can be separated from al-Qaeda.

Furthermore, you're right that the Taliban is a fractured organization or, more properly speaking, a fractured movement. It's quite likely that some are complete rejectionists and would not accept the offer to dialogue and negotiate, but we know from our own contacts in Afghanistan that some groups certainly were open. I hope they still are—they certainly were open a year ago to dialogue. If we haven't made a proper effort to speak to them, how can we blame them for not dialoguing?

Those are my comments.

● (1235)

The Chair: Mr. Ohlsen, very quickly.

Mr. Gerry Ohlsen: Very briefly, this kind of negotiation would be multi-dimensional. It would take years. The international community has a long history of doing this in Kosovo, in the former Yugoslavia, in the Congo, in Liberia. We know how to do it. The international community as a whole, the diplomatic community as a whole, knows how to implement this sort of thing. In the Congo there were eight countries in combat at one time.

It can be done. It just takes time and it takes patience and a huge commitment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ohlsen.

Madame Barbot.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: In a country like Afghanistan which you described as very complex, how do you get people to sit down together and engage in dialogue?

Mr. Stefan Lehmeier: I apologize, but my French is not very good. So I will reply in English.

[*English*]

If you look at the different groups engaged in the insurgency, the incentives or motives they have are very diverse. Some are in this because of very localized grievances, others need to create insecurity to continue cultivating poppies, and others are in it for ideological reasons.

Depending on what the exact motive of the particular group is, a specific approach will be needed. And as has been mentioned before, you can assume there will be some absolute spoilers, some rejectionists who are simply not interested in dialogue. And we will have to find ways of dealing with those. But you can assume that probably the majority of actors involved in the insurgency will be open to dialogue.

The point is it will take a very long time. It will be a process. As you see right now, the central government in Kabul has strict conditions for negotiations, and also strict conditions have been mentioned by members of the insurgency. And at this stage these conditions are not compatible. Where we are today, we cannot have talks, but this is where we are today. Stakes are being raised, and this is where we have to start from, and as the process takes us forward, I think we will get to a point where we can start talking and negotiating.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: To answer Mr. Patry's question, it seems to me that we are having difficulty identifying these people. So how would this be possible?

Mr. Gerry Ohlsen: You must remember that this process will be neither Canadian nor international even, but well and truly Afghan. The Afghans must in effect own the negotiation process. Our role is to support them, to encourage them, to make connections and to serve as a catalyst. We are not necessarily called upon to play the role of negotiator or mediator, particularly given that we are currently combatants.

Things are happening in several ways and on several levels at the same time. The fact that the Afghans will choose to hold discussions will depend not only on the government but also on Afghans, whether at the community level, the national level or some other level.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ohlsen.

We'll proceed to Monsieur Lebel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Lebel (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, CPC): Thank you.

Given all of the information we receive, it is not always easy to take stock of these issues.

We have learned over the last few hours that the Taliban have retaken ground in some parts of the country and that a certain percentage of the population is wondering if it would not be best if they returned to power. In fact, the period between 1996 and 2001 was the longest politically stable period in recent years. That is the information we have and that is what is appearing in the press.

We tell ourselves that we should perhaps reassess the military presence. The Taliban are continuing to regain ground. I actually do not understand why they would want to sit down at the table and negotiate when they are under the impression that they are taking their rightful place back, or at least that is how they would see it, and they can see the possibility of reconquering the entire country.

● (1240)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lebel.

Mr. Lehmeier.

Mr. Stefan Lehmeier: It's very important to distinguish between the Taliban we saw from the early nineties to 2001, and what we see today as an insurgency. The Taliban you saw in the early nineties were more cohesive, they had stronger support from outside, and the enemy they were facing was a loose coalition of movements that didn't have the same kind of support the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police and the international actors have. So the conflict is different today from what it used to be. That is one point to keep in mind.

The Chair: Very quickly, Mr. Lebel, then.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Lebel: It is a good thing that they are destabilized. For the moment, we are not managing to get the upper hand. You are telling me that they are not as strong as they used to be?

[*English*]

Prof. Graeme MacQueen: Could I make one quick comment?

This whole idea of at what stage people are open to negotiation is very important. It's been very frustrating to my group, who has been calling for this negotiation for years and who knows the Taliban were open to it at various times. And of course you're right, that as they go from victory to victory they may become less open to it.

To me, this is an argument for acting quickly, for acting now, before there is no opportunity at all.

The Chair: Mr. Ohlsen, I think you were trying to get in.

Mr. Gerry Ohlsen: I have a brief point.

[*Translation*]

I want to add that if the military situation deteriorates, the Taliban will be more open. The Afghans want peace after all. In order to ensure sustainability and balance in the country, it would be best to undertake negotiations as soon as possible, particularly given the deterioration of the military situation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Olsen.

We'll go to Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our guests. You've built on what the previous guests had been telling us.

One of the reasons I brought forward this motion to continue the study on Afghanistan is your presentation today. For the record, I have to say I haven't met these gentlemen before, other than Mr. Ohlsen—he lives in my community, so I see him from time to time. But this is exactly what our committee should be looking at and what our foreign policy needs. That is to say, looking at other steps and to actually dare to use the P word, because we haven't heard that. We've heard three-D, and I guess we're down to one-D now, as we heard in committee the other day, because we don't do that any more.

I want to ask a very specific question, I guess to you, Mr. MacQueen. Earlier I was asking a previous group, in terms of aid, how we would plug in. How would we plug into a dialogue like this? Do we have to go and find the people to dialogue with, as an exercise, or has that work already been done?

Prof. Graeme MacQueen: First of all, I don't think it's very difficult to talk to the Taliban. They're quite accessible in Afghanistan. If you want to talk to them, you can. Secondly, I don't think it would be Canada's job to run off on its own and talk to the Taliban. I would assume this is going to be a UN process and they would have some role in that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Further to that, I know a UN project that's going on right now in Darfur, which is similar, in that they have people.... I know a Canadian who's involved in this, who is actually going to the various ethnic groups and speaking with them. If we do get a comprehensive peace in Darfur, for instance, it matters not, unless it's understood at the local level.

Is that the kind of approach you're talking about? First, deal with the local communities so they understand what's at stake, before we get into this big architecture and stuff?

Prof. Graeme MacQueen: Absolutely.

Mr. Paul Dewar: If we follow that through, the present mission we're engaged in with the counter-insurgency—you know my party's stance—to continue that on, even to 2009, what effect would that have on the potential for the process you're posing?

Prof. Graeme MacQueen: I'll start us off.

First, I don't think we have to wait for ceasefires before starting this work. I think that's an important point, because I think that's often a big mistake. The kind of thing we're suggesting here can begin while the bullets are still flying.

Secondly, on the question of whether Canada should continue its current mission until 2009 or should switch before that and so on, I can't pretend to represent the Afghan Reference Group, so I will simply give my own personal opinion. From the polls I've seen, I believe most Canadians want that mission changed now, and I personally feel it should be changed sooner rather than later. That's my personal view.

● (1245)

Mr. Gerry Olsen: To add, this kind of transition is moving a relatively large ship. It does take time. What we're suggesting is that Canada immediately begin that discussion with its NATO allies, both formally and publicly and privately. A lot of things go on diplomatically, as we all know, that we don't hear about, and a lot of people say they're doing one thing when they're doing something quite different. That's the real world. So we start now to build the momentum with our NATO allies to shift this thing the 90 degrees.

It will take between now and 2009, perhaps longer, to completely transfer that kind of process from what it is to what it was meant to be, but if we don't begin, if we go on and reinforce this and get more troops to fight, it will fail. It simply will fail.

The Chair: Mr. Lehmeier, you'll have the final comment, and it will be short.

Mr. Stefan Lehmeier: Yes, I just wanted to pick up on something that was said in the previous panel.

As long as counter-insurgency is the focus of the military engagement, it would be wrong to say that security is being provided. What we're advocating for is to do just that: use military assets to provide security, and that will be a peace support operation, which is very different from a proactive military campaign to clear areas from insurgents.

So it wouldn't mean end the mission, pull out completely, no military involvement. What we are looking at is a changing mission, with a very different focus. The absolute basis for this is the political framework and a process that takes us there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lehmeier.

I note that other groups have come out and suggested that there could be not so much military operations, but military personnel who could take over and change the focuses from being strictly military into other areas of development, helping to administer certain aid groups. There are all different ideas as to what we can be doing and how we should be doing it.

We thank all of you for being here today.

We will now suspend and give you folks the opportunity to take exit, if you choose.

We will move in one minute into committee business. I know that today we're going to look at Mr. Wilfert's motion.

Thank you again.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1250)

The Chair: I call this committee back to order.

We want to meet in the last ten minutes for committee business.

At the start of committee business, I was informed that the minister may be able to attend on December 11, but it looks like that is not going to happen.

The Clerk: No, we said December 4 this morning. It's December 11.

The Chair: The minister has confirmed for December 11, I see. The Minister of Foreign Affairs. We'll have the two together, perhaps.

We'll get back to you in the next day or two. We're just still—

The Clerk: My error.

The Chair: We won't pass on whose error it is.

Anyway, you will be getting e-mails as to those times specifically. So it looks like something has been confirmed here.

Mr. Wilfert has given proper notice on his motion; you've seen it on the paper for some time now. His motion reads:

> That the committee invite the responsible minister and appropriate senior officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Development concerning the status of the proposal to close up to 19 additional consulates, to appear before committee in order to examine the rationale, the cost, and the implications of such a decision as well as the current government strategy that is being applied when making the decision to close Canadian consulates.

I'll ask Mr. Wilfert if he would like to speak to his motion.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Chairman, in light of the comments of the deputy minister the other day, I think it's appropriate to understand what the strategy of this government is with regard to closures, or even openings. What is the big picture?

As they were closing consulates earlier this year, they are proposing to open five in China. There must be a rationale. We need to know what that is. What are our cost implications for these things? I think it's appropriate that we have an idea of what the strategy is in the larger context.

So that's the purpose of the motion.

And so that I can deal with my friend across the way before I get into the ands and ors, hopefully, we can get the minister and/or the deputy minister or appropriate officials to come, rather than not. I'm sure the honourable gentleman across the way will tell me that the minister's schedule is already booked and that we've already dealt with this, but in fact we have not dealt with it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wilfert. Of course we always appreciate your comments. We're also impressed by your ability to know exactly what our parliamentary secretary is going to say—

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I'm one of the few MPs.

The Chair: —so I appreciate that.

Mr. Obhrai, since he made reference to you in his preamble, would you have any comments in regard to this motion?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Absolutely. I won't let him down, no way. I don't know why he makes me work so hard.

Anyway, Mr. Chair, this motion is very speculative. This motion does not have any basis. There is no strategy of the Government of Canada. On every occasion, when we look at the services that are provided, it is taken into account where Canada would effectively be represented overseas. We don't create strategies by saying that we're going to shut somebody down or we're going to open somebody. It happens on a periodic review basis.

The funny part is that when they were in the government, they did the same thing. They took periodic reviews. They closed one, opened one here—they did it all—but with the purpose and with the idea of having effective representations overseas, not reducing service. Therefore, what he's looking for—consolidations of missions on the basis of some comprehensive secret plan of the Government of Canada to do this—does not exist. There is none of that whatsoever.

We can't support this motion because basically, to tell him frankly, there is absolutely no plan of consolidation or anything in the current state of affairs. It is an ongoing exercise that will continue taking place throughout the history of this government and throughout your history.

So I would say, Mr. Chairman, that this is something to which I will answer and the minister will answer, everybody will answer, the same answer: there is no plan. There is no such thing as a hidden agenda to do it. It's just a plain, simple consolidation that's taken place.

● (1255)

The Chair: I'm going to get to some of the others who haven't spoken to this yet, and we'll come to Mr. Wilfert.

Actually, we'll just jump over to Mr. Chan and we'll go back and forth a bit here.

Hon. Raymond Chan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't know whether it's a hidden agenda or not. I think it's quite open that they're doing it, except that we don't understand why. I think that the justification probably is not coming from the departmental level. I've been a junior minister for Asia Pacific and I understand Japan really well. From all I know, from the departmental briefing that I got over the years, particularly in Japan the Kansai area is very different from Tokyo. There are two different groups of mentality, two groups of business people there who—

The Chair: Just one second.

On a point of order, Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: What my friend is talking about is something that has already happened. The motion is not passed in—

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Continue, Mr. Chan.

Hon. Raymond Chan: The ambassador of the time and deputy minister of the time insisted that the Kansai region is so important for Canada that they asked for additional support. So this time, when they closed the Kansai consulate general's office in Osaka, it's very disturbing.

This is why we need this. I will support my colleague's motion to get both the minister and the senior officials to come to be accountable for this very difficult decision that is so badly received by both the Japanese government and the Canadian community.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I would like to suggest that any hidden agenda was rather by the Liberals previously in their absence internationally, particularly on the issues in the Caribbean area. There is much more interest shown of late by our Prime Minister towards looking at renewing relationships throughout the Caribbean area. In other words, this consolidation, if you want to describe it as a consolidation, is in the interest of taking these resources and assets and putting them...and initiating the resources and assets in areas that can do better, that can provide greater international work for our Canadian government and for trade and other efforts.

The Chair: We have a couple more on the speakers list.

We have Mr. Wilfert, Mr. Obhrai, Mr. Kramp, and Madame Barbot.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I would move to the question. I'm not surprised that there's no plan and no rationale. I'm just surprised that the parliamentary secretary admitted there was no plan or rationale.

The Chair: I think what he admitted was that there was no strategy to an overall closing of consulates. They're looking at it one by one.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I'm sure the minister can come to tell us.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Obhrai, did you have a comment? We're not going to cut short the debate here. Go ahead, Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Yes, I do. I have to speak. Let me speak. Madame Barbot wants to speak too, you know. You guys just don't like hearing the truth, that's the problem.

First of all, in reference to Mr. Chan, he's talking about something that has already taken place—the closure or consolidation of consulates in Japan. He wants to go back to what has already happened. That is not the intent of this motion. I'm referring to him when he was talking about Japan. That argument put forward has gone past, is not valid in reference to this motion.

Now we come down here, and we talk about 19. I am saying that there is no plan, there is no such kind of strategy sitting behind closing 19. It's just that every government has a right, at any given time, to do what it will do, as I said in my argument.

The third point here, as we discussed, is that we can't have ministers coming up every time and any time somebody wants, which is what he is trying to do at this time. When the minister is here on December 11, you will have five minutes of your own, and you can always jump in with this question.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Obhrai.

I would just caution the committee—and you can take it for what it's worth—that when we have all these motions saying let's invite the minister, that's fine, but he will pick and choose then. He'll see what these motions are. I'm certain, I would imagine, that he knows which motions have been brought forward, and he will say "Okay, I'll appear on this one and that one". So I guess he has the prerogative to do that.

When we really want him for something—and if this is one of those cases—then the motion is completely in line. I would just caution that inviting the minister to appear seven or eight times isn't going to be successful. We all know that's not going to happen. He would tend to take a look at all these and say "I can do it on this one, but I'm not going to speak on the others".

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm not supportive of this motion simply because, historically speaking, governments through the years, regardless of stripe, have opened missions, and they've closed them. They base that on the factors that are in front of them. They base that on everything from budget to economic need, to trade, to foreign affairs, to world circumstance.

The government will make a proper decision when the time is right, based on all of the information that comes before it at that time. So to suggest that this is going to happen, will happen, did happen, is totally speculation, and it's absolutely ridiculous to bring a minister in here before the fact.

Then everybody should be into government planning. Well, you can't have everybody in this House in government planning. A government has a responsibility to govern, and that's what the government should do.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kramp.

Madame Barbot.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

With all due respect for you and for my colleagues across the table, I think that when we want to meet with the minister on one subject or another, we should have the possibility of asking him. It is critical to our work here. The minister may of course make a decision according to his availability, but that is the policy.

You're telling me to be careful, to not make demands on him too often, and I understand that. However, he does not have to react in that way. He should understand that if, in a committee as important as the one on foreign affairs, so many issues are raised by members concerning government policies, it is obviously worth his time and trouble to come and meet with them and present his perspective clearly and objectively. I cannot understand why some systematically oppose the idea that we should ask the minister to come and meet with us.

Having said that, there are once again discrepancies in the translation. I will point them out to the clerk, if you wish, because the French and English versions do not say the same thing. I think we should call for the vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame St-Hilaire.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire: My colleague took the words out of my mouth.

[*English*]

The Chair: She wanted to dismiss you. Madame Barbot says let's go to a vote.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire: And I move that you call the question.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right.

I'm going to give one more person the opportunity to speak to that, and that's going to be Mr. Wilfert, just to sum up.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I just want to do a correction. You can't avoid letting me talk.

The Chair: Okay, what's the correction?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: The correction is that Madame Barbot said we are opposed to having ministers here, and I said yesterday very clearly that we are not opposed to having the minister here. We have been very willing, and the minister himself is willing to come here—and he's doing it. So that's not the issue.

The issue is that this one here—

● (1305)

The Chair: Okay. This is the same thing. It's not the proposal.

Mr. Wilfert, just—

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Chairman, call the question.

The Chair: All right.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It is carried, five to four. Or, as Mr. Dewar said when he left: “I'm leaving, but you already have your five, so....”

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll see you next week. The meeting is adjourned.

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