

Canadian soldiers deserve our support

ON AUG. 22, the **Canadian Forces** in Afghanistan suffered another major setback. Just outside their fortified camp in the centre of Kandahar, a suicide bomber targeted a supply convoy returning from a Provincial Reconstruction Team base. The resulting blast killed Cpl. David Braun, injured three others and left two armored vehicles blazing fiercely.

As the ammunition stored in the Canadian vehicles continued to "cook off" in the aftermath of the attack, the rapid response team from Camp Nathan Smith was sent out to secure the ambush site. It was several hours later that **Canadian soldiers** fired on an approaching motorcycle, seriously wounding the 17-year-old driver and killing his 10-year-old passenger.

The news that our soldiers had shot and killed an Afghan child - albeit under the belief that they were acting in self-defense - sent shock waves across Canada.

Over and over we have been told that our troops were sent to Afghanistan to "protect the weak and the vulnerable," and now that logic has been stood on its head. Once again, Canadians have begun asking what we hope to achieve and whether our soldiers' sacrifice can be justified.

Gen. **Rick Hillier**, the chief of defense staff, was quick to mount his own private PR counterattack. Hillier told reporters that the incident would be investigated but that all preliminary indicators were that our soldiers had exercised the proper procedures within the rules of engagement. The general also opined that ultimately the blame for the boy's death cannot be attributed to our soldiers.

"The conditions that caused that death to occur are set by the Taliban, who refuse to accept that a stable Afghanistan is better for all people there," claimed Hillier. Those familiar with recent history will understand that blaming the Taliban for all of Afghanistan's woes is unfairly simplistic. The Soviet occupation in 1979 was mounted in an attempt to stabilize an Afghanistan already ravaged by factional violence.

After nine years of guerrilla war, the warlords and Islamic extremists (supported by the CIA) successfully ousted the Soviets, only to turn on one another. In the post-Soviet struggle for control, the Taliban emerged victorious over the warlord coalition known as the Northern Alliance. One of the reasons the Taliban succeeded was that the Afghan people preferred their oppressive brand of Islamic extremism to the ruthless violence perpetrated by the Northern Alliance. Then the U.S. invasion in 2001 toppled the Taliban with the help of the Northern Alliance and set the country back into violent unrest.

There is no question that Afghanistan is a failed state and that if abandoned by the international community will once again become a breeding ground for terrorists. That being said, Canada's current contribution of troops to a NATO military force is doomed to failure unless we begin analyzing the problems from a realistic perspective. Never in its history has the region of present-day Afghanistan been successfully occupied by a foreign army. It was in the Afghan mountains that Alexander the Great suffered his first major military setback. The local tribesmen did not stand up an army to resist the Macedonians; they simply allowed them to enter the territory unmolested and then launched a relentless guerrilla campaign against Alexander's supply lines. For more than 2,000 years the tactics have not changed.

The stated NATO objective of training and equipping the Afghan security forces to eventually replace all foreign troops is a valid one. However, we are not committing the resources to make this a reality. **The current criteria for training an Afghan policeman is just two weeks for illiterate recruits and a month for those who can read the training manuals.** Such a stopgap measure may seem economical in the short term, but will not create necessary public trust in law enforcement agencies.

We would not think of putting an illiterate cop, armed with 14 days' instruction and an assault rifle, onto the streets of a Canadian city. In fact, **Canadian civilian workers destined to make doughnuts at the Camp Kandahar Tim Horton's receive a minimum of six weeks of special military familiarization training before we send them overseas.**

Ultimately, Afghans will have to determine their own future, and we may have to accept the fact that they don't fully embrace our democratic, capitalist values. Already the "elected" government of Hamid Karzai has proposed the reinstatement of the infamous Department for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice that was the cornerstone of the oppressive Islamic Taliban.

Our soldiers deserve our support, and their sacrifice must be honored. Putting a flag on our front lawn or a yellow ribbon on a tree or car may demonstrate recognition for the troops, but an educated populace can only truly support the troops by ensuring that the Afghanistan mission concludes on a positive note.