

Brief to Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Combating Poverty, Homelessness and Hunger: Create a Peace Dividend

June 1, 2009

“As a very wealthy country, with significant surplus in federal budget, immediate attention is required for the most vulnerable part of the population living in inadequate housing and living conditions. There is no justification for not massively engaging in the improvement of the situation of all those that face inadequate housing and living conditions throughout Canada.”

**Miloon Kothari, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing
(March, 2008)**

Thank you for this opportunity to present to your committee.

I have worked as a Street Nurse for over 20 years. I am now on my 6th year of an Economic Justice Fellowship from the Atkinson Charitable Foundation. I have worked on homelessness and the affordable housing crisis from Victoria to Saint John's. In addition, I am Executive Producer of a series of films about homeless families and children directed by Laura Sky. The first in the series that is completed, **'Home Safe Calgary'**, I will table with your committee for your consideration. In production and to follow are **Home Safe Toronto, Home Safe Hamilton** and **Home Safe Sault Ste. Marie**.

Miloon Kothari, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, has pointed out that while we had a significant federal surplus Canada's record on alleviating homelessness and poverty was pretty inadequate.

Last week Prime Minister Harper, commenting on North Korea stated:

"It is deeply troubling that a regime routinely unable to provide for its own people should invest so much of its effort and wealth into its weapons programs." (Stephen Harper, May 25, 2009)

A May 2009 Angus-Reid poll found that 51% of Canadians believe that the bulk of Canadian troops should be pulled from Afghanistan before 2011, the year that the House of Commons voted to prolong the Canadian mission to. There are troublesome signs that the federal government is renewing its campaign to divert even more spending to an extended mission in Afghanistan.

It is deeply troubling that in our country:

- The deteriorating housing stock has left people to live in water damaged, poorly heated, mouldy and bed bug infested units;
- That aboriginal people are disproportionately affected by substandard housing and by homelessness;
- Poverty routinely necessitates evictions, hunger, deprivation and ill health;
- Parents, depending on food banks, need to ration diapers to 3/day;
- We allow the forced nightly migration of homeless people like the families with children in Calgary who move from church basement to church basement because there was no family shelter;
- So many of our seniors live and ultimately die in a shelter;
- Palliative care units have now been set up in several shelters;
- Families from so many walks of life are now housing unstable, many ending up in one room in a shelter or motel/shelters that are far from meeting the UN Standards for Refugee Camps.

We are spending \$100 million a month in Afghanistan, the majority of that not in peace-keeping or NGOs but on war. This is troubling since quite simply that

spending that could be directed towards a peace dividend that could include a national housing program among other things. For example:

\$\$ for one light armoured vehicle could fund 60 teacher salaries for 1 year (\$3 million)

\$\$ for one CH-123 Sea King Helicopter could finance books for 570,000 university students for one year (\$114 million)

\$\$ One C2 105 MM Howitzer cannon could finance child care for 180 children for one year in Quebec (\$450,000)

\$\$ 2008 spending in Afghanistan could fund 3,500 new units of affordable housing (\$1 billion)

\$\$ spending in Afghanistan by 2011 could fund 9 years of a national housing program (\$18 billion)

****sources available at***

http://tdrc.net/uploads/file/HnW/poped2009_2.pdf

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/Sites/PBO-DPB/documents/2008-10-09%20Statement%20-%20Afghanistan.pdf>

Canadians need and want a peace dividend that is an investment in people not destruction.

In the meantime however, this recession further necessitates program spending that will provide emergency recession relief – monies to expand Employment Insurance benefits, bolster provincial social assistance rates, prevent evictions, and expand emergency life saving services such as food and shelter.

Attached please find a presentation I made in Kingston on this issue.

Thank you for your time.



Our War in Afghanistan:

Who Pays? Who Profits? Kingston, April 2008

Housing and War

Housing and war have had an interesting history. Our national housing program, owes its origins, in large part, to tremendous efforts by members of the Canadian military and their families. Today, **spending** on war in Afghanistan is **spending** that should be directed towards a national housing strategy.

You may know the Tommy Douglas story, how we got Medicare, our national health program. You may not know this one – how we got our national housing program.

Returning World War II veterans, facing a housing shortage, fought for their right to housing. In Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver, women's groups joined in. They protested, they held picket signs, they demonstrated, and they actually took over empty buildings like the Hotel Vancouver and the Kildare barracks in Ottawa and squatted in them. Franklyn Hanratty, the leader of the Ottawa protest said that "scores of Ottawa families are living under intolerable conditions".

The campaign led to empty military buildings being freed up for housing; it led to a federal agency 'Wartime Housing Ltd.' that built 19,000 temporary rental homes over 4 years. It led to the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which came to be our national housing program. The resulting war-time housing, co-op housing, supportive housing, city 'public' housing is evident all across Canada, including Kingston.

CMHC helped to build affordable housing for close to 2 million Canadians until that program was quietly killed. Today, we are one of the few countries in the world without a national housing program. Canadian NGO's pointed this out in their 2005 submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Working Group. Canada has:

"no coherent policy of national standards to ensure that the right to adequate housing is enjoyed by all and particularly by poor and disadvantaged groups, such as low-income women."

The 2007 federal budget was entirely silent on homelessness and a national housing program. So was the 2008 budget.

Canada's federal, provincial and territorial housing ministers met several weeks ago on April 2 for the first time since September of 2005. After the 2005 meeting, the ministers issued a joint communiqué promising that they were accelerating work on developing a comprehensive Canadian Housing Framework to address the needs of the four million Canadians who are officially classified as being in "core housing need" and the 300,000 or more Canadians who experience homelessness each year.

Despite that promise almost three years ago, no progress has been made. The issue was not even on the agenda of the **informal** meeting of the housing ministers. Provincial housing ministers got no assurances, no commitments on any of the three national programs due to expire.

The three national housing / homelessness programs that are due to expire this year (in annual dollars) are:

1. \$700 million for the affordable housing (a two-year allocation of \$1.4 billion from Bill C-48 that was authorized by Parliament in 2005 and allocated in 2006;
2. \$128 million for the housing repairs through the Residential Rehabilitation and Assistance Program (RRAP); and,
3. \$135 million for homelessness through the National Homelessness Initiative.

Ten years after the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and the mayors of Canada's largest cities declared homelessness a national disaster nothing of substance has been done. So this is the tragedy today and we should be enraged about, and I've seen it from Vancouver to Newfoundland:

- a deteriorating housing stock that leaves people to live in water damaged, poorly heated, mouldy and bed bug infested units;
- worsening poverty that equates to evictions, hunger, deprivation, depression;
- forced nightly migration of homeless people like the families with children who move from church basement to church basement in Calgary because there is no family shelter and no affordable housing program
- disease outbreaks such as tuberculosis;
- seniors, living and ultimately dying in a shelter;
- palliative care units set up in shelters;
- homeless deaths, freezing deaths, hate crimes and murders

How we treat our own people is a pretty important thing to look at. Who do we care about? What are we spending our federal budget on?

It's not being spend on home care, pharmacare, a new national child care program, education or to help reduce tuition, to help provinces raise welfare rates, to improve and expand employment insurance, on increases to old age

pensions, not on better income security for injured workers, not on making sure we meet Kyoto standards, and certainly not on affordable housing.

This fiscal year a whopping \$18 billion will go towards the military. That is 8.5 % of our budget. We are spending \$100 million a month in Afghanistan, the majority of that not in peace-keeping or NGOs but on war. Spending that could be directed towards a national housing strategy.

We don't intend to take money from Peter to pay Paul. I am not asking that we take money from health care or from roads and transit. We need those things. We do not need to dedicate money to a US/NATO military coalition that is fighting a counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan.

What does our government care about at home and in Afghanistan? They say they care about women.

If the Conservative government cared so much about women would they have dismantled so much of Canada's funding for women's programs? Would they leave homeless families and children in church basements, forced to move nightly for shelter?

If I saw money going to women I'd be far less skeptical about this government's efforts to help women in Afghanistan.

How does the Karzai government, that we're supporting, treat women? Ask Malalai Joya. She is the young, Afghan Member of Parliament who was illegally ejected for criticizing the warlords that surrounded her. Then it got worse. She had four assassination attempts on her life. Her home was blown up and she was assaulted and threatened even inside the parliament chamber. The Karzai government took away her security protection. Joya, who now runs a clinic in Farah province, whose patients are mostly women and children, reports that the warlords, who we help, control much of Afghanistan: "kidnap girls and women and rape them regularly."

The government continues to perpetrate severe human rights violations against women including: systemic rape, imprisonment for trying to escape forced and child marriages and offering no protection to the 87% who face violence at home. (as reported by Amnesty, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, WOMANKIND Worldwide)

What does the Karzai government do to individuals including journalists who consider women's rights issues or who utter feminist ideas? They jailed 23 year old Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh and he is sentenced to be-heading.

The Canadian government says we are there to reconstruct and to achieve peace.

Violence just keeps increasing, year after year since this war began.

Our military brags that it has fired 4.7 million bullets plus about 14,000 artillery and tank shells in less than 20 months. Even mainstream media is now reporting that violence has increased every year since 2001 – the Canadian role is aggressive, quite distinct from peacekeeping.

In an Oxfam report earlier this year it was reported that Canadian and allied forces have killed about as many civilians as the insurgents.

3 million Afghans are displaced, made homeless by bombing and shelling – many forced into refugee camps, thousands killed. According to the Afghan Post thousands froze to death this past winter, many who lost limbs to frostbite.

Our government says we are providing aid.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Canada is spending 10 times more on war than aid, despite the fact that poverty fuels the insurgency.

In Afghanistan 7.5 million people living on the verge of starvation – men, women and children. Where is the aid?

We are actually destroying their infrastructure. Retired Major-General Lewis Mackenzie explained the use of battle tanks in Afghanistan: rather than risking soldiers when “clearing that house of the enemy, even though they would win, it’s sort of nice to be able to stand back and turn to the tanker and say ‘Take that house out.’” (Globe and Mail, Sept. 11, 2006)

Instead, we should invest resources in peaceful, neutral aid – indeed, reparations – investing in Afghan community-led reconstruction/development.

The Harper government purports to care about drug issues here at home.

Are they funding a national harm reduction strategy? No. Instead, they take the side of the Karzai government which is intricately linked to the drug trade, producing 90% of the world’s heroin.

How much longer will we engage in this war? Two more years? Or 12? Or 20?

We must always have questions when we send our youth to war. We should have debate. People ask “What would happen if we leave Afghanistan?” I ask “What will happen if we stay?” When will we get money for housing and aid in Canada and Afghanistan?

Check with delivery