

*Internationally, people perceive Canada as a small, peaceful nation, often undertaking peacekeeping duties. However, now Canada's government may soon earn the nation the distinction of leading NATO forces in Afghanistan.*

*The world is watching Canada. In **Spring Offensive**, submitted to newspapers around the world, Canadian citizen Beric German argues his position on the situation.*

## **SPRING OFFENSIVE**

A "spring offensive" is when war really heats up and belligerents emerge to face off in countries that have cold and formidable winters, like Afghanistan. Or Canada. In both countries, the Spring Offensive has begun.

In Canada, on May 17 the governing Conservative Party allowed Parliament a hasty six-hour debate on whether Canada should extend its military mission in Afghanistan for two more years. Tellingly, the government called the debate just as Canadian forces became engaged in a major battle in Kandahar. Canadians have been killed. On the day of the debate itself, Captain Nicola Goddard, age 26, died. She was the first Canadian woman soldier killed in combat since World War II. Even in these emotional circumstances, the Government's motion squeaked through, by a vote of only 149 to 145.

The May 17 decision commits Canada to a further two years of a *de facto* war which polls show that 55 percent of Canadians do not support (Toronto *Star*, May 20, 2006). It also sets Canada up for the Government's plan that Canada should lead the coalition forces in Afghanistan when the U.S. relinquishes command in 2007, and subsequently assume command of a wider NATO mission in 2008.

The debate began and ended quickly and was contained enough to quell fears of further deaths in the months ahead. As well, few speakers raised more basic questions that could have harmed the Government's motion to continue Canada's military mission. Is Canada in fact helping in nation-building in Afghanistan? And for whom?

All parties to the debate skirted questioning either the legitimacy of the government Canadians are propping up in Afghanistan or our motives. Such short, uninformed discussions and quick emotional decisions on the world's future are not only insulting but also very dangerous.

To help people, you really have to know them, or at least a little about them. Robert Fisk, who has lived in the Middle East for nearly thirty years and holds more British and International journalism awards than any other foreign correspondent, has recently written a major book on the Middle East, *The Great War for Civilization*. He notes that not only is Afghanistan in crisis but also the Afghan government Canada supports may not have the credibility that distant observers attribute to it. Fisk writes, "In Kabul where two government ministers had been murdered in seven months, President Karzai, at his own request, was now protected by American bodyguards. And you don't have to be a political analyst to know what kind of message this sent to Afghans" (p.1110).

As Fisk points out, Karzai resides in Kabul. The British, the Russians, the Mujahadeen, the Northern Alliance, the Taliban, the Americans and the Canadians have all held Kabul at one time or another. But Kabul is not Afghanistan. Afghanistan is an agrarian country. Most of the people are farmers in the countryside, even though one of their main crops is poppies for heroin production. Like any farmers, they will fight to protect their land and livelihood. Kandahar province, where Canadians are fighting and dying, is a case in point.

Now the religious leaders in Kabul are calling on Afghans at large to support the rebels ( *Toronto Star* , May 22, 2006 ). Western politicians, pundits and press people counter by referring to mullahs in Afghanistan as self-serving zealots who inflame the people to follow the Taliban. The farmers don't seem to be buying the Western line. They see outsiders entering their county again with more guns than bread. If the farmers are influenced by the clerics, they shouldn't be blamed. The examples that they see of the West's philosophy are Abu Ghraib prison, Guantánamo Bay and their land and skies filled with the most sophisticated armaments invented, killing village families as well as rebels ( *Toronto Globe and Mail*, May 23, 2006 ).

The Government has argued that Canadians should be particularly concerned about women in Afghanistan. But Afghan women have died and are dying from war, starvation and the destruction of infrastructure caused by all of the foreign "helping" armies. Outside the major cities, the new regime has made no appreciable improvement in women's rights.

In other places, Canada's intervention could really help women. What about the women of Darfur, who are raped and starved, but don't have the privilege of being in a strategic or oil-rich country? The former black slave, Sojourner Truth, in the 1800s referred to women's rights and her lack thereof, "Ain't I a woman?" Do the women of Darfur not deserve peacekeepers and food? Canada's May 17 decision drastically drastically reduces the likelihood of desperately-needed Canadian peacekeeping and aid activities in Darfur.

Amnesty International has reported that the West's obsession with fighting "terrorists" blinds us to humanitarian crises more worthy of intervention. These crises do not only happen in developing nations. Internally, Canada faces pressing issues of economic, social and cultural rights, including homelessness, inequities in education, poverty and discrimination against Natives and other minorities (UN Committee Report, May 8, 2006).

Canada and other countries should press for a Spring Offensive against these humanitarian problems at home and abroad, rather than supporting a military venture aimed at perceived "terrorist" threats to international security.

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### **Submitted by Beric German**

Beric German is a leading anti-poverty activist in Canada. As a young man, he was sent out twice with Operation Omega, an NGO funded both privately and by Oxfam, England. He worked in Bangladesh as a relief and reconstruction worker who intervened on behalf of the Bihari people who were persecuted in the post-revolution period, the beginning of Bangladesh. He intervened with authorities when beatings, lootings and murders occurred. He is co-founder of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, a housing advocacy association, and has worked against homelessness for over 22 years. He is active in the *Housing not War* campaign in Toronto, and works for Street Health. This health care organization for homeless people recently held a large celebration honoring his 16 years of service.