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[HOME](#) [About us](#) [Comité des Sages](#) [Document Centre](#) [Glossary](#) [Site Map](#) [Contact Us](#) [Links](#)

Countdown to
2008

The deadline for a
new global drug policy

Search

Afghanistan Initiatives

Invitations to Tender

Countdown to 2008

Events

Publications

Media Centre

Fellowship Programme

Print

Network of European Foundations
THE MERCATOR FUND

Media Centre - News releases - Following US policies is turning Canadian military operation in Afghanistan into a suicide mission



SENLIS COUNCIL NEWS RELEASE
7 JUNE 2006

Following US policies is turning Canadian military operation in Afghanistan into a suicide mission

Canada at War in Kandahar – Canadian troops no longer on a mission of peace keeping

Civilian deaths have led to mistrust by local populations – support for international military presence has been lost

Canadian public has been misled as to true nature of Canada's mission

LONDON - Canadian troops are paying with their lives for Canada's adherence to the US government's failing military and counter-narcotics policies in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan said The Senlis Council, an international security and development think tank. Senlis warned in a Report released today that the US-led counter-terrorist operations under Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and aggressive large-scale crop eradication have significantly contributed to the current war situation that is flaring-up in Kandahar and the other southern provinces.

"The Canada government and the international community continue to seemingly unquestioningly accept America's fundamentally flawed approach to southern Afghanistan," said Emmanuel Reinert, Executive Director of The Senlis Council. "But this is jeopardising both the troops' lives and the stabilisation, reconstruction and development objectives. The Canadian troops in Kandahar are doing a heroic job in the most difficult of circumstances and are to be commended; but the overall policy context within which they are obliged to work is putting them at risk."

Deadly months ahead

The Council warned that the months ahead could be deadly for Canadian troops participating in Operation Mountain Thrust – the latest military operation designed to defeat the Taliban who are regaining control of southern Afghanistan, but cast the blame for the recent escalation of violence on the current US-led approach in Afghanistan.

Senlis said that the Canadian troops' biggest challenge is to shake off the legacy of US-led Operation Enduring Freedom – the seek and destroy counter terrorism campaign in which the Canadian troops have been participating.

"There is no longer any peace to keep in Kandahar," said Reinert. "If Canadian troops are to be supported in their mission of securing Kandahar, they urgently need the additional tools to regain the support of the local population which has been lost due to the aggressive militaristic approach of the US in the region. When the international forces arrived in Afghanistan in 2001 they were welcomed and perceived as being there to help, but now that has changed."

Forced Eradication of Poppy Crops Contributed to Increase in Support for Taliban

The Report indicates that the large-scale aggressive forced eradication of poppy crops in Kandahar, led by the US, has contributed in a significant way to the discontent of the local populations and that a wave of New Taliban are cashing-in on the local population's disillusionment with the foreign military presence.

"Most farmers feel abandoned and cheated by the central government and the international community," said Reinert. "This has given way to a dramatic switch in alliance to the only people who they believe are showing any understanding of their needs – the Taliban."

In its report, Senlis notes that there is growing support for the Taliban who now offer protection to farmers against the eradication of their poppy crops.

Conflicting policies

The Report said that the policies being used in Afghanistan are in conflict with each other and that this has led to the recent very rapid disintegration security in the southern provinces.

"Conflicting drug, development and security policies are making Afghanistan spiral into chaos," said Emmanuel Reinert, Executive Director of The Senlis Council. "The growing violence shows that the current approach in Afghanistan is simply not working. The international community needs to go back to the drawing board and rework its approach in Afghanistan."

An emergency package is urgently needed for Kandahar focusing on poverty relief

Senlis said that a short term emergency package is urgently needed for Kandahar, which Canada could provide.

"Southern Afghanistan urgently needs an injection of financial aid earmarked for the short-term relief of conditions of extreme poverty in which many people live," said Reinert. "We also recommend the organisation of a series of Jirga-style meetings and the provision of an amnesty period of grace for farmers to carry on growing opium until they have an alternative means of supporting themselves."

"This will help address the international community's critical failure to understand the actual impact of the policies that have been implemented in the region," said Reinert. "Listening to local concerns with the participation of local communities should be an integral part of all future policy decisions."

Senlis said that in the coming years, thousands of poppy farmers will continue to lack sufficient legal economic alternatives to provide for their families. They are already living in extreme poverty.

"A period of grace for poppy farmers would provide for the smooth transition from current illegal poppy cultivation to legal alternatives without endangering farmers' economic situations," said Reinert. "An amnesty will also constrain rural communities' support for insurgent groups, as farmers will no longer be targeted by ineffective and destructive poppy eradication campaigns."

Thailand, after commencing its opium control project in 1978, gave farmers a four-year interlude in which to end their opium cultivation and find alternative crops.

Civilian deaths are contributing to the disintegration of trust in the Canadian military

The Report notes that foreign troops are increasingly being seen as aggressors rather than peace-keepers in the eyes of the local population due to aggressive military interventions which have caused numerous civilian deaths and casualties in the past months.

"The increasing number of cases of civilian deaths or injuries at the hands of the coalition military, has directly contributed to the disintegration of the local population's confidence in the international community and their troops," said Reinert.

The field research in Kandahar revealed that the number of civilian deaths in the province has doubled from 2005 to 2006. Of the total number of fatalities for 2005 and the first half of 2006 (until the end of June 2006), civilian deaths represented an astonishing 22 percent of total fatalities. This equals the amount of Afghan Army and police forces killed in Kandahar.

The Report notes that the recent bombing in Kandahar by the US which resulted in the deaths of civilians including women and children has recently caused severe alienation of local people.

"The US has lost yet more of the support of the local people with the blood of innocent civilians on their hands," said Reinert. "The problem facing the Canadian troops who have been assisting in the US led anti terrorist mission Operation Enduring Freedom, is that the local populations do not differentiate between the various nationalities present in their region – foreign troops are foreign troops. And foreign troops have killed their loved ones or other members of their communities."

One case study in the Report tells of the passenger of a taxi in Kandahar who shot dead by Canadian troops on his way home from an evening with relatives. The taxi allegedly came too close to the Canadian vehicle.

"Mr Nassrat Ali, a father of six, was killed by accident by Canadian soldiers, but once this accident had occurred, it was not dealt with in a proper way," said Reinert. "His family have not been taken care of by the Canadian Army and they have not even received an apology. They were just given some money for the funeral."

The Report goes on to conclude that this type of action is not in keeping with Canada's traditional role as a peace-keeping force and that the Canadian public has been misled as to Canada's exact role in Kandahar.

"The troops are more on a mission of war than a mission of peace," said Reinert.

The south is a warning for the rest of the country

Senlis said that the recent resurgence of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan and the sharp rise in violence which has come with it are an early warning of how the rest of the country could go if the international community, particularly the military, do not change their approach in the coming months.

The Report was based on Field Interviews conducted by The Senlis Council's international and Afghan staff in Kandahar over the last two months.

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- **European civic leaders call for a review of UN drug policy**
 - **Failure of the "Global War on Drugs" requires more effective solutions**
 - **The war America cannot win**
 - **Europeans will "make their voice heard"**
 - **Towards a new UN drug policy?**
 - **"War on Drugs" become "War on Truth"**
 - **UN Drug Control System in Crisis**
 - **Dario Fo: "Stop the war on drug users!"**
 - **2004 Feb, Civil society urges European leaders to face the global drug war crisis**
 - **Out of step INCB report still ignores major threats to world health**
 - **Canadian Senator Criticizes US Drug War**
 - **Civil Society Calls for an Evaluation of UN Drug Policy**
 - **Global Drug Policy: A failed US War under the UN Flag**

- **With EU Enlargement, European Drug Policy Faces Crucial Challenge**
- **EU Conference in Dublin**
- **Italy out of step with European Drug Policy Trend**
- **Still much progress to be made in Russian drug legislation**
- **The Czech Republic shows leadership in drug policy**
- **International Day against Drug Abuse and Trafficking: The Senlis Council launches International Award for Innovative Drug Policy**
- **Conservative Party position a major step backwards in drug policy for Canada**
- **Chinese Executions must be stopped**
- **Think-tank deplors lack of political response to world drug crisis**
- **AIDS crisis linked to defective economic model**
- **Alternatives to War on Drugs urgently needed in Afghanistan**
- **Urgent need for coordinated action in European drug policy**
- **Without a new drug policy model, Afghanistan will fail again**
- **Former Interpol Chief Criticises Current Drug Policy**
- **Solutions to Drug Policy Crisis Within Reach**
- **With Marijuana Bill, Canada Shows Leadership, Needs to Stay on Right Track**
- **The Afghan drug crisis will deteriorate further if new approach is not taken soon**
- **A call for the creation of a safe consumption centre in Paris**
- **World AIDS Day: millions of cases of HIV could be prevented**
- **Think tank urges President Karzai to focus on alternatives to drug war policies**
- **INCB'S Response to world drug situation irresponsible**
- **Drug policy decisions key to Afghan future**
- **Think tank opium licensing feasibility study for Afghanistan**
- **HIV/AIDS prevention should be included in international drug Law**
- **New Convention would put life-saving policies into legal practice**
- **Adapting model could prevent millions of deaths in Asia**
- **Feasibility Study Could Address Shortage of Pain Medication in Developing Countries**
- **Agreement Signed In Effort To Save Lives**
- **Ireland Takes Step Back On Drugs In Prison**
- **Report Gives Green Light to Licensed Opium in Afghanistan to Provide Essential Medicines**
- **Operations Expanded for Licensing Opium in Afghanistan**
- **New Afghan Parliament must treat drug problem**
- **Call for UK Government to Implement New Tactics to Tackle Afghan Drug Crisis**
- **Senlis Council Announces Treatment Initiative**
- **Senlis Council Warns of Looming HIV Crisis in Afghanistan -- Alarming Drug Use Figures**
- **Link between HIV/AIDS and drug use**
- **Forced Poppy Eradication Would End Hope for Reconstruction and Security in Afghanistan**
- **New Survey Exposes Alarming Lack of Access to Vital Pain-Relief Medicines in Afghanistan**
- **Afghan Farmers Come to UK to Plead for their Livelihoods**
- **In Face of Mounting Violence and Instability, Think Tank Calls on International Community to React to Crisis Situation in Afghanistan**
- **Opium Licensing pinned as hope for Afghan drug crisis by European Parliament**
- **Think Tank announces expert panel to review effectiveness of International Narcotics Control Board**
- **Current drug policy is endangering world security and hindering development**
- **Insurgency Assessment Report Reveals Disintegration of Government Control in Pashto Belt of Southern Afghanistan**
- **Broken promises of British Government have led to the breakdown in relationship with Afghanistan farmers in key province**
- **John Reid warns of Taliban resurgence: Think Tank blames current counter-narcotic policy**
- **Farmers from all over Afghanistan sign Resolution to support government counter-narcotics policy in exchange for opium licensing**
- **AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia at crisis levels: Current drug policies blocking progress**
- **The tide has turned: Taliban have retaken control of southern Afghanistan -- Support from local population for Central Government and international military presence has been lost**
- **Senlis Council applauds Rowntree Foundation's initiative for drug consumption rooms in UK**

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