

POSTED AT 8:18 AM EST ON 20/03/06

We've forgotten why we're really in Afghanistan

SALLY ARMSTRONG
FROM MONDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

Wars are fought on many fronts, not all of them military. The übersaturation of media coverage of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan is a case in point. While their presence is badly needed and much appreciated by Afghans, the job of getting Afghanistan back on its feet depends on more than the security the Canadian military can bring.

The assumption that the international community invaded that country in 2001 to rescue the people is wrong. Coalition forces entered Afghanistan to find Osama bin Laden and dismantle the Taliban. The cameras that followed them happened to trip over burka-clad women, the highest infant mortality rate in the world, the lowest life expectancy and a human-rights catastrophe. Consequently, in November of 2001, Canada and others agreed in Bonn to repair Afghanistan's infrastructure, reform its judiciary, restore the rights of women and girls, and establish

security.

While Prime Minister Stephen Harper was visiting the country, girls' schools were being torched by fundamentalists, women were being imprisoned for the "crime" of being raped and girls as young as 8 were being sold as child brides to settle tribal disputes. In the past year alone, 188 women used self-immolation to escape the intolerable conditions imposed on them by mullahs and their own fathers.

Establishing security is vital. But ignoring the rest is a recipe for failure. Studies done by the World Bank, the North-South Institute and others support the notion that, if the women and girls do not find justice, nor will their fathers, husbands and sons.

One of the results of the world's coming to their doorstep is that Afghans discovered that other people don't live the way they do. At a literacy class in Kabul, for example, a woman referred to her illiteracy as being blind. "I couldn't read so I couldn't see what was going on." Then they learned that Afghanistan had signed the same United Nations documents that Canada has -- the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Canadian International Development Agency invested Canadian tax dollars in making sure those rights would be observed.

For a time, the effort seemed to be on track -- girls' schools opened, women went back to work, a democratic government was elected, and there was reason for hope. So much so that Kabul turned into a sort of Disney World for academics and diplomats who donned flak jackets and drove around the city with military escorts to observe the new species of survivors.

But just like ants attracted to fresh sources of food, the Taliban and their al-Qaeda cohorts have crawled back out of the woodwork to chew on the underbelly of the Canadian military resolve. In the process, the programs for those who were supposed to be rescued have fallen off the radar screen. The women and girls who paid the biggest price under the Taliban risk being sidelined once again. Their concerns -- education, health, the brutal treatment they are subjected to -- are being lost while budgets and time lines are refocused on the insurgents.

The Bonn agreement cannot be fulfilled without the military there to provide security. But security is only one of the parts that will make Afghanistan whole. Canadians have done impressive work to deliver the promises made in Bonn. Two Calgary women started an organization called Women for Women in Afghanistan and raised \$500,000 that goes directly to nurses' training, school kits and an orphanage. A Toronto woman started a fundraiser called Breaking Bread for Women that has held more than 400 potluck suppers across Canada and raised half a million dollars to pay teachers in Afghanistan. A Winnipeg man brought together medical students from universities across Canada to restock the library at Kabul University's medical school; the Canadian military delivered the books, and a philanthropist in Vancouver paid the cost of sending a librarian to Kabul to train the library staff.

Their efforts are a message about where Canadians stand when others depend on the kindness of strangers. It is a message about keeping promises and fighting a war on all fronts.

Sally Armstrong, a special representative of Unicef from 2001 to 2003, is the author of Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan.

© Copyright 2006 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

