

Let's not tear down Afghan gains

by Rosie DiManno

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Just four months ago, I stood on the crest of Ghundy Ghar, in the company of Canadian snipers, surveying a valley that was lush, thriving and, in the context of Southern Afghanistan, remarkably calm.

Our troops held the high ground, firmly.

Others had fought for it, the previous autumn and winter, but the Royal Canadian Dragoons, Recce squadron, had made the crucial vantage point habitable, secure, battening down the hatches and clearing the approach road of mines. They had eyes on, through the telescopic sights of rifles and surveillance radar. Regularly, in convoys, they patrolled the larger area a crucial chunk of Zhari district criss-crossed by dirt trails used to hustle out opium and muster in fighters. It was this Canadian presence that had the insurgents on their heels. They couldn't tyrannize at will.

Last week, two Van Doos were killed trying to retake that position.

What happened, in so brief a span? Short answer: Canadian troops left.

They turned Ghundy Ghar over to Afghan national security forces an Army encampment at the bottom of the hill, Afghan police checkpoints along the arterial road on the northern bank of the Arghandab River. Gift-wrapped it for the Afghans. And they couldn't hold it. Couldn't even prevent insurrectionists from planting massive improvised explosive devices right inside what had been the Canadian compound.

"It just goes to show, in this complex country, in this complex terrain, how easy it is for insurgents to slip back into an area and intimidate the locals, in a short period of time," Gen. Rick Hillier told the Star on Friday.

"We've countered that in a variety of ways. Long term, the most important way is to grow the Afghan army and police. We're light years ahead of where we were last September and not as far advanced as we will be come Christmas. But there's a long way to go."

Two Afghan battalions have been trained, one already in the field. They've certainly showed willing, more so than Afghan police who are notoriously corrupt but also infrequently paid. Neither army nor police are properly equipped.

Ghundy Ghar is a microcosm of the peril that Afghanistan faces when, as seems increasingly certain, Canadian troops depart combustible Kandahar in early 2009, hard-won military successes crushed on the anvil of domestic politics back home.

It happens repeatedly, all over the southern provinces where the neo-Taliban has been most resurgent. Villagers come back, when they feel NATO troops have pacified the environment, rural life is resurrected, families start sending their children to school, the local economy begins to percolate. Then, NATO withdraws from a location, either because they have pressing assignments elsewhere Recce squadron was rotated to Spin Boldak or because somebody decides the time is ripe for hand-off to Afghan forces.

It was Afghan civilians who'd pleaded for Canadians to return last week.

Transferring security to Afghan forces, as long-term masters in their own house, has been promoted as the best pullout strategy for foreign troops. But the long-term is disastrously short-term, with political pressure in Canada and other NATO countries guaranteed to dismantle the incremental gains. Politicians, with their eyes on opinion polls, lack the backbone of soldiers. A great many Canadians have grown weary of the whole involvement, because Afghanistan is far away, theoretical, not worth Canadian lives.

Some, I think, perversely covet defeat, dead soldiers exploited as little more than ideological clubs with which to batter the mission.

Abandoning Afghanistan prematurely, on some arbitrary deadline, really will mean that those Canadians died in vain.