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Crush insurgency with jobs: Tory

By **KATHLEEN HARRIS**, PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

Reducing poverty and creating jobs is the key to wiping out insurgents in Afghanistan, according to Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor.

In an interview with Sun Media yesterday, the minister and MP for Carleton-Mississippi Mills said most Taliban recruits aren't fanatics, but impoverished youth who take up arms for lack of livelihood.

While Canadian troops are engaging in combat operations in the volatile Kandahar region, O'Connor said they're chiefly deployed to allow Afghanistan's tiny economy to blossom.

"The military are there to provide the protective environment, the secure environment, for development to take place and the economy to regain and that really is the most important part," he said.

"There is no military solution there. The solution is economic but you need to have the security blanket to do that."

O'Connor just returned from a three-day trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, where he met with soldiers to gain a deeper understanding of the complex mission. He called the visit a "fantastic" boost for the troops.

Because most Taliban recruits are jobless, 18 to 24-year-old men, O'Connor said providing employment is the secret to drying up the insurgency.

TIED TO DRUGS

"A lot of the recruits they get are because they're being offered money by the insurgency, because the insurgency is often tied up with the drug trade," he said.

"They're offering youth money and if you're in a village and you have no money at all and you're offered a salary, you might join. They're survivors."

The Canadian team in Kandahar employs locals for \$5 a day, which is considered a good wage in the fifth-poorest country in the world.

O'Connor said "labour battalions" could employ locals to build roads, schools, walls and homes.

"If they can get enough money, they can absorb huge numbers of youth."

While a political debate rages over Canada's future involvement in the region, O'Connor said even if the 2,200-troop commitment extends beyond next February, the numbers will decline by 300-400 due to the change of command.

It's not clear how long the international presence might remain, but he said training more Afghan soldiers and police will help the country control its internal enemies when foreign troops go home.

kathleen.harris@tor.sunpub.com