

The Globe And Mail

Rate of wounded on rise

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OTTAWA -- The number of Canadian soldiers who are so badly wounded in Afghanistan that they must be returned to Canada for treatment is on a trajectory to far exceed last year's toll.

During the first eight months of this year, 108 members of the Canadian Forces became eligible for the allowance that is given to wounded military personnel who lose their danger pay because their injuries require them to be removed from the war zone.

When the danger-pay substitute, called the Allowance for Loss of Operational Allowance, was introduced on Dec. 15, 2006, then-defence-minister Gordon O'Connor said he expected 115 soldiers would receive it as a result of injuries in 2006.

So the 2007 tally of 108 by Sept. 1 - obtained by The Globe and Mail using Access to Information legislation - was just seven shy of the number reached in mid-December of last year. And published reports suggest many have been injured since the end of August.

Defence officials refused to explain the increase despite requests over a number of days for clarification.

Although other countries are open about the number of wounded returning from the conflict, Canadian officials are tight lipped.

That means defence analysts are unable to verify the escalation. But some said yesterday it is not improbable that more are wounded because the Taliban has relied heavily this year on bombs and missiles rather than direct combat, which are less precise and could lead to more injuries.

There are also inconsistencies in the way the number of wounded are reported. The Canadian military magazine *Esprit de Corps* recently reported that, when the military has released numbers of injured, the count has included only those "wounded in action."

When injuries in incidents not directly related to the conflict - such as a truck rollover or an accidental discharge from a firearm - are taken into account, the magazine says the list of Canadians wounded or killed since 2001 tops 600.

The military will not clarify whether the figures released to The Globe include those wounded in action and non-conflict injuries.

"I think it's appalling," said Stephen Staples,

president of the Rideau Institute, an Ottawa-based policy group. "The government should be making every effort to have the full cost of this war explained to Canadians. And the casualty rate due to injuries is another human cost of the war."

The number of NATO fatalities across Afghanistan has hit 214 so far this year, 23 more than the total for last year.

There were 38 Canadian soldiers killed last year, compared with 27 so far in 2007.

But the number of injuries has apparently grown.

"There is a hint here that there is more wounded than meets the eye or they don't have an actual picture that they are dealing with. And I think either one of those demonstrates a most serious lapse in judgment," said Dan McTeague, the Liberal MP who successfully campaigned for the introduction of the allowance to replace danger pay.

"I am deeply concerned by the discrepancy and the lack of precision by the Department of National Defence."

Dawn Black, the NDP defence critic, is equally concerned by the Canadian Forces' unwillingness to be clear about the number of wounded.

"I think the issue is, why the lack of transparency, what's to hide here?" Ms. Black asked. "Canada is involved in a combat mission. We know that Canadian Forces personnel are getting injured in this mission. Why would you be hiding what the numbers are?"

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