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[Home](#) > Interview with LGen Michel Gauthier

Interview with LGen Michel Gauthier

2008 was a big year for Canada in Afghanistan. Tell us about it.

We are making progress, but inevitably in Afghanistan it's three steps forward and two steps back. Kandahar City is secured by Afghans today — that's a huge success — enabled by our men and women, and many brave Canadian civilian police patrolling the streets with Afghan partners. A growing number of Canadian civilians (more than 70) are also making a big difference, with all of us guided by a clear set of government priorities.

I'm especially proud of the progress we have made in professionalizing the Afghan National Army. In 2006, there were virtually no ANA for us to work with. Today, we are mentoring a full brigade. They are our brothers in arms: they are greatly respected by Kandaharis and, with every day that passes, they play more of a leadership role on operations.

Together with our Afghan partners, we've certainly taken the upper hand with the insurgents. They will not stand up and fight us. Instead, they've reverted to terrorist tactics — IEDs, intimidation and targeted assassinations of prominent Afghans — all aimed at increasing fear and eroding the people's confidence in their government. The net effect of our high operational tempo and their asymmetric tactics has been an upsurge in violence.

Can you describe some of the key challenges of 2008?

In the security arena, the Afghan National Police is the key to Afghanistan's future. The ANA will never be large enough to secure the entire country, nor will there ever be enough international forces to do so. There are encouraging signs of police progress in Kandahar City, where almost 50 percent of the province's population lives. But effective police are also needed in hundreds of villages in rural Kandahar, and we are not close to that yet. There are far too few of them, and they are not all well led. As a result, many of them have bad habits that give them a bad reputation in the South. Effective mentoring is needed at all levels, and this task will become increasingly important for us and the international community.

We've learned over the past three years in the South that Afghan leadership is critical particularly at the village and district levels. "White faces" alone in violent conflict with insurgents do not engender the support of the local population. Dramatically increasing the number of Western troops in the South will work only if Afghans are at the forefront. Empowering them at all levels — building their capacity to govern, and to deliver justice, basic services and economic well being, free of self-serving corruption — is as important as augmenting security forces. And this is Canada's focus in Afghanistan.

What is in store for 2009?

We will continue to separate the insurgents from the people, but our broader focus has to be on the population — stabilizing in Kandahar City and building a stronger sense of security in the populated approaches to the city, while we support Afghan solutions and build their capacity to protect and look after their people. This will be the essence of our focus: where most Kandaharis live and sleep.

The addition of enablers recommended by the Manley Panel — three types of helicopters and a very capable UAV — will save lives and make a huge contribution to mission success. Likewise, the arrival of tens of thousands of US troops will help Afghan authorities control territory that is currently dominated by insurgents. This will mean more violence in the near term, but the insurgents will see

*Government of Canada*Left: LGen Michel Gauthier
Commander CEF/COM
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their influence diminish gradually to irrelevance as Afghan leadership and confidence grow at the village and district levels.

Key to all this, of course, will be to ensure that Afghans are front and centre. Insurgencies are ultimately defeated by the people. In Kandahar, they must be prepared to take collective and individual ownership of the security and governance challenges, strongly enabled by a great Canadian team.

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