

# BUILDING BRIDGES IN AFGHANISTAN

**C**anada's renewed commitment to Afghanistan involves a coordinated, long-term approach that brings together the three arms of Canadian foreign policy: defence, diplomacy and development.

The bridge is hardly noticeable, a modest concrete structure that traverses a small river on the southern edge of Kabul. Yet for the people of the district of Paghman, the Deh-e Punbah Bridge is a critical lifeline to the city that's easily weakened by seasonal floods and unable to take heavy commercial traffic. For several weeks this fall, overseeing the reconstruction of the bridge became a focus of activity for members of the Royal Canadian Regiment—and a symbol of the close cooperation between Canada and Afghanistan in the effort to help rebuild the devastated country.

Such involvement by Canada in Afghanistan dates back to the early 1960s, with the first Canadian development assistance program in the country. As the need to coordinate the efforts of the various development agencies working there grew, Ottawa established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. However, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and the installation of a puppet regime led the Canadian government to sever diplomatic ties. Even after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, connections between the two countries remained minimal, although Canada provided some humanitarian aid throughout the 1990s.

## A Renewed Commitment

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, prompted Canada and other countries to re-evaluate their policies toward Afghanistan. The collapse of the Taliban regime in October 2001 was followed by a meeting of groups interested in developing a framework for governing the country. The resulting Bonn Agreement led to the creation of an interim administration, headed by Hamid Karzai, and gave the international community a new opportunity to help end decades of civil conflict and contribute effectively to the reconstruction of the country.

Canada's renewed commitment to Afghanistan is rooted in the principle of a multilateral approach with two main



Friendship grows into brotherhood: Mohammed Musa, the Governor of Paghman District, and Lieutenant Colonel Don Denne, Commanding Officer of Third Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, cut a ribbon to open the Deh-e Punbah Bridge, reconstructed with the assistance of the regiment under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) civil-military cooperation program. The newly rebuilt bridge serves the interest of local villagers as well as ISAF in their patrols of the area, says Denne. "The building of this bridge is a symbol of the friendship between the people of Canada and the people of Afghanistan," he says, "and further stands as a testament to our spirit of cooperation in the rebuilding of Afghanistan."



objectives: security and reconstruction. Achieving these will ensure that the country never again becomes a haven for terrorism and extremism.

"In short, the mission speaks both to Canadians' altruism—our desire to help others—and to our self-interest—our desire to put down terrorism and enhance our own domestic security," says Minister of National Defence John McCallum. "In the absence of international forces, there is a serious risk that the country would fall back into the hands of the Taliban—a serious risk that it would once again become a breeding ground for terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. That is something the world cannot allow."

photos: MCpl Brian Walsh, Canadian Forces Combat Camera