

OUR MAN IN KABUL

Canadian Ambassador Christopher Alexander gets to work helping Afghans break down barriers and rebuild lives.

It is not always easy being a diplomat, but no more so than in Afghanistan. Christopher Alexander, who became Canada's first ambassador to the country in July, lives and works in conditions that can best be described as modest but functional, travels in an armoured SUV and has more guards than program officers on his staff. Despite all of that, he is enthused about his new posting.

His logic is simple: he sees a vital role for a Canadian diplomat in Kabul. "Afghanistan has been through an enormous number of conflicts of different types over the past 25 years, and it is a very factionalized place. Our role of breaking down the barriers between factions and restoring trust between groups who were on opposite sides of the barricades is essential."

At only 35, Mr. Alexander is one of the youngest Canadian ambassadors ever appointed. Still, he comes with plenty of experience to help him handle the challenges of Kabul. Since joining the Foreign Service in 1991, he has twice served abroad in Moscow, as Second Secretary from 1993 to 1996 and Minister-Counsellor from 2000 to 2003.

In Ottawa, he was Assistant to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996 and 1997, and Deputy Director (Russia) in the Eastern Europe Division from 1997 to 2000.

That experience stands him in good stead in Kabul, where his role is not only to break down barriers between Afghans, but also to coordinate the activities of Canadians working in the country. And there is no shortage of coordinating to do. "Our soldiers are all around us," Mr. Alexander



Ambassador Christopher Alexander in his modest but functional Kabul office.

says, "but Canadian civilians are also very numerous on the ground here in Kabul, working for a variety of NGOs, humanitarian organizations and UN agencies."

Furthermore, Canadians will be in Afghanistan for awhile. "The number one request that everyone here makes of Canada as a leading donor country is that we extend our commitment over the longer term," he adds. "No one knows what the needs will be beyond 2005, but follow-through and continuity are going to be crucial."

Doing all of this is not made any easier by the fact that Kabul remains a highly dangerous place in which to live and work. Mr. Alexander acknowledges that security remains "the number one precondition for success," but the Military Security Guards see to it that he and his staff feel safe. "It's an unprecedented and challenging posting for them, but frankly our work here would not be possible without them."

Above all, he remains optimistic, especially because of the amount of reconstruction he sees taking place in Kabul. "Individual families and organizations are rebuilding their houses, opening their shops, painting their buildings," he says. "Every neighbourhood where people live is a beehive of reconstruction at the micro level." 🍁

To find out more about Canada's diplomatic relationship with Afghanistan, visit www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/afghanistan.



Growing commitment: (left to right): Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham and Ambassador Christopher Alexander meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the presidential palace in Kabul.