

Condemning weapon shows won't stop wars

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Can a pro-peace human rights activist deplore the weapons industry and yet support a military intervention?

This is a question I struggled with when I learned about the arms trade show that was held this week at Lansdowne Park, and a rally organized by pro-peace advocacy organizations to protest the event. Being against war and the weapons industry, yet supporting a military intervention are contradictory but equally valid positions that many human rights activists hold simultaneously.

When I was asked if I would speak as an Afghan woman at the rally to oppose the arms trade show, my first reaction was positive. I am against all war and weapons. Millions of people in the country of my origin, Afghanistan, lost their lives, limbs, homes, livestock, communities and livelihoods due to the oversaturated supply of weapons that was made available to their own parties of interest by all countries involved in the Cold War.

When I started elementary school in 1983, many young boys joined their fathers, brothers and uncles in the mountains to fight the Russians, or went to training camps in Pakistan to become "warriors." By the end of the Cold War, when I was a high-school student, they came down from the mountains with their weapons, the only things they knew how to handle. Hence, the "holy war" transformed into a civil war and the freedom fighters into warlords and thugs.

However at the same time, speaking as an Afghan woman at a rally against an arms show in Canada would project a message that neither I nor many other Afghans support: ending the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan.

It is ironic that, even in a democratic society I cannot speak the simple truth that I am against war and I am against the weapons that induce violence, hatred and misery wherever they are used. I can only make this statement wearing the antiwar-movement uniform which also says that Canada should withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and should not be involved in this war or any war. I say Canada should be involved in "good wars" and I have my reasons.

The military intervention alone will not solve all the problems in Afghanistan. Tangible efforts must be focused on development, justice, education and nation-building in order to bring peace and stability to the country and the region. These sectors can develop and function only under the security umbrella provided by international troops, including the Canadian Forces.

Similarly, it is the presence of Canadian troops in Afghanistan that engenders government and public interest in focusing on development and humanitarian

efforts. Proof of this is the fact that one year before Canadian troop withdrawal, development and humanitarian efforts are effectively winding down. Neither CIDA nor Foreign Affairs has announced their post-2011 strategies and development project proposals that extend beyond the withdrawal date are invariably turned down.

The withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan before the mission is accomplished will not end the conflict. It simply means Canadians won't hear about it.

The atrocious violence that tore apart the country, using massive arsenals of weapons that were not produced in Afghanistan, happened after the end of the Cold War when the stakeholders abandoned the country that fought their war for 20 years. During this period, Canadians knew little of Afghanistan's existence, until Sept. 11, 2001, that is.

The war will likely continue after Canada is gone, and weapons -- not marked Made in Afghanistan -- will be used by others who will induce further violence and suffering.

Maybe the real question to ask is: who do we, claiming to be pro-peace human rights activists, prefer to see carrying the weapons?

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