

Thursday, January 31, 2008

\$30,000 gift took 'a bit of slugging'

Canadian group buys 5,000 soccer balls for Afghans

Melissa Leong, National Post, With Files From Global National Published: Thursday, January 31, 2008



Canadian troops have given 5,000 soccer balls to Afghan children, thanks to a donation of \$30,000 from a group of Canadian philanthropists.

Vahan Kololian, a Toronto businessman, co-ordinated the donations and arranged to have the balls delivered to Kandahar from a manufacturer in Pakistan.

"Small gestures go a long way," Mr. Kololian said yesterday. "The message of development and reconstruction in the Afghan mission is not being trumpeted and not being heard both internationally and within Canada.... By handing out soccer balls to the children of Afghanistan, it reinforces that message in a very tangible and on the ground level."

Soldiers presented the balls to the director of sport and the director of education in Kandahar on Tuesday. They will be distributed to schools and various soccer leagues.

"That province has a fair number of soccer tournaments in the summer," Mr. Kololian said. "It is a relatively inexpensive sport to support because all you need is a ball and an open field."

Brigadier-General David Fraser, the Canadian General who commanded NATO forces in southern Afghanistan in 2006, added: "Soccer balls are good items for the young people in Afghanistan. They love to play and it is something that gets everyone involved."

Mr. Kololian says he was inspired to do something for Canadian troops and the children of Afghanistan in late 2006 after reading *Three Cups of Tea*, a book about an American mountaineer who builds schools in remote regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He said it took about 18 months to finally get the balls shipped by truck from a Pakistani village, four hours away from the Afghan border.

Mr. Kololian is also chairman of the Mosaic Institute, an organization devoted to diversity, international peace and development. The soccer balls project was a joint venture between the Mosaic Institute and Canada Company, a group committed to supporting the military, founded by Blake Goldring, chairman and CEO of AGF Trust Company.

"I'm hoping this could lead to other people taking up similar projects. It takes a bit of work, a bit of slugging it out, midnight conference calls with manufacturers in Pakistan but it is very, very rewarding," Mr. Kololian said.

Canadians have donated soccer balls to Afghan children before.

When Peter MacKay, Minister of National Defence, visited Afghanistan last November, he brought with him the first of 500 soccer balls collected by 12-year-old Joshua Zuidema of South Mountain, Ont.

The boy was motivated after hearing that former General Romeo Dallaire brought balls to kids in Rwanda. Joshua, who suffers from celiac syndrome, a nonlife threatening digestive disorder, was able to raise money by babysitting and going door-to-door.