

Mission costs up sharply, MacKay says

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OTTAWA — The incremental cost to National Defence of the Afghan military mission is rising steeply and has reached a total of \$3.1-billion from its start in 2001, according to Defence Minister Peter MacKay.

Mr. MacKay made the disclosure as he appeared before the House of Commons defence committee, which is studying supplementary spending estimates of \$875-million for the department for the current fiscal year.

In May, Mr. MacKay's predecessor, Gordon O'Connor, told the Commons that the incremental cost of the mission was \$2.6-billion. A spokesman for Mr. MacKay said yesterday that the extra costs are due mainly to additional tanks and force protection expenses.

Mr. MacKay and Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier insisted that progress continues to be made in Afghanistan, despite reports to the contrary by external groups such as the Senlis Council and Oxfam.

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The minister questioned a recent report from the Senlis Council, which asserted that the Taliban had a permanent presence in 54 per cent of Afghanistan and now controls "vast swaths of unchallenged territory."

"Who are they?" Mr. MacKay asked of the Senlis Council, a Paris-based think tank. He questioned the rigour of the group's recent study, noting that the report has no index and no footnotes and is dealing with military matters, which he alleged are beyond the group's expertise.

Gen. Hillier insisted that the military situation has improved in recent months, declaring that the Taliban are "on the back foot" throughout southern Afghanistan thanks to the work of Canadian, British and other NATO-led soldiers.

There is a big improvement in the readiness of Afghan National Army soldiers and Afghan police, both of whom are now working beside the Canadians in Kandahar, he said.

The MPs peppered the minister with questions on issues ranging from plans to refurbish the fleet of Aurora maritime surveillance aircraft to the state of the runways at CFB Bagotville, Que.

New Democrat David Christopherson wanted to know about \$10.5-million that the department is spending on non-lethal laser "dazzlers," concerned that the high-tech device could end up being dangerous like the taser. He worried that the dazzlers could end up blinding people.

Mr. MacKay said the dazzlers are designed to deter possible suicide drivers by shining laser beams at them. The idea was to have a new tool to protect troops against attacks on their convoys, especially in Afghanistan.

"They are undergoing rigorous testing," Mr. MacKay said, noting that only a few have been purchased, solely to test them.

Gen. Hillier said the dazzler is designed to fill the gap between "vigorously waving at people and shooting them." He said the dazzler would flash a strong light on the windshield of an oncoming car, prompting the driver to stop.

"It avoids us having to take a shot at them," the general said. He said the dazzlers are still being tested and, before they are purchased for use by the military, the device would be submitted to the Judge Advocate General to make sure their use conforms with the Geneva Conventions.

Canada has signed an international treaty, the Protocol on Blinding Laser Weapons, which bans the use of devices if they emit a blinding light.

Mr. Christopherson said he is concerned that the military could end up using the dazzlers in Canada when it is called in to aid civil powers. Mr. MacKay said there is no thought being given to their use domestically.

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