

MacKay, Hillier serve troops Christmas dinner

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KANDAHAR AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — Defence Minister Peter MacKay served up turkey and tourtière to the Canadian troops in Afghanistan on Christmas Day, but also took the opportunity to dish out a stern public warning to Iran and Pakistan to stop the flow of weapons and explosives to groups targeting NATO forces.

Afghanistan has "very negative influences coming in from other countries, Pakistan, certainly Iran in particular," Mr. MacKay told reporters in Kandahar on Christmas Day.

Asked to elaborate, he said that, "We're very concerned that weapons are coming in from Iran, we're very concerned these weapons are going to the insurgents and keeping this issue alive.

"So we've certainly made our views to the Iranian government about this known," he said, adding that similar complaints have been registered by Canada with the Pakistani government.

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The issue of Iranian complicity in obtaining weapons for the Taliban has arisen before. While Iranian-originated weapons are known to have entered Afghanistan, NATO officials have previously suggested that Tehran was not directly involved.

In June, General Dan McNeill, the head of NATO forces in Afghanistan, told Reuters that "there certainly are weapons or munitions of Iranian origin, but when you say weapons being provided by Iran that would suggest there is some more formal entity involved in getting those weapons here," he said at ISAF's heavily fortified main base in Kabul. "That's not my view at all."

He added that: "I just have no information to support that there's anything formal in some arrangement out of Iran to provide weapons here."

On Tuesday, Mr. Mackay said that Afghan nationals have been welcoming Canadian troops as liberators, much like the way the Dutch welcomed troops during the Second World War.

"Not to overdramatize this," he said, "but this was akin to the type of liberations we saw in Holland where citizens were coming out and celebrating the success, coming out and paying their overt gratitude to Canadian soldiers."

Mr. MacKay is being accompanied by Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier and the U.S. Ambassador to Canada David Wilkins. The officials arrived on Christmas Eve, though news of the visit was embargoed for security reasons until 9 a.m. Eastern time.

The visitors spent Christmas visiting several military outposts around Kandahar, where Canadian and NATO troops are working to pacify a Taliban presence in southern Afghanistan.

Asked to comment on what has been one of the deadliest years in Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion, the officials said that progress is being made. Both Mr. MacKay and Gen. Hillier said that much work remains but that, with Parliament's approval, Canada will be in the struggle for the long haul.

"The soldiers believe in their mission," Gen. Hillier said. "And they believe the Afghans need help and they believe they need to keep the Taliban on their back foot until they can help the Afghans build their own army, their own police force, so they could do it themselves."

Canada's continued commitment of 2,500 troops to Afghanistan will be one of the hot-button political issues this coming year. Parliament has only formally committed soldiers to the NATO-led mission until February, 2009. The Conservatives are hoping to keep the troops in Afghanistan until 2011, at least.

In coming months, a panel led by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley is to release a report on the Canadian presence in Afghanistan. Mr.

MacKay said once the report is issued, Parliament will decide whether Canadian Forces stay put or pull out.

"How confident am I that we are going to continue this progress? Extremely confident," Mr. MacKay said.

Mr. Wilkins said he was invited by Mr. MacKay to make his first visit to Afghanistan.

The ambassador praised Canada's contribution as "a great example of what a freedom loving people can do to help other people gain freedom and democracy."

Then, Mr. Wilkins made a point of adding that "I flew commercial to Dubai so I came a long way on my own – on the U.S. dollar."

The officials hand-delivered paper plates with Christmas dinner to the soldiers – including tourtière (meat pie) for the Royal 22nd Regiment, the Van Doos – at a Kandahar Air Field mess hall. Mr. Mackay told the soldiers they are accomplishing "something you will be proud of for the rest of your lives."

He told reporters that "we do not want to leave work undone. We want to make sure Afghanistan is a fully functional, secure, self sustaining country.

"That's the mission. And we want to complete that mission."

Troops cheering Gen. Hillier after he gave a speech thanking them for their sacrifices.

"We are here [at the central base] only one day a month, so it's special to be here," said Corporal Martin Lavigne of the Van Doos, who spends most of this time at military outposts keeping the Taliban at bay.

"It's Afghanistan, it's always dangerous," he said. "But right now everything is okay. Everyone is happy."

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