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Afghan rebels' arms suppliers assailed

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By [Betsy Pisik](#) - KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — Canadian Defense Minister Peter Mackay last night accused Pakistan and Iran of supplying weapons to insurgents, only half an hour before a rocket disrupted his Christmas game of field hockey with the troops here.

Witnesses described a plume of smoke and a column of orange flame in the direction of the impact, which was audible from a mile away.

Elsewhere, two European diplomats who went to one of Afghanistan's most volatile regions have been asked to leave the country, wire agencies reported.

A Briton working for the European Union and an Irishman working for the United Nations were accused of posing a threat to national security, officials and diplomats said.

Reuters news agency, citing local news portals, reported that they may have visited the Taliban insurgent stronghold of Helmand recently and might have met with senior tribal elders with close links to the Taliban — or even insurgent leaders themselves.

Helmand is the heart of Afghanistan's drug-producing poppy industry, and the European Union and United Nations have a key role in the British-led eradication program.

Yesterday's attack was the second time Mr. Mackay has been targeted on a visit to southern Afghanistan, where 2,600 Canadian troops are leading the area's security and rehabilitation efforts.

In early November, militants narrowly missed Mr. Mackay, again traveling with Chief of Army Staff Gen. Rick Hillier, on his visit to a military outpost eight miles west of Kandahar. Two rockets landed near his convoy, but no one was injured in the attack.

Insurgents have impeded NATO efforts to bring development and security to the country, largely by aiming rocket and bomb attacks on soldiers and sympathetic locals.

The Afghans "live in a very tough neighborhood here," Mr. Mackay told a small group of predominantly Canadian reporters yesterday evening. "Let's not forget they have very negative influence coming in from other countries, Pakistan and certainly Iran in particular."

Ottawa, he said, has already protested to Iranian officials over the export of weapons or bomb components.

"We are very concerned that weapons are coming in from Iran and very concerned that these weapons are going to the insurgency and keep this issue alive," Mr. Mackay said. "We have certainly made our views to the Iranian government about this known."

It was the first time a Canadian official has blamed Tehran for sending weapons or permitting their transfer to Afghanistan to be used against coalition forces.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates expressed similar concerns during a visit to Afghanistan earlier this month.

Mr. Gates said Washington has "good evidence" that Iran is supplying militias with weapons and funds to challenge international forces operating here with U.N. Security Council authorization.

The Canadian troops are trying to stabilize Afghanistan's tumultuous southern sectors, including the Taliban's home base of Kandahar. Canadian forces have already taken 73 casualties, and popular support for the war has dropped to barely half the country.

The Canadian government has authorized troops for Afghanistan until 2009, although the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper hopes to extend the mission until at least 2011.

Mr. Gates last week chastised NATO nations for not sending more troops and resources to secure and rebuild Afghanistan.

Yesterday's attack came shortly after Mr. Mackay, Gen. Hillier and U.S. Ambassador to Canada David Wilkins had dished out turkey dinner to troops — a holiday tradition echoed on military bases around the world since World War II.

Mr. Wilkins said he came to Afghanistan to thank the Canadian soldiers for their efforts to restore security to the Afghan people.