

MacKay pushes need to stay course

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KANDAHAR AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — Defence Minister Peter MacKay served up turkey and tourtière to Canadian troops in Afghanistan on Christmas Day, saying they will stay for "as long as [they] can make this contribution."

The complicated calculus of Canada's commitment to Afghanistan, which could end as early as February of 2009, looms large in Kabul, Kandahar, Ottawa and other international capitals this coming year.

Mr. MacKay said the length of the mission "will be decided by Parliament in a fair, democratic debate and vote" but made no secret of his minority government's desire to stay until 2011 — and possibly a lot longer.

"We do not want to leave work undone. We want to make sure Afghanistan is a fully functional, secure, self-sustaining country," he told reporters. "That's the mission. And we want to complete that mission."

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He said "remarkable progress" has been made, but it's still early days. "We're providing peace in a war-torn country. Certainly that takes time.

"Five years, six years is a relatively short time, in the grand scheme of things, to build a country that has been under such difficult circumstances for so many years."

Mr. MacKay was accompanied by the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier. David Wilkins, the U.S. Ambassador to Canada, also came along at Mr. MacKay's request. Mr. Wilkins called Ottawa's contribution in Afghanistan "a great example of what a freedom-loving people can do to help other people gain freedom and democracy."

Mr. MacKay also took the opportunity to dish out a stern public warning to Iran and Pakistan to stop the flow of weapons and explosives to terrorist groups that are targeting NATO forces. Afghanistan has "very negative influences coming in from other countries, Pakistan, certainly, Iran in particular," Mr. MacKay said.

"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.

"We have asked the Iranians to deal with the problem because it is very hard to cut the supply lines when you have, in another country, people who are providing the arms for use against Canadian forces and others" in the 39-nation NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, he told Agence France-Presse. Similar complaints have been registered by Canada with the Pakistani government, he said.

Afghanistan is drawing renewed international attention, amid a growing consensus that too little heed was paid to stabilizing the nation after the 2001 invasion led by the United States.

Today, Taliban extremists are back and leading a growing insurgency. There are renewed fears that Afghanistan could slide back into becoming a failed state and terrorist haven. The U.S. government has been calling for thousands more troops from NATO allies, calls that have been joined by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

But few leaders are upping the ante. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi all stopped by on the weekend to reaffirm existing levels of support, although none spoke of adding more troops.

France would "make a number of decisions" in the coming weeks, Mr. Sarkozy said, adding it would "reinforce" the personnel it has here to train the Afghan army and police.

The future of Afghanistan also hinges on where troops are deployed. The Canadian Forces are being used to pacify the Taliban in their heartland,

the restive Kandahar area, and have suffered more casualties than most NATO allies. This year will finish as the most casualty-heavy yet for Canadians.

Gen. Hillier, who was cheered loudly by troops as he told them they have incredible support back home, said serious strides are being made, even if much work remains in terms of building Afghanistan's institutions.

"A year ago, we had no Afghan soldiers with us here in Kandahar. Now as a result, partly, of those training teams we put with them, we have three battalions," he said.

But he acknowledged miracles aren't made overnight. "They're not complete, they're not up to strength, and they lack equipment and a whole variety of things, but there are three, actually, good battalions," he added.

Well-received by the troops, Mr. MacKay was visibly charged after his whirlwind Christmas trip.

"Not to over-dramatize this, but this was akin to the type of liberations we saw in Holland [after the Second World War] where citizens were coming out and celebrating the success, coming out and paying their overt gratitude to Canadian soldiers," he said.

"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.

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.

Troops who were served dinner by the officials appreciated the gesture, cheering the extremely popular 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 Vandoos, who spends most of his 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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