

Canadian troops face bigger bombs; sophisticated Taliban foe in 2008: Hillier

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OTTAWA - The Taliban have become more sophisticated in the way they plant roadside bombs in Afghanistan, importing lethal tactics already tested and proven on bloodied U.S. forces in Iraq, says Canada's chief of defence staff.

But Gen. Rick Hillier insists that, although insurgents have become more cagey and adept, Canadian troops are staying a step ahead of the improvised explosives and booby traps that litter the countryside.

"The Taliban are not 10-foot-tall warriors, but at the same time they are not to be dismissed lightly," Hillier said in a year-end interview with The Canadian Press.

The bombs have grown steadily bigger since Canadian troops first deployed to the Kandahar area for their latest Afghan assignment nearly two years ago.

The army's hardy, troop-transporting light armoured vehicles were initially a source of frustration for lightly armed insurgents, whose machine-gun bullets and rocket-propelled grenades pinged off the reinforced steel skins of the LAV IIIs. Their vexation only increased with the deployment of 62-tonne Leopard 2 tanks.

In response, the Taliban began stacking anti-tank mines atop one another, burying them in the mud and gravel roads that criss-cross the desert moonscape and arid farmland west of Kandahar. Detonated by pressure-plate or cell-phone signal, the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been responsible for the majority of Canada's 73 combat deaths.

Hillier said insurgents have been crafty in their attempts to get the upper hand on the army.

"We know they watch us," he said in the wide-ranging interview on Friday.

"They watch our tactics. Yes, they do learn. The IEDs are not getting more sophisticated; they're getting more sophisticated in their use, how they place them, where they place them."

Tactics that have been the hallmark of insurgents in Iraq - where big roadside bombs followed ambushes and were followed in turn by suicide attacks - have seeped into the Afghan war. Prior to 2006, those kinds of co-ordinated, multi-pronged skirmishes were the exception, rather than the normal.

Throughout the last year, the army has learned that its LAV IIIs are not invulnerable to the bigger blasts and has introduced a variety of technical improvements, most of which are classified.

The RG-31s, the South African-designed armoured patrol vehicle specially designed to withstand land mines, were also scheduled to undergo improvements.

Last May, the Defence Department quietly announced that it would purchase specialized anti-IED vehicles from the U.S. military for close to \$30 million. The Husky, Cougar and Buffalo work in tandem to detect buried mines and went into service last September.

Hillier said by far the biggest lessons have come in the army's now scientific approach to IED investigation.

A few weeks ago, National Defence confirmed it is turning to the private sector to better train soldiers who investigate roadside bombings.

Better investigative techniques will allow the army to track down individual bomb-makers and the improvised factories where the devices are assembled.

Whenever a new tactic is spotted, Hillier said that within days the military has been able to get the word out to soldiers in the field and even to those training at bases back in Canada so they can adapt.

"Years ago and (longer) it would have taken us months to learn those kinds of lessons."