

Crew safe, but Afghan insurgents total our best tank

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Afghan insurgents knocked out one of Canada's new Leopard tanks, sparking questions in the military about whether the attack was simply lucky or a signal that enemy forces intend to target the armored vehicles by increasing the amount of explosives used against them.

The Leopard 2A6M, on loan from Germany and outfitted with additional armour and protection to deal with landmines, was damaged beyond repair in an explosion last month. Military investigators believe the blast was caused by a landmine but there have been suggestions that an improvised explosive device or IED was used.

At the time of the incident the Canadian Forces only stated a crew member was injured in the explosion but did not give details about damage to the vehicle. Members of Canada's tank community now privately confirm the Leopard was a write-off.

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But officers are also praising the capabilities of the new tank, saying it did its job in protecting the crew.

Only one crewmember, the driver, was injured. He suffered a broken hip.

Some in the Canadian Forces believe the insurgents will try to focus more attacks on the Leopards because they are seen as highly effective in supporting coalition efforts. Insurgents in Iraq have also targeted U.S. tanks with roadside bombs packed with large amounts of explosives.

Afghan insurgents have already tried "swarming tactics" on the Leopards, firing large volleys of rocket-propelled grenades at the vehicles. In one incident a Leopard was hit by four RPGs but emerged unscathed. Military officials have continually stated that any vehicle can be destroyed if enough explosives are used in a roadside bomb or landmine.

In Afghanistan Canada has a mix of older Leopard tanks and the 2A6Ms obtained from Germany.

Asked if insurgents are now increasing the amount of explosives in their bombs to deal with heavier armoured vehicles such as the Leopards, military spokesperson Lieut. Isabelle Riche responded that experience has shown the Taliban continually adjust tactics in an attempt to achieve greater result.

She said in response, the Canadian Forces constantly assesses how these tactics can be countered to minimize risk to military personnel.

"Although there are a variety of factors that influence the effectiveness of an IED the tank involved in this particular incident was sufficiently robust to protect the lives of our personnel," said Riche.

The military declined to get into details about the specifics of the damage because of operational security reasons. Some officers have suggested the insurgents already knew they had successfully knocked out the tank since their spies monitored the recovery of the vehicle.

The German media has quoted a letter sent to German defence officials from a Canadian officer who was in the Leopard at the time of the blast. He thanked the Germans, noting that the tank "worked as it should."

The Afghan insurgents used a roadside bomb, an IED, but did not give any details.

The officer identified the source of the blast as an IED but didn't get into other details.

In addition, there are concerns in the military that there are not enough spare parts available for the Leopards. In Afghanistan the number of kilometres being driven by the tanks in a month is the equivalent of what is usually put on the vehicles in a year back in Canada. While that is acceptable since the tanks are being used in a war zone, some officers have complained that spare parts are not being made available.

But Defence Department spokesperson Tanya Barnes said there are a large number of parts available for the Leopards. "DND and (Public Works) have established the necessary mechanisms to support the tanks in theatre," Barnes said in an e-mail.

The Defence department has arranged a logistic support agreement with the German government and Public Works has raised a number of contracts for the supply of Leopard 2 spare parts, she added. More than 3,000 different spare parts have been ordered, according to Barnes.

Under the terms of the loan arrangement on the 20 Leopard 2A6Ms, Canada will be required to return the tanks to Germany in the same condition they were received. The tanks are to be returned in September 2009.

In April, the Harper government announced it would be purchasing up to 100 used Leopard 2s from the Netherlands as well as getting the loan of the 20 Leopard 2A6Ms from Germany. The cost of the purchase and long-term support contract is estimated to be about \$1.3 billion.

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