

## THE AFGHAN MISSION

**MacKay lauds progress, planning**

OLIVER MOORE

MARCH 20, 2008

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- Parliament's vote to extend the mission in Afghanistan has given military commanders the firm timeline they need to plan rotations and deploy their troops most effectively, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said yesterday.

The cabinet minister was speaking in Kandahar after about two days in the area, a secrecy-shrouded visit that included time at several forward operating bases. He met with reporters shortly before his plane took off, saying that he was gratified by the "incremental progress" he had seen.

"This is encouraging," Mr. MacKay said yesterday. "I also had the chance to speak to a lot of our soldiers who expressed relief that the mission will be extended. They were grateful for the fact that the Parliament of Canada endorses the work that they're doing."

But the minister went on to say that the vote would also have an operational impact, quite apart from its effect on the morale of soldiers here.

**Print Edition - Section Front**[Enlarge Image](#)**More National Stories**

- Jail suicide of sex offender under scrutiny
- Risks linked to use of older cells in transfusions
- Canada to take more Iraqis
- Khadr came within seconds of death in firefight
- Gaffes worsened cancer-test woes in Newfoundland
- Go to the National section



"The military are very conscious of the fact that we now have a set period of time. We can gauge the numbers that will be required," he said. "Again, that vote allows for proper planning and allows for us as well to gauge the necessity [for troops], in conjunction with other international forces."

Parliament's decision to extend the mission's finish from early 2009 to the end of 2011 means that, instead of fielding a single six-month rotation after the current one is finished in the fall, military commanders will have to come up with another six contingents of troops.

Mr. MacKay said that the demand for troops will be met in part by recruitment efforts back home. He was non-committal about the idea of lengthening the tours of Canadian soldiers, which are less than half the 15 months served by U.S. Army troops here.

"I rely very heavily, as you would appreciate, on the military assessment of that," he said. "We're not ruling anything out, but of course these are operational decisions. I'll take that up with the Chief of Defence Staff."

There are numerous soldiers who have already served several tours in Afghanistan. One of them was Sergeant Jason Boyes, with the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, who was killed on the weekend shortly after arriving for his third rotation here.

Sgt. Boyes died the night before Mr. MacKay arrived and the Defence Minister was at the 32-year-old's ramp ceremony early Tuesday morning, standing between Major-General Marc Lessard and Brigadier-General Guy Laroche, the highest-ranking Canadian soldiers here.

Mr. MacKay was also able to get a taste of life at several forward operating bases; he met with Afghan commanders, visited a hospital on the main base and toured a causeway across the Arghandab River, a Canadian-driven project.

After this tour, he rejected reports - including one last week from the United Nations that indicated a jump in insurgent activity, when comparing last year to 2006 - that the security situation had deteriorated badly in Kandahar.

"We're seeing roads being built, bridges completed in areas where, because of the security situation and concerns, those projects couldn't have occurred just a year ago," he said yesterday morning.

"Of course the insurgency remains a real challenge, but you have to look at it in relative terms. You have to do a retrospective occasionally, look at where we were five short years ago, two years ago and then gauge what some of these reports are saying. By North American standards, there's obviously a lot of work to do. By Afghan standards, I would suggest they've come a long way and they're continuing to make very positive steps forward."

© Copyright 2008 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9

Phillip Crawley, Publisher