

THE AFGHAN MISSION: DETAINEE ABUSE

Top soldier praises Kandahar governor

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OTTAWA, WASHINGTON -- Canada's top soldier says the governor of Kandahar province is doing "phenomenal work," and that allegations of torture against him are up to Afghans to investigate.

And while the opposition asked why Canadians weren't informed about the allegations 10 months ago, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said the prisoner who made the charges against Governor Asadullah Khalid was not handed over by Canadians and that it's an issue for Kabul to deal with.

The two men made their remarks as opposition members demanded that the Harper government put pressure on Afghan President Hamid Karzai to investigate the allegations. They also wanted to know what the Department of Foreign Affairs did with the information and why it has taken this long for it to emerge.

General Rick Hillier confirmed he was aware of allegations against the governor, but said it is up to the Afghan government to deal with them. He also praised Mr. Khalid for the work he has done in Kandahar.

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"Governor Asadullah has been doing some phenomenal work in Kandahar province. Obviously, we have worked with him because he is the governor there. And we have seen some incredible changes in the province, and if there's an issue of any kind of impropriety whatsoever, that's an issue for the Afghanistan government."

According to a censored report published in The Globe and Mail yesterday, a prisoner held in Kandahar told two Canadian officials last April of interrogations as well as a beating and electric shocks he received from an individual whose identification was blacked out. Sources have told The Globe that "the governor" were the censored words, in reference to Mr. Khalid.

Outside the House of Commons, Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae said Canada should use its influence with Mr. Karzai to have the matter investigated. He was also angry that the federal government did not disclose the incident when it first occurred.

"We're not there to cover things up, we're not there to cover up for some guy who's corrupt. We're not there to cover up for some guy who's allowing beatings to go on in a private jail," Mr. Rae said.

In the House, Liberal House Leader Ralph Goodale called the incident a cover-up.

"Has the government even bothered to investigate the allegations against Mr. Khalid as specifically required under Canada's detainee-transfer agreement?"

Mr. MacKay said that the prisoner who made the complaint had not been transferred by Canadian Forces into Afghan detention.

"The allegation with respect to the governor is not a Canadian-transferred prisoner," Mr. MacKay said.

"Second, with respect to the governor of Kandahar, let us not forget that this is an individual appointed by the sovereign elected government of Afghanistan."

He noted that when Canada did hear of a credible complaint from a Canadian-transferred prisoner, an investigation was launched. The government also stopped transferring detainees in early November after that incident.

In Kandahar, Mr. Khalid's staff said yesterday that the governor would respond to the allegations that a secret prison was located inside his compound and that he had personally engaged in torture and abuse of detainees. However, the governor didn't return calls yesterday.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was told last spring by Canadian diplomats of the allegations against Mr. Khalid, Graziella Piccolo, an ICRC spokeswoman in Kabul, confirmed.

But the ICRC won't tell Canada whether it investigated the allegations nor the outcome of any investigation.

"Should an authority, such as the Canadian government, decide to share information with the ICRC about detainees held by another authority, such as the Afghan government, the ICRC would address these concerns only with the detaining authorities."

Former foreign affairs minister John Manley, who headed a recent panel looking into the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, could not be reached for comment over the allegations against Mr. Khalid.

Meanwhile, Gen. Hillier said yesterday that Canadian soldiers won't be able to avoid combat if they remain in Kandahar and that switching places

with a NATO country in a quieter region of Afghanistan is not an option, The Canadian Press reported.

While the Liberals have suggested remaining in Afghanistan only for training rather than combat, Gen. Hillier said the need for troops is in the south and that means combat.

"Certainly, if you're in Kandahar, you're going to be in combat operations," he said.

Gen. Hillier said that the report of the panel led by Mr. Manley that more troops are needed in the south only echoes the frustration of NATO military commanders from many countries.

Finally, Gen. Hillier told reporters that he was not angry last week when he heard that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's communications director, Sandra Buckler, had said the military did not inform the government that transfers of prisoners had been suspended, a statement she retracted the next day.

"I was on the beach in the Dominican Republic. I had a little break, and I heard about that, and, can I say this without everybody beating up on me across Canada? I was on my third rum and Coke, and I really didn't give a damn."

Gen. Hillier said the military did inform the government right away when the transfers were suspended in November.

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