

AFGHANISTAN: 'WE ARE, IN THE EYES OF THE TALIBAN, IN A WINDOW OF EXTREME VULNERABILITY'

## Top soldier pushes MPs to extend mission

**Canadians could die if Parliament drags its heels, Hillier says in speech some suggest oversteps his bounds**

**CAMPBELL CLARK**

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OTTAWA -- Canada's top general warned the Taliban might step up attacks in Afghanistan to sway the political debate here and urged politicians to quickly give a strong, clear mandate to troops in the field.

In a speech that saw Canada's military commander give a public push to elected representatives yesterday, General Rick Hillier, the Chief of the Defence Staff, said he wants Parliament to show its support "overwhelmingly" to soldiers in Afghanistan.

And he insisted that extending the mission requires "pro-active" fighting - and that it would be dangerous for politicians to tie the hands of military commanders so that troops cannot take the battle to the Taliban.

But his most ominous warning was that Canadians could die if Parliament drags its heels on the future of the mission, and that soldiers must get a clear direction "as soon as we can possibly give it to them as a country."

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"Because we are, in the eyes of the Taliban, in a window of extreme vulnerability. And the longer we go without that clarity, with the issue in doubt, the more the Taliban will target us as a perceived weak link," Gen. Hillier told the Conference of Defence Associations.

"I'm not going to stand here and tell you that the suicide bombings of this past week have been related to the debate back here in Canada. But I also cannot stand here and say that they are not."

His speech raised eyebrows by making demands of elected MPs.

NDP defence critic Dawn Black said it was "beyond belief" to suggest last week's suicide bombings were linked to Canadian debate, and that Gen. Hillier's speech infringed on politics. Liberals gently suggested he overstepped his bounds.

"A debate is unavoidable, and we are fighting ... to be sure that one day, Afghanistan will enjoy a situation like Canada where you have a pluralist democracy and people may debate in mutual respect and without risking their life," Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion said.

The Conservatives and Liberals have moved close to a compromise to extend the Afghan mission from 2009 to 2011, but the Bloc Québécois and the NDP are against it. A Commons vote is expected next month.

The government's compromise motion adopted Liberal wording on changing the mission's focus to training Afghan forces and providing security for reconstruction.

The Liberals say that means an end to offensive operations to attack Taliban, though military commanders would decide what fighting is needed.

Gen. Hillier insisted the troops need "clarity of purpose" and cannot return to the days when their rules of engagement stopped them from taking the initiative, as in Bosnia in the 1990s.

"Giving us the ability to defend ourselves doesn't do it. If we want to defend ourselves, the best defence is simply to stay home," he said.

He said Canadian Forces operations have in the past six months "removed" six Taliban commanders responsible for attacks that killed 21 Canadian soldiers.

"Without the pro-active operations necessary to precisely track them, locate them and attack them, they, with their forces, would still be trying to kill us."

He told reporters that the compromise motion now before Parliament allows a "militarily viable" mission, but that providing security means troops must be able to do things such as attacking massed Taliban forces.

"Maybe Gen. Hillier better read the motion very carefully, because that is not the intent of the motion," Liberal MP Bryon Wilfert said.

"It's not going out on offensive operations deliberately. Obviously, if there's training outside the wire, and we're attacked, we will respond. But if he's suggesting a far more aggressive approach or the approach that's currently in place, the answer is no."

Gen. Hillier also said that once there is a decision to extend the mission, parliamentarians should vote "overwhelmingly" to support the troops.

Ms. Black said those comments muddy the difference between legitimate debate on extending the mission and unanimous support for the troops who do it - and that the general is suggesting Parliament's debate be curtailed.

"I think that he's possibly coming very close to contempt of Parliament," she said.

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