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Tories accused of delaying release of friendly fire report

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Opposition parties accused the Tory government Wednesday of delaying the release of the findings of military investigations into two incidents in which Canadian soldiers were accidentally killed by American firepower in Afghanistan.

"This is damage control, pure and simple," said Liberal MP Denis Coderre. "Let's call a spade a spade."

On Tuesday, the army released the findings of a board of inquiry that blamed a lack of co-ordination among Canadian, U.S. and Afghan forces in a March 2006 battle where Pte. Robert Costall was accidentally machine-gunned by American special forces.

The inquiry report and separate military police investigation found that the U.S. commander failed to properly outline the location of forces defending Forward Operating Base Robinson, and that Canadians did not warn American troops about their movements as insurgents were trying to overrun the outpost.

The board also found that Canadian troops were not wearing infrared beacons that could have distinguished them from enemy fighters.

The Canadian inquiry report was finished and presented for approval to the chief of defence staff, Gen. Rick Hillier, on March 8, 2007, according to documents released by the military.

Military police, who conducted a separate probe to see whether Canadians soldiers should be charged, formally wrapped up their investigation on June 8, 2007, said Lt.-Col. Bud Garrett, a senior officer with the National Investigative Service.

Coderre said it's hard to believe that five months were needed to get Hillier's signature on the report and to liaise with American authorities.

But a spokeswoman for Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor said the government had no say in the process.

"We don't ever intervene in investigations," said Isabelle Bouchard. "We get the findings when they come through the chain of command. And even then the minister only gets an FYI."

Cmdr. Mike Considine, a spokesman for the board of inquiry, also said there was no foot-dragging for political reasons.

"We were waiting on information coming from the U.S. investigation," he said. "The report had to be reviewed for national security issues, there was a legal review, the families – both here and in the States – had to be notified."

Considine said National Defence has no control over the speed of the U.S. investigation and Canadian officials have been held up, particularly the military police, waiting for their U.S. counterparts.

But NDP defence critic Dawn Black said she doesn't buy the explanation because the U.S. report into Costall's death was released a month ago in response to a freedom of information request by The Associated Press.

Releasing the Canadian findings in the middle of summer, when many are on holiday, virtually guarantees that the matter will be forgotten and swept under the rug, she said.

Three weeks ago, late on a Friday night, the military released a report into the friendly-fire incident in which one Canadian soldier was killed and 30 others wounded after an American A-10A attack plane accidentally strafed members of the Royal Canadian Regiment at Ma'sum Ghar.

Opposition says Ottawa delayed report into death

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Afghanistan : l'opposition accuse les conservateurs d'ingérence politique

PUBLICATION: Le Droit

DATE: 2007.08.09

SECTION: La Région

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SOURCE: PC

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Les partis de l'opposition ont accusé le gouvernement conservateur, hier, d'avoir retardé la divulgation des conclusions d'enquêtes militaires menées sur deux incidents lors desquels des soldats ont été tués accidentellement par leurs alliés américains en Afghanistan.

"Il s'agit de limitation des dégâts, purement et simplement, a déclaré le député libéral Dennis Coderre. Appelons un chat un chat." Mardi, les Forces canadiennes ont rendu publiques les conclusions d'une commission d'enquête ayant imputé au manque de coordination entre forces canadiennes, américaines et afghanes la mort du soldat canadien Robert Costall, victime de tirs de membres des forces spéciales américaines, lors de combats ayant eu lieu en mars 2006.

L'enquête menée par la commission et celle, distincte, entreprise par la police militaire ont permis d'apprendre que le commandant des forces spéciales américaines n'avait pas dessiné de plan défensif identifiant les endroits où se trouvaient les troupes appelées à défendre la Base d'opérations avancée Robinson, et que les Canadiens n'avaient pas informé les troupes américaines quant à leurs mouvements, alors que les insurgés talibans tentaient de prendre cette position.

Rapport d'enquête

Le rapport d'enquête a été complété et soumis à l'approbation du chef d'état-major de la Défense, le général Rick Hillier, le 8 mars dernier, selon des documents rendus publics par les Forces canadiennes.

La police militaire, qui a mené sa propre enquête afin de déterminer si des soldats canadiens devaient être accusés, a quant à elle conclu son investigation le 8 juin, a indiqué le lieutenant-colonel Bud Garrett, du Service national des enquêtes des Forces canadiennes.

M. Coderre a affirmé qu'il était difficile de croire que cinq mois avaient été nécessaires pour obtenir la signature du général Hillier et pour se concerter avec les autorités américaines.

Isabelle Bouchard, porte-parole du ministre de la Défense nationale, Gordon O'Connor, a toutefois indiqué que le gouvernement était étranger au processus. "Nous n'intervenons pas dans les enquêtes", a-t-elle affirmé.

L'opposition accuse le gouvernement d'ingérence politique

PUBLICATION: Le Devoir

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Soldat tué en Afghanistan; L'opposition crie à l'ingérence politique

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DATE: 2007.08.09

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SOURCE: PC

BYLINE: Brewster, Murray

DATELINE: OTTAWA

WORD COUNT: 225

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L'opposition accuse le gouvernement conservateur d'ingérence politique

DATE: 2007.08.08

KEYWORDS: DÉFENSE INTERNATIONAL POLITIQUE

PUBLICATION: pcf

WORD COUNT: 288

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"Nous n'intervenons pas dans les enquêtes", a-t-elle affirmé.

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Your Call Column Ottawa Sun online poll

SOURCETAG 0708090052

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SECTION: News

PAGE: 3

COLUMN: Your Call

WORD COUNT: 34

TODAY'S QUESTION

How do you feel about paying for beach parking at Mooney's Bay and Petrie Island?

- It's a tax grab
- Users should pay

YESTERDAY'S RESULTS

Do you agree with the decision not to lay charges in the death of Pte. Robert Costall?

34% No

66% Yes

Vote at ottawasun.canoe.ca KEYWORDS=OTTAWA AND REGION

Tories grilled on friendly fire

SOURCETAG 0708090689

PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun

DATE: 2007.08.09

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BYLINE: CP

DATELINE: OTTAWA

WORD COUNT: 236

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Coderre said it's hard to believe that five months were needed to get Hillier's signature on the report and to liaise with American authorities.

But a spokesman for Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor said the government had no say in the process. "We don't ever intervene in investigations," said Isabelle Bouchard. KEYWORDS=CANADA

From the fog, a lesson

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WORD COUNT: 466

The death of any Canadian soldier is a sobering event. When a soldier dies not from enemy fire, however, but as the result of accident or misadventure, it's natural that we express anger as well as sorrow.

Yet the reality of warfare is that the battlefield -- any battlefield -- is an unpredictable environment, a place of extreme stress and physical danger, where the stakes are huge, where circumstances change and where decision-making processes are compressed. Outcomes are not easily controlled.

The "fog of war" is a real phenomenon, and investigators believe it played a role in the death of Canadian Pte. Robert Costall. Pte. Costall, who was 22, died more than a year ago in Afghanistan, in a firefight with Taliban insurgents. The bullets that killed him were fired not from Taliban fighters but from a U.S. Army gunner.

Pte. Costall was a victim of so-called friendly fire.

The Canadian military investigated the incident and announced this week that no charges will be laid. "No one person or persons met the requirements for blame," concluded the report. From what is known of the firefight, the conclusion is the appropriate one.

The battle took place in pitch-black conditions, and it was ferocious. According to news reports, the Taliban attacked from three sides, with mortars, machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

Analysts believed it to be the most significant battle involving Canadian soldiers in at least three decades.

The board of inquiry report agreed that coalition forces made mistakes that led to the death of Pte. Costall.

The report uses military jargon -- there was "incomplete co-ordination and control" and "poor situational awareness" -- but in plain English this means, simply, that in the darkness of night, under the stress of the situation, the good guys lost track of where their buddies were.

Advances in technology and training have minimized battlefield confusion over the generations, and will continue to do so.

The report rightly indicates that improvements can and should be made in equipment and communications techniques. But no matter how professional and disciplined an army is, there will always be variables that it cannot control. Training and technology can help soldiers adjust to the unexpected, but nothing can prevent the unexpected from happening.

More than a century ago Matthew Arnold, in his great poem Dover Beach, wrote of the dark plain: "Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/Where ignorant armies clash by night."

Literary critics have debated the meaning of his reference to "ignorant" armies, often projecting an anti-war sentiment into it, but really Arnold was expressing perfectly the chaotic, untamed nature of armed conflict.

No one knows who will die on that dark plain and who will live to fight another night. Even the best armies are in this sense ignorant. In wars past, "friendly fire" incidents were little remarked upon, perhaps because they were not identified as such. A casualty was a casualty.

It speaks well of Canada that, today, every military death is deemed worthy of scrutiny, study and, of course, grief.