

Ottawa to hunt for answers in Taliban jailbreak

Minister asks why Canadian intelligence heard nothing before well-planned attack that freed 800 prisoners

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OTTAWA — The federal government will probe why Canadian military intelligence in Afghanistan failed to pick up any hint of plans for the bold prison break that freed hundreds of Taliban insurgents, acting foreign affairs minister David Emerson says.

On Sunday, Defence Minister Peter MacKay laid the responsibility for the massive breach at the feet of Afghan forces, saying they were in charge of securing Kandahar's Sarpoza Provincial Prison.

But as opposition politicians accused the Conservatives of buck passing, Mr. Emerson said an investigation will include an attempt to determine why Canadian intelligence heard nothing before the elaborate attack.

"I think we have to make sure that Canadian intelligence, working with the Afghans and others of our NATO allies - obviously there are things that happened that we needed to know and we didn't know. We're going to have to find out why," Mr. Emerson said.

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He also raised the fear that corrupt prison or security officials may have aided the Taliban.

"We don't know the degree to which there may have been inside participation in this," Mr. Emerson, chairman of the federal cabinet committee on Afghanistan, told reporters.

The startling prison break Friday began with a suicide bomber detonating a large vehicle packed with explosives, followed by an assault with rocket launchers. About 800 prisoners, half of them believed to be insurgents, escaped, some to waiting vehicles. The attack was followed yesterday by a Taliban offensive that took control of villages in the Arghandab region just outside of Kandahar City.

The developments have revived questions about whether enough NATO troops are in the field in Kandahar province, and whether Afghan forces will be ready to take over their country's defence when Canadian troops leave in 2011.

Like Mr. MacKay, Mr. Emerson noted that defending the prison was the responsibility of Afghan security forces.

Several military experts have described the prison break as a tactical and strategic blow that will allow key Taliban operatives to fight again, and also have a psychological effect.

Mr. Emerson said he does not feel as pessimistic as those who say it set the Canadian Forces back two years, but acknowledged that his "heart sank" when he heard the news, because the freed prisoners are "a real threat."

Liberal defence critic Bryon Wilfert said the government is not accepting its responsibility in the attack, noting that Canadian prison officials last year recommended improving the prison's security perimeter.

Mr. MacKay said yesterday that some improvements were made to the inside of the prison, but did not specify what kind.

However, Mr. Emerson said a better building could probably not have stopped the attack.

"It's obvious now that we needed to do more, but when you see this kind of a well-orchestrated massive manoeuvre, I'm not sure that a simple construction fix is going to prevent that kind of thing in the future," he said.

"I think it requires a more comprehensive fix, because we have to look at why our intelligence did not give us a heads-up that something like this was in the works, as well as some of the physical equipment and manpower-related issues."

Over the spring, the Conservative government, supported by the Liberals, struck a bargain for extending Canada's mission: 1,000 more NATO troops would come in as reinforcements, so that by 2011, Afghan forces could lead their own defence.

The prison attack has renewed questions about both the key condition the government cited for staying, and for success.

Retired Major-General Lewis MacKenzie said more troops would expand intelligence capabilities and reduce the risk of future attacks.

"They should have the capability to maintain a much larger footprint," he said in an interview.

Gen. MacKenzie has called for 4,000 more troops in Kandahar, as did a Senate report issued last week, and said even the 2,000 U.S. Marines about to be deployed to Afghanistan's south for seven months will not be enough for a counterinsurgency operation.

Mr. Emerson, however, said he does not believe that the government underestimated the need for troops.

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