

Soldiers getting ahead of civilians in promoting Afghan-Taliban talks: MacKay

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Members of the Canadian military who have been encouraging low-and mid-level Taliban to talk with Afghan authorities were out of line, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Friday.

He suggested recent overtures by soldiers on the ground to foment dialogue are a step ahead of an international working group that's trying to hammer together a united front against the deadly insurgency.

The Globe and Mail quoted Lt.-Col. Gordon Corbould, the new battle group commander, and Sgt. Tim Seeley, a civilian-military co-operation officer for Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team, on Thursday as saying that channels were being opened to moderate Taliban.

Other officials in Kandahar, who spoke privately, backed up the military's assessment calling it creative thinking.

But they were sternly corrected by the minister.

"They certainly don't speak for the government of Canada," MacKay said in a telephone interview from Halifax.

The Department of National Defence "doesn't make policy," he said, "only the government does that."

MacKay repeated the hardline stand by the Conservatives that Canada does not negotiate directly with terrorists.

The idea that Canadian soldiers would be stepping up with Afghans to encourage militants in the war-ravaged province to lay down their weapons and talk has won high praise in Kandahar City.

Powerbrokers such as Ahmed Wali Karzai, the younger half brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, say it's just the kind of push that's need to stem the tide of violence. Tribal leaders in the hotly contested Panjwaii district, where much Canadian blood has been shed, are also happy with the thought.

But MacKay said reconciliation isn't something that Canadians can make happen for the Afghans. It's an "initiative that must be led by them" and that Ottawa is content to support Karzai's peace overtures, but "at a distance."

In Kabul, a high-level international committee called the Policy Action Group - which includes Canada, the United States, Britain and the Afghan government - is trying to agree on the scope of talks with top Taliban commanders.

The U.S. has apparently set down three conditions, which includes preventing the return of al-Qaida, no power-sharing with Taliban leaders and no reduction of military operations.

MacKay said the group is trying to formulate a coherent stand and has not yet agreed on a common position.

"Every country has a different approach," he said. "Canada has its own approach."

He declined to go into details about what Ottawa sees as important "red lines" if and when the Afghan government begins formal talks to bring an end to the bloodshed.

But MacKay suggested that most of the U.S. demands are common sense points that all allies fighting in Afghanistan could support.

Karzai has called for peace talks with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, but militants have demanded the removal of all foreign forces as a pre-condition for talks. They also want a stricter interpretation of Islamic law, political posts and perhaps control over some districts and provinces.

Canada and the United States are alone among NATO allies in southern Afghanistan in their refusal to speak to militants. The British and the Dutch have both made efforts to either engage in dialogue or broker local ceasefires.