

# Military can disclose fate of detainees, PM says

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In an apparent policy twist, Prime Minister Stephen Harper says it's up to the Canadian military to decide if and when it will disclose information about the handling of insurgent detainees captured in Afghanistan.

“These are operational matters of the Canadian military,” Mr. Harper said as opposition MPs hammered the government for a second day in Question Period with accusations of excessive secrecy and mismanagement of the Afghan mission.

“If the Canadian military chooses to reveal that information that's their decision, but the government certainly isn't going to reveal it on their behalf,” the Prime Minister told the House of Commons.

NDP Leader Jack Layton rhymed off numbers of detainees handled by British, Dutch and American forces and asked why Canada can't be as open as its allies.



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Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier are seen in a June, 2006, file photo. (*Chris Wattie/Reuters*)

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“Is [Mr. Harper] saying that the British, the Dutch and the Americans are imperilling their national security by releasing information about their detainees to their public,” Mr. Layton asked.

Mr. Harper replied, “I guess what it means is that Canada makes its own policies.”

As The Globe and Mail reported Tuesday, the Canadian Forces are holding insurgent detainees at their Kandahar Air Force base rather than turning them over to Afghan authorities, while taking fewer prisoners and quickly releasing some of them.

The information, provided by sources, answers questions about Canada's new policy for handling detainees that Mr. Harper and other ministers repeatedly refuse to provide, citing the need for combat operational secrecy.

Reports have also emerged that General Rick Hillier, Chief of the Defence Staff, was furious with the Prime Minister's Office's handling of the military's new policy and angrily telephoned Mr. Harper Friday night after letting it be known he was "tired of being used" in political controversy.

While Mr. Harper refused to comment on whether detainees are being held at the base, he dismissed outright the report of Gen. Hillier's angry phone call.

“These anonymous sources say that I had a telephone conversation on this subject with General Hillier last week,” Mr. Harper said. “In fact, I haven't had any telephone conversation the last several weeks with General Hillier. I did talk to General Hiller last week, not about prisoners, [but] about the Manley report.”

After the revelation last week that Canadians ceased turning detainees over to the Afghan authorities in early November after discovering credible evidence of torture, the Prime Minister's Office initially said it hadn't been informed of this by senior officers.

Gen. Hillier was said to be "absolutely livid" when he learned of this.

Mr. Harper's chief spokeswoman, Sandra Buckler, retracted the statement the next day but refused to say where the detainees were being held.

The presence of a detention facility at Kandahar Air Force base (KAF) has long been known. Prior to Nov. 5, detainees were held at the facility until they either were turned over to Afghan authorities or released. Now sources say either their detention is continued at KAF or they are released - reports Mr. Harper will not confirm.

One well-placed source who spoke to The Globe and Mail Monday on condition of anonymity said that, in addition to being told that Canadian detainees were being held at Kandahar Air Force base, he understood some insurgents detained in joint Canadian Forces-Afghan National Army combat operations were being turned over to the Afghan military in a "grey zone" action.

He said he has been told that Canadians have been content in some cases to allow operations to be labelled as Afghan-led military proceedings. Thus, detainees passed into Afghan military hands with no records kept.

Since the Canadian military's decision to stop transferring detainees became known, there has been rife speculation on what is being done with them, with three options being mentioned: that Canadians were holding detainees at KAF; that Canadians were transferring detainees to the Americans; and that Canadians had simply stopped detaining people.

Transferring detainees to the Americans would be, in the words of one federal politician, "the red-hot issue" because of the harsh interrogation techniques the U.S. military uses.

Janice Gross Stein, director of University of Toronto's Munk Centre for International Studies and co-author of a widely lauded book on Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan, said, "I would be astonished if the Canadian Forces were transferring detainees to the Americans, absolutely astonished."

She also said she had not heard of any "grey zone" transfers but commented: "That would be a very dangerous thing to do."

When Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and deputy leader Michael Ignatieff visited Afghanistan earlier this month they were briefed on the policy change but did not see detainees, Mr. Ignatieff said Monday. He said they were given few details and he could not confirm or deny whether detainees were being interned at KAF.

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