

## Hillier says he's not at odds with PM over Afghanistan

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OTTAWA — Canada's Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier is rejecting accusations that he has publicly contradicted the Prime Minister regarding the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

Just back from Afghanistan, Gen. Hillier took to the Canadian airwaves late Friday in an attempt to quell the political firestorm that took hold in the House of Commons, where all three opposition parties demanded answers as to why Gen. Hillier and the government are apparently at odds over how long it will take before the Afghan army is ready to protect the country on its own.

In last week's Throne Speech, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said the Afghan army and police will be ready to take over by 2011. Yet Gen. Hillier told reporters this week in Afghanistan that such a goal is 10 years off.

"I've talked to the Prime Minister. I'm absolutely clear of where he wants to go, of what he needs, and I'm absolutely in line with that, otherwise I wouldn't be his chief of defence staff," Gen. Hillier said late Friday during an appearance on CBC Newsworld.



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Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier listens to Canadian troops from the NATO-led coalition at Masum Ghar camp in Kandahar province, southern Afghanistan, on Wednesday.

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"There is no contradiction -- I believe we are absolutely on the same page," said Gen. Hillier in an official statement late Friday. "We - the Canadian Forces - are tasked with training the Kandaks - the Afghan battalions in Kandahar and helping them develop a fully functional operational brigade - and we continue to keep the Taliban on their back feet.

"There is enormous progress on this front - with the mentorship, training and leadership of our professional and very dedicated soldiers - that I have just returned from having seen myself - I believe that the Afghan National Army will indeed have the lead on operations in the province in the next two to three years. In the shorter term, Afghan Army battalions are already taking the lead in certain parts of the province where they are ready to do so," he said in the statement.

"Canada does not have responsibility for the long-term professionalization, professional development and major equipping of the Afghan

National Army, which in my view, will take a significant period of time.”

Comments from the General followed a fiery Question Period in the House of Commons in which all three parties grilled the government over the apparent discrepancy between Gen. Hillier and the Prime Minister.

Conservative cabinet ministers and the Prime Minister's Office stood by their original estimate.

“Building up the capacity of the Afghan people is obviously going to take time,” Government House leader Peter Van Loan told the House of Commons. “We want them to be able to defend their sovereignty. We know that will not happen overnight, but our government does believe it can happen by 2011, the end of the period that is covered in the Afghanistan Compact. We look forward to receiving the report of the [John] Manley panel, which all parliamentarians will have an opportunity to review and, as we have said many times before, it will be up to this Parliament to decide, in the end, the deployment.”

Michael Ignatieff, the deputy leader of the Liberal Party, told reporters Friday that Canadians are more likely to believe Gen. Hillier's time line, rather than the government's.

“You can't go out in a Throne Speech and, and say 2011 and then have your Chief of the Defence Staff saying well actually, it's 2017,” he said. “And then third, to make it worse, let's appoint a panel to look at a third set of options and then in the House of Commons, to hide behind that panel when you don't know what the heck you're doing. I mean this creates, this creates a very bad impression of incompetence and mismanagement. And the troops deserve better.”

NDP leader Jack Layton said the minister's comments support what his party has been saying for a long time.

“I believe that clearly the general is telling the truth,” Mr. Layton told reporters. “We've said for a long time that there's no military end in sight and saying that we're going to be there for 10 more years is the equivalent of saying there is no end in sight. Mr. Harper doesn't want to acknowledge that to the Canadian people. He wants to keep that hidden because he knows that Canadians wouldn't support a 10-year counterinsurgency war effort by Canada and the \$10 billion that would be required so I think it's time for the prime minister to come clean with the truth.”

The Conservative government's Oct. 16 Throne Speech stated that Canada should not abandon the people of Afghanistan in Feb. 2009, when the mission is currently scheduled to end.

“Canada should build on its accomplishments and shift to accelerate the training of the Afghan army and police so that the Afghan government can defend its own sovereignty. This will not be completed by February 2009, but our Government believes this objective should be achievable by 2011, the end of the period covered by the Afghanistan Compact. Our Government has appointed an independent panel to advise Canadians on how best to proceed given these considerations,” the speech stated.

Then on Thursday while visiting Canadian troops in Afghanistan, Gen. Hillier said it would take 10 years for the Afghan army to be ready to defend itself.

“It's going to take 10 years or so just to work through and build an army to whatever the final number that Afghanistan will have, and make them professional and let them meet their security demands here,” Canada's chief of defence staff said.

“I think most Canadians, living in the incredible country that we have, don't always see all the complexities of trying to rebuild a country and, in some cases, build a country from the 25 years of destruction that took place in Afghanistan.”

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