

## Afghanistan efforts to ramp up with 200 more troops, tanks

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OTTAWA -- The Canadian Forces are sending 450 more troops and a squadron of tanks to counter the growing Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan, but top generals took pains Friday to portray the reinforcements as a step towards reconstruction efforts, not combat.

At least 125 to 150 soldiers from the Royal 22nd Regiment, the famed Van Doos of Val Cartier, Que. will be dispatched to provide extra security for the Provincial Reconstruction Team to move beyond its compound in Kandahar City and do more work throughout southern Afghanistan, said Gen. Rick Hillier, the chief of the defence staff.

A Leopard tank squadron from Edmonton is also being deployed, something Hillier said would provide extra security to the Canadian-led NATO offensive that has been fighting a renewed Taliban insurgency in the south for the last several months.

In an interview to be broadcast this morning with CBC Radio's Kathleen Petty, Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged in some of his strongest language to date Canada is now at war.

"The fact of the matter is we are engaged in a war in Afghanistan. We have been for some years, but we are today at the front lines of that war, and that's a very real thing that we have to manage," Harper told CBC



CREDIT: CP Photo/Les Perreaux

Capt. Ian Penner (left) and Bombardier Trevor Johnson of Red Deer, Alta., survey the damage from NATO bombardment in Panjwai, Afghanistan Tuesday, Sept. 12, 2006.



Afghan and members of the NATO led Coalition forces are seen in the southern city of Kandahar, Afghanistan on Sunday. (AP Photo/Allahuddin Khan)

## Radio's The House.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai visits Ottawa next week in an effort to bolster support for the mission.

Hillier and his other top generals, including Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, the army chief, also made clear the heaviest weapon in the army's arsenal was designed to have a psychological impact on Taliban forces, which have opted for more traditional war-fighting techniques in the last month.

Instead of hit-and-run guerrilla tactics, the Taliban has been directly confronting the growing number of Canadian, Dutch and British troops flowing into Afghanistan with weapons being smuggled across the lawless Pakistani-Afghan border.

"With that gun -- to go back to the old Bell telephone commercial -- you can reach out and touch somebody, from a long ways away," said Hillier, who three years ago dismissed the Leopard tank a relic of the Cold War era in favour of more mobile, modern big gun systems.

Hillier and other generals said Friday the tanks were now necessary because the Taliban were directly engaging NATO forces.

Canada hasn't sent tanks into combat since the Korean War of 1950-53.

"Tanks produce a certain amount of shock action. They can be extraordinarily intimidating," said Leslie, noting they have a range of two to three kilometers.

Initially four tanks would be deployed but the number could swell to 15, said Leslie.

Liberal defence critic Ujjal Dosanjh said he supported any move by the military to protect troops from harm, but questioned the steady escalation of hardware to Afghanistan, which has gone from jeeps, to armoured vehicles and now tanks.

"Tanks are famous for blasting and smashing things, not reconstruction," said Dosanjh.

Engineers and new anti-mortar capabilities were also being sent to Afghanistan, the latter to counter the more sophisticated weaponry the Taliban was throwing at NATO troops.

In all, the 450 reinforcements will boost Canada's troop total in Afghanistan from about 2,300 to 2,500.

That is because 250 headquarters personnel will be coming back to Canada at the end of next month when The Netherlands takes over command of the NATO mission in southern Afghanistan from Canada.

Lt. Ray Corby, a battle group duty officer at the Zhari district base, said Friday troops will be happy to hear the news.

"It will give us a larger presence on the ground," he said. "Despite it being a large piece of equipment, it can expand our strategy and capabilities."

The tanks are capable of better withstanding attacks by suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices known as IEDs.

"The tanks could be used to support convoys," Corby said.

The announcement came as NATO diplomats struggled Friday to find upwards of 2,500 new troops for Afghanistan. Poland offered 1,000, but NATO generals stressed more needed to be done to bolster the 20,000 troops it already has there.

Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier, the commander of Canada's overseas operations, said more troops were needed if the long-term goal of reconstruction in Afghanistan was to be met any time soon. "With the level of forces that we have in place now, we will achieve progress at a certain pace. If it was more robust, we would be able to achieve progress at a more rapid pace. That's what it comes down to," Gauthier said.

In the last month, Gauthier said the Canadian troops have faced "E a much more direct approach" from the Taliban.

"They see their heartland -- from their perspective -- threatened, and that requires clearly a different kind of response," Gauthier explained.

"From our perspective, clearly it would be helpful to have more troops over there E. We must be fully determined."

Hillier and Leslie -- both of whom have commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan in recent years -- pointed to the lawless region around Afghanistan-Pakistan border as the source of the Taliban's new cache of weapons.

"Pakistan has got an enormous challenge in that federally administered tribal area," said Hillier.

Hillier said Pakistan has promised NATO it would do more to crack down on the flow of weapons and extremist activities in its tribal areas, but he admitted it is next to impossible to secure that border area.

"There's no silver bullet on this one," Hillier said. "Pakistan is stepping up to do a whole bunch of things and no doubt they will have to step up to do more."

Leslie and Gauthier also said the Taliban is a more complex enemy than Canadians realize.

Leslie said he has dined with Taliban members, including one who was a member of President Hamid Karzai's cabinet in order to emphasize the movement is comprised of "absolute fanatics" as well as moderates. "We perhaps simplistically use Taliban as a label," said Gauthier.

Canadian troops are facing a combination of criminals, "local hires" recruited to fight, producers and traffickers in the opium trade.

"We certainly are not naive enough to think it is just about the Taliban," said Gauthier. "But the Taliban represents an important element of this."

Their motives are clearer to us than others. It's about hatred. It's about terrorizing the local population."

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