

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves attended the 'Spring Storm' large-scale exercise of the Defence Forces today (which as of yesterday forms part of the NATO exercise 'Steadfast Javelin') and met with Prince Harry, who is visiting Estonia.

Army Commander Colonel Artur Tiganik gave President Ilves as the supreme commander of national defence an overview of the legend and progress of the exercise.

President Ilves and Prince Harry met with the Estonian Scouts Battalion, the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment and the airborne troops of the United States participating in the exercise.

Prince Harry, who has himself served in Afghanistan, thanked his Estonian brothers-in-arms for their courage and commitment during the joint operations of Estonian and British forces in Helmand province.

The Estonian Head of State gave an interview to Soldier FM, the radio station of the exercise.

According to President Ilves, 'Spring Storm' demonstrates the ability of our Defence Forces to defend Estonia and their ability to work with allies.

"All of this should leave us confident that Estonia is firmly protected – even at a time when the security context has totally changed in Europe," the President said. "Democratic countries are facing the fact that international law has been thrown out of the window and that state borders are being redrawn militarily, as we're seeing in Ukraine."

Together with Major General Riho Terras, the Commander of the Defence Forces, President Ilves visited conscripts from the Guard Battalion – who are known as the 'Presidential Guard' – who were in defence positions near Sangaste.

"I'm sure you'll successfully pass 'Spring Storm' as the final exam of your conscript service," the President said. "You're good soldiers who are motivated to learn and who have good teachers – our officers and non-commissioned officers."

President Ilves also met with combatants from the special operations force of the Estonian Defence Forces, who were participating in the exercise with their brothers-in-arms from the United States.

"Your dedicated, successful, difficult and dangerous service in foreign operations and at home is hidden from the public, but those of us who are aware of your battles are proud of our special operations force," the Head of State said.

The special operations force of the Defence Forces was set up in 2009. On 2 October 2012, Estonia and the United States signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on the deployment of the special operations force of Estonia in NATO's operations in Afghanistan. In addition, the special operations force actively cooperates with the special forces of Germany, Poland and the other Baltic States. Two teams of the special operations force have served in Afghanistan, participating in a number of joint operations with the special unit of the Afghan security forces and US brothers-in-arms.

A total of nearly 6000 servicemen, members of the Defence League, reservists and allied soldiers are participating in 'Spring Storm'.

As of Friday, 'Spring Storm' formed part of the NATO exercise 'Steadfast Javelin', whose purpose is to put the consolidated command of military operations to the test in a situation where allied forces are operating in Estonia in addition to the country's own defence forces. The exercise is being directed by NATO's Joint Force Command Brunssum. Among other things, 'Steadfast Javelin' enables situations to be practised in which there is an urgent need to supplement troops operating in Estonia.

The training conducted during 'Spring Storm' follows a traditional scenario where international troops led by the Scouts Battalion counterforce a battalion of conscripts and an area defence battalion of the Defence League practicing a joint action.

The international troops participating in 'Spring Storm' include the 173rd Airborne Brigade Company of the United States, the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment Company from the UK, a Latvian infantry company and a Lithuanian reconnaissance platoon. In addition, three Polish Su-22 attack aircraft and an anti-aircraft unit with an SA-8 missile system are taking part in the exercise. The latter's task is to protect Ämari Air Base and its surrounding airspace. The exercise also involves Belgian anti-aircraft personnel, who are providing air targets for the Estonian anti-aircraft battalion's firing exercises and an anti-aircraft missile platoon participating in the exercise as part of our anti-aircraft battalion.

Office of the President
Public Relations Department
Phone +372 631 6229