

"Thanks to your experiences and courage, the Estonian Defence Forces are more effective and more professional," said the President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves today in Kadriorg, when he addressed the last contingent of the Estonian Defence Forces to serve in the NATO led mission in Afghanistan.

The greeting of President Ilves to the members of the Defence Forces who served in Afghanistan and their families follows.

My good mission soldiers and your families.

I feel great relief in saying: Estonian soldiers, welcome home!

Participation in NATO's operation in Afghanistan, the most difficult and complicated foreign mission of the Estonian Defence Forces, is now over.

Today, it is important to pose two questions. Why did we go to Afghanistan in the first place? And what did we achieve there?

Estonia joined NATO's military operation in Afghanistan to confirm and peg our allegiance to the alliance. This was the fundamental issue. And, of course, the aim was to combat evil that had, back then, turned Afghanistan into a failed and dangerous country that repressed both its own people and had spread violence and terror beyond its borders.

Therefore: Estonia's ten-year contribution to the security of Afghanistan has been a contribution to our own security. The essential principle of "one for all and all for one" that governs NATO can now be seen here, today.

Just as we went to the aid of our allies, our brothers in arms are now coming to support us. The additional fighter planes of the USA, Denmark, the UK, Poland and other allies participating in NATO's air security mission in the Baltic states, allied vessels and the arrival of the US Airborne Brigade Company in Estonia all represent visible components of this camaraderie in arms and allied relationships.

As a member of NATO, Estonia enjoys a more solid defence today than ever before in the history of our country – both before World War II and since restoring our independence.

On the battlefield, the Estonian Defence Force members showed that they are among the best soldiers in the world. Approximately 2,500 soldiers and Defence League members who stood for Estonia in foreign missions have contributed something invaluable. Your professionalism and mobility, specifically ESTCOY, have been praised by many of our allies; the same goes for your skilful and brave deployment. I have personally heard words of acknowledgment from several top NATO military officials in Afghanistan, Brussels, Washington and Tallinn that praise your excellent co-operation ability, courage and battle skills.

Thanks to your experiences and courage, the Estonian Defence Forces are better and more professional, and I believe also more considerate of its soldiers, in terms of training, equipment and warfare.

But what about Afghanistan itself? Is this country more secure, successful and safer now? Yes, definitely, although many things have not turned out as well as we had hoped, 12 years ago, when the Mine Clearance Team of the Rescue Board landed at Bagram Air Base. We were able to achieve a lot there, although there were even more things that were beyond our reach.

However, it is important to understand that NATO did not withdraw from Afghanistan. NATO transferred responsibility for security to Afghanistan's own army and police. The responsibility now rests in the hands of the people of Afghanistan.

My good Defence Force members. Afghanistan was a difficult operation for you, and painful for all of us. More than one hundred Estonian soldiers were wounded there. Nine young men were killed in action. Junior Sergeant Jako Karuks. Sergeant Kalle Torn. Senior Warrant Officer Ivar Brok. Sergeant Raivis Kang. Warrant Officer Eerik Salmus. Warrant Officer Allain Tikko. Junior Sergeant Kristjan Jalakas. Junior Sergeant Herdis Sikka. Corporal Agris Hutrof. In the same way, Junior Sergeant Andres Nuiamäe and Senior Warrant Officer Arre Illenzeer, who were killed in Iraq, remain alive in our thoughts.

They will all stay with us. And, as we think of them, we feel a sense of sadness and pride, but, above all, gratitude for our brave soldiers.

Also, as we think of the wounded soldiers, we must be guided by our duty and responsibility to help those men and women who fought for Estonia's security. I know this is not always easy. Many of the wounded have found the inner strength to continue with their lives; many of them have remained in the Defence Forces. And there are those who are still seeking their way. We have no right to tire from supporting them as they have fought for us and in the name of Estonia.

I am pleased to say that I signed an order just an hour ago to enforce a law to make Veteran's Day a day for hoisting our national flag as of next year. This will mean that the national flags of Estonia will be hoisted all over the country in recognition of our mission soldiers.

Finally, I would like to address all of those I should have started with. No war – and the operation in Afghanistan was a real war – can be fought effectively without a strong rear. For our soldiers, the strongest rear was their families. No successful foreign mission can take place without the support and understanding of family members.

Mothers and fathers, siblings, wives and girlfriends, friends of the Estonian Defence Force members and all the people important for you – I thank you for supporting our soldiers. For shielding your concerns and allowing the soldiers to do their job. And they did it very, very well.

Thank you Defence Force members for your current service. The Republic of Estonia and the

Estonian Defence Forces will need your experiences. Therefore, I wish you effective future service.

Long live Estonia!