

On his official visit to Afghanistan, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves met with Afghan Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak, NATO-led international ISAF forces commander General David Petraeus, the alliance's highest-ranking civilian representative Mark Sedwill, special representative of the UN Secretary-General Staffan di Mistura and special representative of the European Union Vygaudas Ušackas in Kabul today.

In his meeting with Defence Minister Wardak, the Estonian head of state emphasised the need to take an even more active approach to the training of the Afghan army and police and to increasing Afghanistan's responsibility for its own affairs generally, including at the local government level.

"Estonia knows first-hand how difficult it is to set up a contemporary military and strong police force," he said. "You need dedication, resources, patience and time, and this is particularly the case here in Afghanistan, where they are being set up at the same time as the country is having to deal with internal conflict."

President Ilves praised the Afghan defence forces, saying: "They are improving every day, and become a more effective partner to the international stabilisation forces here. We hope to see the army and police units taking responsibility for maintaining security in a number of provinces." Estonian military personnel are serving in southern Afghanistan alongside local army and police units, with whom they share a patrol base.

In his meeting with the special representatives of the Secretary-General of the United Nations and of the European Union, President Ilves stressed the importance of close cooperation between all of the international organisations contributing to Afghanistan.

"Coordination between the UN, the EU and NATO on the ground and exchange of information between international contributors have noticeably improved," said the Estonian head of state. "The Afghanistan missions of the UN and EU have done a lot to balance out the civilian contribution of foreign countries, which is more and more being based on the priorities of the Afghan central government and its provincial governments."

The more unified we are internationally, the stronger we are, said the president.

He reinforced the significance of civilian projects in improving the lives of the people of Afghanistan, worn out from decades of war, giving Estonia's coordination of the health care system in Helmand province as an example. In alleviating the situation in the country overall, President Ilves also deemed the programme of reintegration of more moderate rebels and members of the Taliban into society as important. This programme was launched by the Afghan government and is supported by the UN, EU and NATO.

In their meeting with President Ilves, special representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Staffan di Mistura and General Petraeus underlined the strategic importance of the activities of Estonia's military personnel and civilian experts, as well as the danger they face in the region close to the Afghan-Pakistani border.

"Countries for whose areas of responsibility the task of ensuring security and defence is handed over to Afghanistan ahead of others should find ways of contributing to more dangerous regions of operations or markedly increasing their civilian contribution," said the Estonian head of state in his meeting with the ISAF leaders. "Estonia will continue to contribute to the international security forces in the country at the current level and without any limitations for as long as is necessary and expected."

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