

Today President Toomas Hendrik Ilves who is on a working visit to Afghanistan flew from Kabul to the Helmand Province. The head of state visited the Wahid Patrol Base where the Estonian infantry company ESTCOY-10 is based and where Camp Bastion, the largest base of the NATO led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), is located and where our logistical support unit is based.

According to the Estonian head of state, one of the main goals of his visit to Afghanistan is to learn about the service of the Estonian troops and thank these men and women for their service.

“You are our best troops,” said the head of the state in a meeting in the Wahid Patrol Base.

“You serve in an area that is of special importance for entire Afghanistan. The ideological base and most of the drug trafficking of the rebels is based in South Afghanistan. Therefore it is of great importance that this region is brought under the Kabul central power and the ISAF control,” said President Ilves. “On the one hand, we can say that battles have intensified compared to the previous year, but on the other hand, we realise that this was to be expected once the Afghan army and ISAF started acting more extensively and forcefully.”

According to the Estonian head of state, several Afghan leaders, high-ranking ISAF officers and representatives of international organisations assured him that there are signs of the Taliban getting exhausted and next year the security situation can be expected to improve.

President Ilves recognised the good training and courageous service of the Estonian troops in one of the most dangerous provinces in Afghanistan where eight of our troops have given their lives.

“You defend the right of the people of South Afghanistan to a secure life, but you also defend the security of Estonia, our NATO allies and our partners,” said the Estonian head of state. “You have stood up against evil and have never backed down. On the contrary, you have taken the ground from the Taliban step by step.”

President Ilves emphasised that the state must provide the troops in Afghanistan with the best and most modern equipment and with strong social guarantees for the troops and the persons closest to them.

“Firstly, it is obvious that the service in Afghanistan calls for different equipment and arms than in Estonia. In the coming months our troops in Helmand should, with the help of our allies, get the best equipment that will increase their security,” said the head of state. “Secondly, we have to do everything and more to improve the situation of the troops who have been injured in the mission, provide them with all kinds of support. This also means legislative amendments so that our injured troops could continue active service in the Defence Forces in a position that is suitable for them.”

According to President Ilves, he does not have an answer to the question of how long the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan will last.

“When we leave Afghanistan, we will do it in order to really leave, not to come back after a while,” he emphasised.

“Extraction of forces now or in the near future would once again be likely to result in a civil war, chaos, a flood of refugees to the neighbouring states and beyond, even Europe, a rise of instability in the nuclear state of Pakistan, the spread of extremism north of Afghanistan,” President Ilves described.

According to the Estonian head of state, the people of South Afghanistan are used to supporting the stronger side and thus: “The Afghan central government and provincial governments must be more reliable than the Taliban and the Afghan own army and police must be stronger than the rebels, drug traffickers and local warlords jointly.”

In Lashkar Gah Brigadier Richard Felton, the chief of the Helmand Task Force, gave President Ilves an overview of the NATO-led operation.

“Estonia does not intend to make any significant changes to its military contribution in the foreseeable future. We understand the meaning of Helmand for entire Afghanistan and do not plan any quick retreat,” assured the Estonian head of state.

In a meeting with the South-West regional management of ISAF in Camp Bastion the President was also interested in the situation in the Afghan-Pakistani border regions that was described as a source of continued concern and instability.

“This is a grey zone from where new rebels enter Afghanistan and that is passed by caravans carrying arms. In order to close the zone, Afghanistan and ISAF and Pakistan need to make an effort in close cooperation and I emphasise the word “cooperation” here,” said President Ilves.

To thank the Estonian troops in Afghanistan for their courage and excellent service, President Ilves gave them silver collector coins made by Eesti Pank.

During the working visit to Afghanistan the head of state is followed by Ants Laaneots, the Commander of the Defence Forces, Mati Raidma, the Chairman of the National Defence Committee of the Parliament, and Riho Terras, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence.

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