

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves met today with infantry company ESTCOY-13 in Paldiski; the company has just finished pre-deployment training and is about to begin a NATO-led operation in Afghanistan in November.

The Head of State told the Defence Force members:

“As a President who was only recently re-elected, I have the pleasure of standing here, in front of you to give one of my first speeches; no other profession more genuinely represents the principles that serving a country embodies than being a defence force member. Resolve, courage, loyalty, consideration. I thank you for having chosen the profession of a professional defence force member. Know that the Republic of Estonia is proud of you.

A couple of days ago, the world recalled the beginning of the second decade of an international military presence in Afghanistan. The past was weighed and the future considered. Only a few could predict back in 2001 that it would take so long. But the number of those who sensed the reality of the challenges offered by Afghanistan was even smaller. However, some obvious mistakes have been made – mostly at political level. The biggest original blunder was certainly ignoring the Pashtun people in South Afghanistan as well as the failure to define the final outcome of the operation.

Today, we know the outcome. Now one can shape Afghanistan into a Sweden of the Middle-East in the coming years; however, what we can achieve in the foreseeable future is a country that can ensure order within its territory, is accepted by its neighbours and can offer its citizens stability. I do believe the commanders and experts who say that this is a possible solution. It is possible, though definitely not self-evident or easy.

The success achieved over the past year – real improvement of the living environment in most of the provinces of Afghanistan – justifies the optimism. The NATO coalition has also experienced military success. 2011 has shown that the Taliban and its allies are in retreat. The attempted murder of local key figures and attacks that ensure the visibility of terrorists, particularly in the capital city of Kabul, are now on their tactical agenda. Let us remember that the same occurred from 2007 to 2008 in Iraq. Solid signs of improvement can also be seen in Helmand – the area that you know much better. Thanks to your efforts, the power centres of the Taliban are fading. The Afghan security forces are showing the first signs of maturity. And,

finally, the attention of the international community is shifting to Pakistan, as a stable Afghanistan would be impossible without a stable Pakistan.

In the same way that Estonia cannot exist within its own economy, our security is also not insulated from the rest of the world. As the latest developments in the financial world have shown, a decision to contribute, which may initially seem the toughest option, often needs to be taken in situations of security policy, as there is no realistic and sustainable alternative. However, being excellent contributors ourselves, we can demand and hope for security for any crises that may potentially affect us. Let us be rest assured that being a small country, the relations with our allies that are primarily built on trust provide the security to our sovereignty.

The Commander of US CENTCOM, General Mattis, who paid a visit to Estonia a couple of weeks ago, was generous in his praise of Estonian soldiers. The commander, who is known for his critical mind and straightforwardness, honoured us by thanking us in our own homeland. He was not the first western officer to convey this message, and I know that he will not be the last. Let us know and bear in mind that the trust, which you are earning every day for Estonia as professional defence force members, is of inestimable value.

The Republic of Estonia must contribute decent equipment and diversified support for your mission, as well as a dignified future for you as defence force members in your home country. Morals must remain high, both in the Helmand river valley and in Paldiski. A combination of words – Estonian soldier – has been emphasised to justify last year's defence budget, which reached record levels. I do hope that this will be the leading message for defence-related expenses in the years to come. And on my own behalf, I will do everything possible to give your concerns – should you have any – necessary support and solutions.

Soldiers cannot function efficiently without the support of their families, next of kin and friends. Enjoy your last days at home and come back enriched with experiences.

I do know that the symbol of your company is a polar bear. An animal that embodies the ability to adjust to the toughest conditions. I wish that you will return even tougher, even more professional. Your country is waiting for you to return. Your country needs each and every one of you.”

Office of the President
Public Relations Department
Phone 631 6229