

"Thank you for making your choice – the choice to be a professional defence force member, and to be committed, brave, loyal and caring. And for your choice to join the Estonian Defence Force operations in Afghanistan," told the President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, at a meeting with the soldiers and officers of the ESTCOY-15 company and support units who are about to leave for the NATO led mission in Afghanistan.

The Head of State described the mission of the Defence Force members as "dangerous and difficult", adding: "However, I feel confident, knowing that more than half of you have been on foreign missions before, many in Iraq or Afghanistan. Therefore, you have been on highly complex military operations. The experiences you have gained are invaluable and sharing these within the company will also be of great help for those going on the mission for the first time. I am aware that the motto of A-infantry company is "Let's do it!" This means that there are no obstacles that you cannot overcome."

President Ilves recalled that Estonia's contingent in Afghanistan is praised both in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, and NATO's Head Office in Brussels for its ability to find solutions – as this considerably simplifies the planning of the operations and also sets an example for the units of the United Kingdom.

"The co-operation and battlefield experiences that you will share with the allied forces in Afghanistan are highly useful for Estonia's security in general," admitted the Head of State.

He described the situation in Afghanistan as still complicated and emphasised the importance of increasing the administrative capabilities of local central government, controlling corruption and standing up against the influences of the insurgents.

"The local population is tired of conflict and they wish to support those who are capable of ensuring peace and the structures for everyday life, such as judicial authority, freedom of trade and many others," President Ilves told.

According to his words, Estonia is abiding by a principle: NATO is uniform in shaping the future of the operation in Afghanistan and shall follow the motto "we went there together and will leave

together".

"Estonia will finish using its infantry company with the army contingent of the United Kingdom, the year after next, at the latest. However, I am quite sure that the foreign missions of our defence forces will not come to an end, even after our participation in Afghanistan ends," told the Head of State.

He emphasised the importance of all kinds of support for the mission soldiers and their next of kin – as well as giving them due acknowledgement. "It is important to involve third sector organisations, different state agencies and companies. When I think back at the charity concert organised by the Carolin Illenzeer Foundation that took place at the eve of Victory Day in Pärnu and the many donations made by TV watchers and radio listeners, I have no doubt that our society supports our soldiers and empathises with them."

President Ilves thanked the next of kin of the Defence Force members for their understanding, as: "Each and every soldier knows the importance of the support of a family and those close to your heart in a difficult moment. I wish your next of kin patience and understanding to give you this support. As for you, my brave officers and soldiers – I wish you lots of strength and soldier's luck!"

ESTCOY-15 is largely based on the oldest A-company of the Scouts battalion, which emerged from Estonian company that was a part of the joint unit of the Baltic states, BALPAT.

ESTCOY15 will be deployed in the Helmand Province, Afghanistan, with the purpose of performing as a manoeuvre company. It will conduct various operations in co-operation with the Afghan security forces and ensure stability and security within its area of responsibility, where the company is manning the PIMON patrol base while working under the whole battle group.

64% of the defence force members of the unit have previous experiences, having participated, overall, in 190 different foreign missions.

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