

"For a long time, I have waited for this day, when, as the high-ranking leader of national defence, I can send off our last infantry company to the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan," President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said in Paldiski, where he met with the logistical support unit.

The Head of State recalled that in the ten years of the mission in Afghanistan we have demonstrated resolve, responsibility and helpfulness, and we have also improved as a state during that time; adding: "However, there have been days when weariness and fear, tears and compassion prevailed. We have made a great contribution to Afghanistan - whether measured in time, money or blood. Estonia will always remember our fallen and injured soldiers."

We have been an ally in a conflict that began because, under the protection of the former Afghan regime, an attack was planned and carried out against our NATO ally. On 12 September 2001, a day after the terrorist attacks in the US, NATO invoked Article 5 on collective defence for the first time in its history. This was followed by the invasion of the coalition of the willing in Afghanistan, the overthrow of the Taliban and the formation of the NATO-led ISAF operation a couple of years later to stabilise and rebuild the country. In the course of ten years, Estonia has made great investments in Afghanistan, perhaps even more than some larger countries, to help Afghanistan and its people.

"Today I wish to let you and all of Estonian society know: this effort has been an investment into Estonia's future, the security of our children and grandchildren, the enduring of our state," President Ilves said.

"Although, figuratively speaking, we will close the door on the Helmand province in a few months, the hard times will not be over for Afghanistan in a year and a half. They will face the long process of reconciliation with former militants, finding common ground in a territorially and ethnically divided country, and also rebuilding a state that can ensure its security and development. As we know, the war-torn recent history of the country does not necessarily favour a peaceful future for Afghanistan. The wounds of local communities are too raw, the distrust between neighbours is too great," the Head of State told the soldiers headed for Afghanistan.

"Even though you will be the last infantry company in Afghanistan and will probably spend most of your deployment in Camp Bastion, I hope that you will remain watchful, that as well-trained

and experienced soldiers you will cope with both routine as well as unexpected events. And I am certain - ESTCOY-17 is a strong team, supportive of each other within the unit and highly motivated to serve in the battlefield," President Ilves assured.

According to him, a section of the Taliban and their allies are waiting for the NATO forces to leave, so that they could try to force the situation in their favour after that. "Although the next few months will be the endgame for the NATO operation, it is also the start of the new, independent Afghanistan of the 21st century."

"I am proud to serve as the head of a state that has soldiers who are known as exemplary, fearless and professional among their NATO allies. This is the appraisal voiced to me by visiting heads of state and generals. I am grateful to you that you have chosen the profession of a soldier. I would also like to thank your loved ones and friends, who support you in that choice," President Ilves told the families of the soldiers.

The contingent of the Estonian Defence Forces heading to the last mission in Afghanistan is led by Lieutenant Colonel Maidu Allikas; the infantry company ESTCOY-17 is led by Major Viljar Laaneste.

For 83 servicemen, this will not be the first time they are being deployed: four have been on six missions, nine servicemen have been on five missions, 12 servicemen have completed four deployments and 28 servicemen have completed two or three missions.

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