

Respected members of the Defence Forces and families!
Respected commander of ESTCOY-9, Captain Sergey Guselnikov!

Afghanistan, as NATO's most important and also most dangerous international operation has already lasted for nine years. Our defence force members, currently approximately 300 of them, are also participating bravely in this operation.

We do know that this is a tough mission and will mean casualties for us. Therefore, the people of Estonia have the right to ask – for what? What are our interests in this distant country that is worn out from thirty years of guerrilla wars? How long will our soldiers fight there?

I will begin with the last question. Most definitely, we are not staying in Afghanistan forever. However, I do repeat what we have told all our NATO partners: we will remain in Afghanistan as long as necessary but will leave as soon as possible; however, we are not discussing specific dates today.

Now let us focus on the reasons why the Estonian Defence Force members are in Afghanistan.

Firstly. This is a shared commitment and the duty of the states belonging to the NATO alliance and our partners.

Secondly. When Estonia joined NATO back in 2004, making a conscious security political choice, we knew very well that Afghanistan represented the most important operation of the alliance, and the motto of the alliance, backed by the collective defence principle, is "One for all and all for one."

Thirdly. The West has once before left Afghanistan alone – after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces at the beginning of the 1990s, when the democratic world was living in euphoria, following the collapse of the iron curtain. The Taliban finally took over the country and was left to cope on its own. This meant disaster – and not just for Afghanistan. Let us recall, for a moment, 9/11 in New York and Washington. Let us recall the mass murders in London and Madrid, and also the terrorists that have been captured in France, Germany and other European countries, and their crazy plans.

It makes me feel worried and anxious, when I read the opinions expressed by think tanks, journalists, or even the politicians of NATO member states that the operation in Afghanistan is already lost or impossible to win.

This sounds like an invitation to surrender, as what else would the withdrawal of the allied forces from Afghanistan mean today?

But NATO will not surrender.

We cannot do it. To leave now before the required stability has been achieved and to hand the security situation over to the control of the Afghan army and police would result in an explosive outburst of violence in Afghanistan. But not only that. It would mean the same in Pakistan, a country with a nuclear arsenal, which, if overtaken by extremist fanatics, would mean a catastrophe for the whole western world. Furthermore, the violence would probably spread to many other countries also, and extremism would spread to Central Asia and beyond.

We don't want a world like that. Therefore, the operation in Afghanistan is also an operation that will ensure the security of ourselves, of Estonia.

In this light, our one and only option is to continue fighting – to remain in Afghanistan as long as the legal government of the country requires NATO's presence, until its ready to take responsibility for controlling the security situation. At the same time, however, our plans must become better, more efficient, accurate and flexible. All of us – both military men and civil servants – must learn from the previous eight years and introduce changes both in the military sphere and in promoting the development of the country under civil plans and programmes.

Let me suggest some of the key words, which could be the foundation to NATO's success. Patience. Innovativeness. Courage. Understanding of the local situation. Trust wherever possible. The continued contribution to both the military and civil spheres, enhancing, above all, the sustainable initiatives of the Afghan people and providing them with the support. Relieving the Afghan authorities of both the acquired and learned dependency on assistance. An uncompromising attitude towards corruption, which spreads its roots and undermines the faith of local people in Kabul and the provinces. And, especially – which is really appropriate at the moment – stressing the invincibly mandatory nature of honest elections.

All this requires the commitment of the international community together with the joint efforts of different countries and organisation. The common Afghans in various villages and towns throughout South Afghanistan know that they must stick to the stronger party, as this will make their life much simpler. This allows us to draw quite a simple conclusion: The ISAF must become stronger than the Taliban everywhere; the President's authority in the capital city and provinces must be more reliable than the shadow government of the Taliban.

Respected soldiers,

There are some questions with answers to be found here, however, in Estonia.

Apart from the achievement of global objectives, the operation in Afghanistan means invaluable battle experiences for dozens of Estonian Defence Force members. This also means an opportunity to enhance our highly important strategic partnership with NATO allies in Europe and the United States of America. Which are, then, the further solutions we see, aside from the ESTCOY-8 company serving under the command of Great Britain in the Helmand Province?

And then: have we done everything we can to ensure maximum *force protection* for our units?

Could we make the interior of the PASI battle machines of the Estonian units more secure to the explosions of powerful improvised blasting charges? Could we enhance our mine clearance capabilities, required for the better detection of improvised explosives with low metal content? What would the opportunities of the Estonian units be for using both unmanned reconnaissance

planes and different surveillance equipment with extra long range, available to Estonian units to secure both their bases and operations? How good is our electronic battle equipment – good enough to monitor and suppress the communication networks of the enemy, if necessary?

These were the topics discussed yesterday at the session of the National Defence Council in Kadriorg with the Commander of the Defence Forces, Lieutenant General Ants Laaneots, who gave his vision of this operation and an overview of his recent visit to Estonian units in Afghanistan.

As he confirmed, all the members of ESTCOY-9 are equipped with night vision equipment. And I am glad to hear it. I am also glad of the decision to supply our soldiers with ground penetrating radars, which help to detect mines with low metal content. Estonia must do everything possible – and even more – to ensure maximum protection for our soldiers in Afghanistan.

Social securities, available to injured and wounded defence force members and to their next of kin, who have lost their son, husband or brother in Afghanistan, are as important. None of them should feel that the state has forgotten about them. A noble principle, well recognised in battlefield – leave no man behind – is also valid here.

Dear members of the Defence Forces,

At the beginning of October, I sent a graphic drawing entitled “Fight” by artist Jüri Arrak to the Estonian soldiers fighting in Afghanistan. The piece of art depicts the ancient Estonians fighting with a dragon, which has one of its heads already cut off, while two are still spitting fire. I also wrote a dedication to the picture, wishing faith in victory, courage, fortitude, and soldier’s luck to all our soldiers.

All the same, I now wish to you, the defence force members of ESTCOY-9 and NSE-8.

I wish you success. And soldier’s luck!