

Soldiers plead for better armour

Rafael Epstein reported this story on [Friday, May 15, 2009](#) 08:10:00

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Australian special forces in Afghanistan are pleading for better protection against roadside bombs. In its Defence White Paper the Government proposes to spend billions of dollars on new equipment and weapons systems. The announcement has only added to the frustration of soldiers on the ground. 'Lateline' reported they've been asking for additional armour for years.

TONY EASTLEY: Australian special forces in Afghanistan are pleading for better protection against roadside bombs. Last month an Australian special forces soldier was critically wounded when his unarmoured vehicle was blasted by an improvised land mine. In its Defence White Paper the Government proposes to spend billions of dollars on new equipment and weapons systems. The announcement has only added to the frustration of soldiers on the ground. "Lateline" reported they've been asking for additional armour for years, as Rafael Epstein reports.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: At the start of April, two Australian soldiers were wounded while driving through southern Oruzgan province. An improvised mine exploded beneath their patrol vehicle. One soldier nearly died after suffering severe injuries to his legs and lower body. He's now recuperating in a Sydney hospital. Other soldiers are disappointed; some are angry. His patrol vehicle lacked the armoured protection that through different avenues, soldiers have been asking for for nearly two years.

Neil James is from the Australia Defence Association.

NEIL JAMES: It's certainly a legitimate concern. You should always listen to the soldiers and the commanders in the field, particularly when they tell defence bureaucrats about what type of vehicle they actually need to fight.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: Extra armour has been tested; some of the patrol vehicles have been given that extra protection. But the next phase of what's called "up armouring" hasn't happened yet. It probably won't happen before the current northern summer has finished and that means there'll be no new armour through what's expected to be the most intense fighting season experienced by Australian soldiers. The Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon says that in general, the soldiers have what they need.

JOEL FITZGIBBON: Nothing holds my focus more than ensuring that our troops in theatre have all the capability and protection they need to do their job as effectively and as efficiently as is possible. Special operations as well; I'm absolutely confident as Minister and I'm absolutely satisfied that they have all that protection.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: Regular diggers in the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force have armoured cars and access to heavily armoured vehicles like the Bushmaster, and they've been through some intense fire fights as well. But special operations soldiers are at the sharp end of this war. They need fast moving vehicles they can fight from and that can travel some distance.

But for a significant number of the special operations troops, more than half of the vehicles available to them have received no new armour for their mission in Afghanistan.

The shadow defence minister is David Johnston.

DAVID JOHNSTON: I actually think we should have done better that we have to this point in time. This whole project has been stalled for now 18 months.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: Is the White Paper the solution? The fast solution?

DAVID JOHNSTON: Well I think the Minister listening to your program now needs to get out of his chair and say, "I better have a meeting tomorrow at 8 o'clock and see where this is at, and let's get this show on the road." That's what I'd be doing. The problem is that we are exposed - let's be perfectly blunt - and most of the casualties and indeed some of the killed-in-action situations we've had have been the direct result of IEDs.

IEDs are the number one threat to our personnel in Afghanistan. And in saying that I would have thought we would have done better, sooner.

TONY EASTLEY: Shadow defence minister David Johnston; Rafael Epstein the reporter.

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