

CSIS promises changes amid criticism

BY BILL CURRY
AND JEFF SALLOT, OTTAWA

Canada's spy agency denied yesterday that it misled a civilian oversight body, but promised new measures to address the "unacceptable" impression that it hides the truth.

These steps include directives to managers to hand over "all relevant information" when the oversight body requests it.

Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan, who is responsible for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, issued a statement yesterday indicating she was "concerned" about a report that accuses CSIS of "purposefully" misleading an investigation. A spokeswoman for the minister said Ms. McLellan will get to the bottom of the issue.

"There are two sides to every story and we're waiting for CSIS to give us their side," Lia Quickert said.

Paule Gauthier, a former chairwoman of the Security Intelligence Review Committee, slammed CSIS in a report released this week for cutting corners and giving the false impression that documents embarrassing to CSIS did not exist.

Bhupinder Singh Liddar had requested the review of CSIS's decision to block his Oct. 21, 2003, diplomatic appointment as consul-general to Chandigarh, India, because he had been involved in pro-Arab causes.

Ms. McLellan said in a statement that she has asked CSIS director Jim Judd to review the report, including its criticism that CSIS destroys interview notes.

"The director of CSIS has indicated to the chair of SIRC that, while the service did not believe that it had misled the committee, any such impression is unacceptable,"



CLEMENT ALLARD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Paule Gauthier, former chair of SIRC, slammed CSIS in a recent report.

she said.

Ms. McLellan hasn't yet decided what is the truth, Ms. Quickert said. "She doesn't have a view on this. The director [of CSIS] will be coming back to her on this."

Ms. Quickert said she would not speculate about whether there would be disciplinary action if in fact the service "purposefully misled" the committee.

She said the minister was unavailable for an interview because she is in Pakistan.

The report's harshest criticism of CSIS focused on the agency's re-

sponse to requests for information about security screening around the time of Mr. Liddar's appointment in the final weeks of Jean Chrétien's term as prime minister.

Ms. Gauthier wrote that when she and Mr. Liddar's lawyer asked CSIS for documents relating to Mr. Liddar before December of 2003, the agency replied that no "security clearance" was done at that time.

But when Mr. Liddar obtained new files showing CSIS did a security check that fall, the agency told Ms. Gauthier a security clearance is different from a security check.

"It was highly misleading," Ms. Gauthier wrote. "It would be disappointing indeed to conclude that the service misled the review committee and Mr. Liddar in order to suppress information that was embarrassing to the service."

At a news conference yesterday, Ron Atkey, who was SIRC chair from 1984 to 1989 and is an independent adviser to the Maher Arar inquiry, said he believes CSIS's actions on the Liddar case are isolated.

When asked whether there should be consequences such as firings at CSIS, Mr. Atkey said "there may be," but added the agency's behaviour is much improved.

"Security intelligence is a dirty business. There's always room for error," he said.

Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew and Mr. Liddar issued a joint press release yesterday in which the minister expresses Ottawa's "sincere regret" for the impact of the delay of the appointment.

The press release states that discussions between the government and Mr. Liddar regarding his appointment will conclude soon.

In a brief interview yesterday, Mr. Liddar said he is happy the report proved he was not a security risk.

"It does restore my credibility and my reputation," he said.

Meanwhile, Canadian Arab and Muslim groups said the Liddar case exposes a bias in the government against advocates for Arab causes.

"It has been a long-held view by many in Canada that taking up 'Arab causes' is dangerous and can lead to unnecessary scrutiny by Canadian security officials," Hussein Amery, president of the National Council on Canada-Arab Relations, said on behalf of his group and other Arab and Muslim organizations.