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BY PAULINE TAM, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

OTTAWA — Retired RCMP Const. Eric Rebiere was on Parliament Hill Saturday to protest what he called the lack of action by the Harper government in taking care of police officers who are injured while serving on military missions.

Rebiere had a warning for any Mountie considering deployments to Afghanistan and other future missions: "Think twice," he said. "You have more to lose than you realize."

Braving a sub-zero chill, Rebiere was among roughly 150 retired and active soldiers who gathered with their families for Canadian Veterans National Day of Protest.

The rally was one of dozens across the country, aimed at pressuring the federal government to improve its veterans benefits and services.

"We mention those who gave their lives ... but there are many more with both visible and invisible wounds," said organizer Mike Blais, who served in the Royal Canadian Regiment for 17 years. "These wounds tear families and lives apart."

Rebiere was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 2004, after serving in Croatia and Kosovo. As a police officer for 26 years, he was able to attend counselling at organized clinics supported by Veterans Affairs.

However, since the RCMP opted not to come under the New Veterans Charter, introduced in 2006, younger officers who are injured during military deployments are not covered for services that help them transition back to civilian life, such as job retraining and paid schooling.

The RCMP is also not part of what is known as the operational stress injury social support program, which helps those with PTSD.

Rebiere said a Mountie with less than 20 years of service who is injured overseas and no longer able to work for the force would only receive their pension contributions plus whatever disability pension Veterans Affairs determines they are eligible to receive.

Rebiere pointed to the treatment of Ottawa police officer and former military member Brian Dyck, who had ALS and was denied benefits by Veterans Affairs. In September, Prime Minister Stephen Harper personally intervened in the case, but Dyck died shortly after.

"Sooner than later, (the RCMP) will have our own Brian Dyck come back from Afghanistan, and there will be nothing in place for that individual, who will have to push a rock up like Brian Dyck had to do, which was a crime," said Rebiere.

The revised charter, developed under the Liberals and brought in by the Conservatives, governs benefits for a new generation of veterans. Critics have complained the charter shortchanges new veterans and is symptomatic of a system that treats all retired soldiers like problems.

The charter was the focus of intense anger at Saturday's rally, with speaker after speaker criticizing it as a tool that creates two tiers of veterans.

"There should be only one charter that applies to all members of the veterans community of Canada," said Perry Gray, a retired captain and veteran of multiple international missions.

The veterans demanded the federal government revert to life-time pensions instead of lump-sum payments and expand treatment programs for PTSD.

Among the retired soldiers to address the crowd was Sean Bruyea, a Canadian Gulf War veteran and Veterans

Affairs critic whose sensitive personal and medical information was illegally shared by officials in the department.

Bruyea called for a royal commission to investigate the department's handling of veterans' disability claims. "Parliament turned a blind eye, allowing bureaucrats to get us into this mess so only Parliament can get us out of this mess."

In an interview Saturday, Veterans Affairs Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn rejected Bruyea's calls, saying he has already ordered two investigations into the case, including one being conducted by the federal privacy commissioner.

Blackburn said he has also toughened the penalties for Veterans Affairs officials caught sharing the private medical information of disabled soldiers. Instead of receiving a one-day suspension from work without pay, the penalty now ranges from 30 days of suspension without pay, to potential dismissal, said Blackburn.

He also listed the efforts his department has made in recent months to improve veterans' benefits and services.

In September, the government announced \$2 billion that would be set aside during the next couple of decades to care for injured veterans. And in a separate announcement, the government pledged another \$52 million for new initiatives to support injured military personnel.

"I'm very convinced that those changes will be good for our veterans," said Blackburn.

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