

Mounties probe potential gold heist from mint

Opposition blasts Harper government for waiting months to call in police after high-security facility loses track of millions in precious metal

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The RCMP is probing a potentially massive gold heist after the Royal Canadian Mint lost track of millions of dollars of precious metal at its high-security facility along the Ottawa River.

There have been two relatively small incidents of gold theft in recent years at the mint, but nothing that compares to the current mystery involving millions of dollars in closely guarded metal.

The opposition blasted the Harper government for waiting months to call in the police, saying that auditors identified problems four months ago.

"One would think that if there was one place where the government could hold onto our treasures, it's at the mint," NDP MP Thomas Mulcair said, accusing the government of trying to minimize the situation.

"You don't call the Mounties when you have an accounting problem. You call the horsemen when there is a theft," Mr. Mulcair said.

Liberal MP Joe Volpe said he was astounded to find out that government officials first had questions in March about the potential disappearance of precious metals, accusing them of mismanaging the matter.

"As soon as you find that there's a discrepancy, which they knew about, by their admission, several months ago, you do the right thing: call in the RCMP. You have to have plans to deal with it," Mr. Volpe said.

But the minister in charge of the mint, Rob Merrifield, said he did not wait for the full results of an audit into the government's stock of precious metals. During Question Period, Mr. Merrifield said he will make the audit public when it is ready in coming weeks, adding the RCMP was called in because the results will reveal unexplained discrepancies between physical metal stocks and financial records.

"The mint has lost track of precious metal, and that is why we brought in an external audit," Mr. Merrifield said in the House. "[Yesterday] morning I found out that the mint will not be able to reconcile all of the missing money with the audit. I have instructed the mint to bring in the RCMP to examine this matter in a fulsome way."

RCMP spokesman Greg Cox said the force will review the allegations and determine whether "there are sufficient grounds to investigate."

The mint is open to the public, but operates under a high level of security. Visitors do not approach gold stocks, and employees operate in the presence of metal detectors and cameras.

"We are ISO-9001:2000 certified, and are regularly audited to ensure the transparency of our business. Our vaults are therefore an exceptionally secure facility," the mint said on its website.

In recent years, a machinist and a janitor were suspected of theft at the mint, but the amounts – in the tens of thousands of dollars – pale in comparison to the current situation.

Bandits have been luckier outside of the mint's walls. In 1966, thieves ran away with \$400,000 worth of gold (worth \$2.5-million in current dollars) that was in transit at Winnipeg International Airport.

In 1987, two armed robbers threatened to blow the kneecaps off mine employees in Northern Ontario as part of the theft of a \$300,000 gold bar.

Last year, police investigated the theft of gold worth an estimated \$250,000 from a mine in British Columbia. The miners thought the gold was safe because it was stuck in frozen earth, but thieves thawed out the thick layer of ice over it and ran away with the loot.