

Minister for Defence – Paper on Afghanistan, tabled in conjunction with a Ministerial Statement

13 October 2011

The Government is committed to providing regular reports and updates on Afghanistan, including to the Parliament.

This year I have reported to the Parliament on three prior occasions, in March, May and July.

I last reported to the Parliament on 7 July, which followed my attendance at the meeting of NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Defence Ministers in Brussels in June, the beginning of the northern summer fighting season, United States President Obama's Statement on Afghanistan on 23 June and the commencement of transition to Afghan-led security.

My report on this occasion follows my visit to Afghanistan on 3 October and my attendance at last week's NATO and ISAF Defence Ministers' meeting in Brussels on 5 and 6 October.

Why we are there

My visit to Afghanistan and my attendance at the NATO/ISAF Defence Ministers' Meeting in Brussels has reinforced the Government's view that it is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan, not just with our Alliance partner the United States (US), but also with 47 other members of ISAF acting under a United Nations mandate.

With the recent addition of El Salvador to ISAF forces, over a quarter of the world's countries now participate in ISAF.

Australia's fundamental goal is to prevent Afghanistan from again being used by terrorists to plan and train for attacks on innocent civilians, including Australians in our own region and beyond.

Last month's commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks was a sober reminder that there are serious and horrifying consequences if international terrorists are allowed to operate unchecked.

It is therefore imperative that we remain focussed on our goal to help prepare the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take lead responsibility for providing security for the Afghan people.

To do so we must continue in our efforts to stabilise the security situation and to mentor and train the Afghan security forces.

To leave now would be to put at risk the gains so hard fought for.

ISAF Campaign Progress

In Afghanistan and Brussels I met senior NATO/ISAF Commanders and my Defence Ministerial colleagues from a number of NATO/ISAF contributing countries including Afghanistan, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Ministers and Commanders are confident of the good progress that is being made in Afghanistan.

We are now seeing results from a clear strategy, appropriate resources and a realistic transition timeline. Afghan and ISAF forces have stalled, then reversed, the Taliban's momentum.

This fighting season, the Taliban has been unable to retake any ground in Uruzgan, or indeed across Afghanistan.

The transition to Afghan-led security commenced with the handover of seven provinces and districts to Afghan-led security in July this year. This process has not been reversed by the Taliban.

In my March update to Parliament, I warned that we had to expect the Taliban to fight back through high profile propaganda motivated attacks.

Regrettably these high profile attacks have come to pass. While the Taliban have not been successful at the tactical or operational level, high profile attacks have occurred with a high civilian casualty toll and the terrible loss of former Afghan President and Chairman of the High Peace Council Professor Rabbani.

These high profile attacks are aimed at undermining confidence in Afghanistan and sapping political will in

the international community:

- undermining confidence in the minds of the Afghan people that the ANSF will not be able to provide them with security;
- and sapping the political will of the international community by distracting from the real progress we are making.

Australia condemns these civilian casualties.

A failed insurgent attack on Uruzgan Province Governor Shirzad on 28 July resulted in the deaths of 16 civilians, including 12 children killed in a callous way.

There have been more such instances across Afghanistan. As the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative Steffan di Mistura advised the NATO/ISAF Defence Ministers Meeting in Brussels, around 85 percent of civilian casualties are caused by the Taliban.

Afghanistan and the international community need to make clear that the change of tactics by the Taliban to mount such high profile propaganda motivated attacks and suicide bomb assassinations is a sign of Taliban weakness not strength.

Uruzgan Campaign Progress

During my visit to Afghanistan, I visited Australian troops serving in Uruzgan Province in the south of Afghanistan. I met Australian troops at the Multi National Base in Tarin Kot and Patrol Base Wali in the Mirabad Valley and thanked them for their excellent work.

I met with Australian and United States operational commanders in Uruzgan Province, including the United States Commander of Combined Team Uruzgan, Colonel Robert Akam.

I also met with Uruzgan Governor Shirzad and his provincial security chiefs, the Commander of the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army Brigadier Zafar, the Provincial Chief of Police Brigadier Mattiullah Khan and the Provincial Chief of the National Directorate of Security Colonel Khan Muhammed.

In Uruzgan, Australian troops are working under an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) flag with their colleagues from the United States, Singapore and Slovakia in Combined Team Uruzgan.

Their mission is to train the Afghan security forces to take on lead responsibility for security by 2014.

They are well on track and making good progress to achieve that objective.

ISAF, working closely with Afghan partners, has expanded its security footprint across Uruzgan to encompass over 30 operating bases and check points. In turn, this has allowed the Afghan Government to expand its influence and provision of basic services to the people of the Province.

Since 2008, Australia has increased its effort from the mentoring of a single Kandak (Battalion) to mentoring six Kandaks plus the Brigade Headquarters.

At times the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has had a presence in more than a dozen different bases in Uruzgan.

Due to the increasing size and effectiveness of Afghan forces in Uruzgan, ISAF is progressively transitioning control of these check points and operating bases to Afghan counterparts. This has included the recent handover of three patrol bases to Afghan forces.

By the first half of 2012, it is anticipated that the Australian Mentoring Task Force will be in a position to reduce its footprint to as few as four main locations in Uruzgan, with mobile mentoring teams able to assist Afghan partners at their operating bases for periods as required.

Australian forces continue to make important progress towards training the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade so that it can take responsibility for security in Uruzgan.

As part of this work, on the advice of the Chief of the Defence Force, the Government has authorised a number of Mentoring Task Force personnel to continue the training and mentoring of the 6th Kandak of the 4th Brigade in northern Kandahar, south of the Uruzgan border.

The 4th Brigade is increasingly assumed the lead for the planning, preparation and execution of tactical operations, allowing Australian forces to concentrate on mentoring and partnering Afghan command and combat support functions.

The 4th Brigade is also demonstrating progress towards operating independently, with a number of infantry Kandaks now expected to be capable of conducting independent operations by early 2012.

On current advice and projections, the 4th Brigade, as a whole, is expected to be operationally viable and ready for provincial transition by 2014.

As my predecessor and I have previously advised the House, Australian Special Forces are authorised to operate in adjoining provinces on operations that have security benefits in Uruzgan Province. This involves operations to maintain pressure on insurgent leadership in Uruzgan, and its surrounding provinces including Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Daykundi.

So far this year, our Special Forces have conducted around 40 out-of-province operations, directly contributing to the security of Uruzgan and facilitating our ongoing training mission.

Australian Special Forces and their Afghan partners, the Provincial Response Company (PRC) and the National Interdiction Unit (NIU), also continue to disrupt the insurgency in and around Uruzgan Province by taking insurgent leaders and bomb-makers off the battlefield and reducing the insurgency revenue stream from narcotics.

This has helped create the environment necessary for ISAF forces to finalise their training mission and to create a safer environment for the Afghan people.

Weapons cache finds have increased significantly and there has been some success in interdicting the movement of Taliban forces and supplies from Pakistani tribal areas across the border into Afghanistan.

Australia's support to the NIU has reduced the insurgency's ability to fund its campaign by targeting the sale of narcotics, which in turn creates a safer environment for our troops and the Afghan population more broadly. This support, commencing at the Afghan Government's request, has led to a series of successful operations in and around Uruzgan.

In September, the ANSF, supported by Australia's Special Forces, seized and destroyed a record amount of drug products in Southern Afghanistan.

A September raid on three drug laboratories netted a large quantity of narcotics with an estimated street value of US\$350 million.

This find follows a similar mission in Helmand province which discovered \$US150 million worth of narcotics manufacturing equipment and chemicals.

The destruction of such a large quantity of drug products will have a considerable effect on the insurgent operations in northern Helmand and western Uruzgan throughout the remainder of this year and into 2012.

Transition

My visit to Afghanistan also confirmed that the international community is on track to achieve nation-wide transition of security-led responsibility to the ANSF by the end of 2014.

In July, Afghanistan and the international community welcomed the formal start of the transition process in the first tranche of provinces and districts across Afghanistan.

This marked an important step towards meeting President Karzai's objective that Afghan authorities assume lead security responsibility across Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

The first tranche of provinces and districts to have transitioned to Afghan-led security accounts for around 20 to 25 per cent of the Afghan population.

President Karzai is expected to announce the second tranche of districts and provinces for transition later this month. When this second tranche of districts and provinces transitions, Afghan security forces will provide lead security for up to 50 percent of the Afghan population.

Subsequent tranches will see international forces continue the process of handing over the lead security responsibility across the country.

The Taliban will continue to test the transition process through more high profile attacks and assassination attempts.

Australia is confident the ANSF will continue to demonstrate their resolve and growing capability by standing up to and against such violence.

In Uruzgan, as I have previously indicated, we continue to do well in training and mentoring the 4th Brigade of the ANA. We are confident that we can transition to Afghan-led security responsibility in Uruzgan by 2014.

Post-Transition

As the international community looks ahead, ISAF must maintain its Lisbon Summit commitment to transition to Afghan led security by 2014.

Likewise, both NATO and the United States must maintain their commitment to a long term enduring strategic partnership with Afghanistan.

NATO and the United States confirmed their long-term commitments at the Defence Ministers' meeting in Brussels last week.

NATO and ISAF Defence Ministers welcomed the outline of the NATO Strategic Plan for Afghanistan which sets out the proposed approach to the NATO/ISAF presence in Afghanistan for the 2012-2014 period, and, most importantly, for the post-2014 period.

This continuing long-term commitment and continued investment in Afghanistan's future is a key to ensuring that Afghanistan and its neighbours – including Pakistan – also invest in a peaceful future for Afghanistan.

It is important to begin work on the post-2014 period now. Not to set this out soon will undermine what we have achieved, jeopardise Afghan confidence in the international community's long term commitment to their country and send the wrong message to regional neighbours, in particular Pakistan.

Australia looks forward to continued work on the Strategic Plan ahead of the Chicago Summit in May next year.

Australia has made clear it expects to maintain a presence in Afghanistan after our current training and mentoring mission has concluded, potentially through institutional training, a Special Forces presence, military advisers, capacity building and development assistance.

Important into the future will be continued international community support for the ANSF. The international community must ensure the ANSF is provided with the resources it needs to maintain security into the future.

Afghanistan's neighbours

Just as NATO and the United States' continuing long-term commitment and continued investment in Afghanistan's future is key to ensuring that Afghanistan and its neighbours also invest in a peaceful future for Afghanistan, so too is Afghanistan's commitment to working with its neighbours and the commitment by Afghanistan's neighbours to work with Afghanistan.

The role of Pakistan has been brought into sharp relief in recent weeks.

Australia has for some time been concerned about the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area and in more recent times increasingly concerned about the operations of the Haqqani network in Afghanistan.

Australia very much supports Pakistan in its counter-terrorism and counter-extremism efforts. That is reflected by the good cooperation that we have and the enhanced counter-terrorism assistance that we have provided to Pakistan in recent years.

We know the situation in Pakistan is complex, we know it is complicated, we know it is tough. We also know that Pakistan needs to do more to counter extremism and terrorism, particularly on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. But there is certainly no point in walking away from Pakistan when Pakistan faces very considerable security and economic challenges and difficulties.

Our support and assistance to Pakistan is not just on the counter-terrorism front – which we regard as very important – it is also on the economic front.

That is why in recent years Australia has in addition to doubling the number of Pakistani military officers that we train in counter-insurgency, also doubled our development assistance to Pakistan.

And it is why Australia was one of the strongest contributors in the aftermath of the terrible floods in Pakistan at the end of last year.

We urge the United States and Pakistan to continue their cooperation on counter terrorism. The relationship between Washington and Islamabad is key both to international counter terrorism efforts and also ongoing efforts in Afghanistan and on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

The signing of a Strategic Partnership between Afghanistan and India is a welcome development in the

region and an important signal of India's commitment to investing in a peaceful future for Afghanistan. Importantly, at the announcement of the Strategic Partnership, President Karzai said Afghanistan, India and Pakistan had all suffered at the hands of terrorists and all needed to work together to defeat terrorism and unlock the economic and growth potential of the region.

At the same time President Karzai stated his preference to talk directly with Pakistan on peace and reconciliation issues. This followed the visit to Kabul in April by the high level delegation from Pakistan which included Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani, Chief of Army Staff Kayani and Head of the Intelligence Service Pasha to meet their Afghan counterparts.

At this April meeting, the combined civilian and military leadership of Pakistan sat down for the first time with their Afghan colleagues to discuss political settlement in Afghanistan and the role of Afghanistan's neighbours in supporting this process.

This was an important step forward, as was President Karzai's more recent commitment to ensure direct discussions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The solution in Afghanistan can not be purely a military one, it must involve a political settlement with the support of Afghanistan's neighbours.

Detainee management update

I welcomed the release this week on 10 October of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Report on the treatment of detainees in Afghan custody.

The UNAMA report raises serious concerns about the torture and mistreatment of detainees in a number of National Directorate of Security (NDS) and Afghan National Police (ANP) detention facilities across Afghanistan.

This includes the ANP facility in Uruzgan. Afghan detainees have not been transferred to this facility by the ADF.

I welcome UNAMA's finding that detainee mistreatment is neither institutional nor Afghan Government policy.

The UNAMA Report does however, very concerningly, indicate that the mistreatment of detainees may be practiced systemically at a number of detention facilities.

The cooperation of Afghan authorities with UNAMA's detention monitoring program is welcome, as are the remedial actions and corrective and preventive measures Afghan authorities have announced and put in place in response to the UNAMA Report.

These include launching their own investigations, reassigning personnel where appropriate and suspending responsible individuals ahead of possible legal action.

Australia takes the issue of detainee management very seriously and continues to make clear its commitment to open and transparent detainee arrangements in support of ADF operations in Afghanistan. Australia has a robust framework for detainee management in Afghanistan which accords with Australia's domestic and international legal obligations.

In line with the UNAMA Report's recommendations, Australian officials and humanitarian organisations already regularly monitor detainees transferred by the ADF.

Until 1 August 2010, Dutch forces took responsibility for detainees captured by the ADF.

On 1 August 2010, leadership in Uruzgan Province passed from the Netherlands to the multinational Combined Team-Uruzgan.

Australia subsequently put in place a comprehensive detainee management framework with the United States and Afghan authorities. This was announced on 14 December 2010.

Once initial screening is complete, detainees are transferred either to Afghan or United States custody, or released if there is insufficient evidence to pursue prosecution.

Under the framework, detainees assessed as posing a less serious threat are transferred to the Afghan NDS facility in Uruzgan. Those assessed as posing a serious threat are transferred to the US-run detention facility in Parwan Province. The NDS facility in Uruzgan is not one of the NDS facilities subject to criticism and concern in the UNAMA Report.

Australian officials, both from Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), continue to

monitor detainees' welfare and condition while they are in US or Afghan custody, until they are released or sentenced.

This monitoring is underpinned by formal arrangements with Afghanistan and the United States, which include assurances on the humane treatment of detainees and free access by Australian officials and NGOs. Any allegation of mistreatment is investigated.

The UNAMA report does not refer to any evidence of detainee mistreatment at the NDS facility in Uruzgan, where Australian-apprehended detainees are transferred.

While the ANP Headquarters in Uruzgan is listed as a facility of concern, Australian-apprehended detainees have not been and are not transferred to ANP facilities in Uruzgan.

The UNAMA report notes that in early July 2011, the United States and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces stopped transferring detainees to NDS and ANP authorities in southern Afghanistan. This decision was based on reports of a practice of torture and mistreatment of detainees in NDS and ANP detention facilities in the south.

At ISAF's request, Australia suspended the transfer of detainees to Afghan authorities at this time. While ISAF's concerns did not expressly relate to the NDS facility in Tarin Kot where ADF-apprehended detainees were transferred, in view of the importance of a unified ISAF approach to detainee management issues, Australia responded positively to the ISAF request.

Australia has maintained the suspension of transfers to the NDS facility in Tarin Kot, pending consideration of the UNAMA Report, which will now occur. The outcome of this consideration will be announced in due course.

ISAF has already begun implementing a six-part plan of remedial measures. The ISAF six-part plan includes facility inspection, remediation training in human rights and detainee treatment, formal certification by Commander ISAF, supporting accountability actions taken by the Afghan Government, monitoring detainees over the long-term, and facilitating transparency and communication among ISAF and Afghan Government detention operations.

Australia will continue to work with our Afghan and international partners, including the United Nations, to ensure Afghan detainees receive the appropriate treatment consistent with domestic and international law.

Detainee Update and Allegations

In the period 1 August 2010 to 1 October 2011, Australian forces apprehended 988 detainees.

Of these, 153 have been transferred to Afghan (NDS Tarin Kot) or US authorities (noting that none have been transferred to Afghan custody since the suspension of detainee transfers on 12 July).

The remainder have been released following initial screening.

In the same period, I am advised the ADF has captured 10 people who were subsequently released, then recaptured. Five of the individuals in question were released as there was insufficient evidence to warrant their continued detention.

Of the remaining five detainees, there was sufficient evidence to warrant their transfer and prosecution.

Two were subsequently transferred to US custody at the Detention Facility in Parwan, and three were transferred to Afghan custody at the NDS detention facility in Tarin Kot.

I also provide an update on the number of allegations of detainee mistreatment we have received against Australian forces: in the same period, 41 allegations from 39 detainees have been made against the ADF. To date, 29 of these allegations have been thoroughly investigated. These were found to have had no substance and were dismissed.

Twelve more recent allegations remain under review.

These allegations and the outcome of the comprehensive investigations are reported to ISAF and appropriate NGOs.

CCTV System

As advised previously, Australia's Initial Screening Area (ISA) was designed to be Closed Circuit TV (CCTV) monitored 24 hours a day to ensure the humane treatment of detainees in our custody, and to protect the ADF personnel working within the Initial Screening Area from erroneous allegations.

In February this year, I advised the House of some failures in the CCTV recording system operating in Australia's detainee screening facility in Afghanistan in the ISA.

At that time immediate action was taken to ensure continuous footage was being recorded and archived, and options to upgrade the system were examined.

I advise the House that a further technical fault in an element of the CCTV recording system was identified in early August this year. Defence immediately rectified the fault and is currently in the process of upgrading the CCTV system as a matter of priority.

This will include a number of upgrades and a partial replacement of the existing system to ensure it can continue to operate in the harsh Afghan environment. While this work is underway, the system will remain operational to record continuous footage.

During my recent visit to Afghanistan, I again inspected the ISA in Tarin Kot and was informed of the work being done in this respect.

Again the opportunity was given to show the Australian media this facility, reflecting Australia's commitment to transparency with respect to these matters.

Conclusion

Australia has lost 29 members of the ADF in Afghanistan. Since my last Afghanistan update to Parliament, Private Matthew Lambert died as a result of an improvised explosive device attack on 22 August. We remember him and express our condolences to his spouse, his family and his friends.

In this period, New Zealand has lost two fine soldiers with the tragic fatalities of Corporal Douglas Grant and Lance Corporal Leon Smith.

I conveyed Australia's condolences to my New Zealand counterpart, Dr Wayne Mapp, at the time. I was pleased that Australia was able to assist with the initial transportation through our C-130s with the repatriation of both Corporal Grant and Lance Corporal Smith.

New Zealand is doing excellent work and making an important contribution to the international community's efforts in Afghanistan through the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamiyan Province and support to the Afghanistan National Police Crisis Response Unit in Kabul.

At this time of tragic loss on both sides of the Tasman, we remember our losses with our age-old refrain, so fitting for our Anzacs, 'Lest We Forget.'

With these terrible tragedies, we must continue to be clear sighted about our objective in Afghanistan. Our objective is to prevent Afghanistan, in particular the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, from again becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

We will not be in Afghanistan forever, and we are on track to transition to Afghan-led responsibility for security arrangements in Uruzgan in 2014.

It is important that the international community now begin work on planning for the post-2014 commitment in Afghanistan.

This will send the right signal to Afghanistan and its neighbours to invest in a peaceful future for Afghanistan.