

## **Minister for Defence - Statement on Afghanistan**

11 December 2013

**Paper presented  
by the  
Minister for Defence  
Senator the Hon David Johnston  
on  
Afghanistan  
Tabled in conjunction with a Ministerial Statement  
on  
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### **Introduction**

Over recent years successive Defence Ministers have reported to the Parliament on Australia's commitment in Afghanistan.

It is proper that the Parliament and the Australian people are informed about major military operations where our men and women are in harm's way.

So today I will provide an update on the completion of the Australian mission in Uruzgan and progress in the transition of security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces in Afghanistan.

I also intend to address Australia's strong ongoing commitment to Afghanistan throughout 2014 and beyond.

### **Conclusion of operations in Uruzgan Province**

Australian operations in Uruzgan province are drawing to a close.

On Tuesday 3 December 2013, the Commander of ISAF's Regional Command South, Major General Paul LaCamera announced the Afghan National Security Forces have assumed responsibility for security in Uruzgan province.

Over the coming weeks the Australian Defence Force will complete its mission in Uruzgan and the majority of our people will return to Australia.

On 28 October, I was privileged to travel to Afghanistan with the Prime Minister to be present at the Recognition Ceremony at the Multi National Base – Tarin Kot in Uruzgan province.

The ceremony was also attended by the Leader of the Opposition in a show of bipartisan support for the achievements of our men and women in Afghanistan.

As is only right, both sides of Parliament have been consistent in Australia's support to the mission in Afghanistan, and our long-term commitment to Afghanistan.

The ceremony formally acknowledged the contribution and sacrifice of Australia and our Coalition partners to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan in Uruzgan province.

What we have achieved in Uruzgan would not have been possible without the support of our international partners, including our traditional partner the United States and our NATO partners the Netherlands and Slovakia.

We have also been assisted by our regional partner Singapore who provided valuable support to the mission.

Key to the success in Uruzgan, and Afghanistan more broadly, has been the role and support provided by the United States.

Australian and United States Forces have worked side by side and we have embedded ADF personnel in ISAF and United States-based Headquarters.

During my recent visit to Brussels at the NATO/ISAF Defence Ministers, I met with my United States counterpart, Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel and Commander ISAF, General Joe Dunford.

During these meetings I acknowledged our shared commitments in Afghanistan and highlighted our close practical ties.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication shown by United States military leaders in Afghanistan.

In addition to recognising the efforts of ISAF members, the ceremony in Tarin Kot was an opportunity to recognise the achievements of the Afghan National Security Forces since we have been in Uruzgan.

Over the past 16 months, the Afghan National Security Forces has taken the security lead in the province.

During this period, insurgent efforts to undermine security in Uruzgan have been countered by well-led and increasingly proficient Afghan National Security Forces.

Their continuing success is a direct result of the training and mentoring provided by the ADF, and other coalition partners, which has helped the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade develop as a capable force.

Throughout the 2013 fighting season, the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade has consistently demonstrated its determination to protect the Afghan population.

With support from the Afghan National Police and the National Directorate of Security, the 4th Brigade has taken the fight to the insurgents through a successful series of well-planned and well-coordinated operations.

These operations have reduced the presence and influence of the insurgents in the most contested areas of the province.

The Afghan National Army's 4th Brigade is operating and sustaining independent operations and proving to be effective against the insurgency.

These operations, which are widespread and ongoing, have provided an increased level of freedom and security for the Afghan population in the province, and have given the Afghan Government the ability to expand its presence at the local level, enhancing public confidence both in the Afghan National Security Forces and the Afghan Government.

It is important to acknowledge that this success in Uruzgan and elsewhere in Afghanistan has been achieved through significant sacrifices by the Afghan National Security Forces.

They remain staunch and committed.

The ANSF's leadership is exemplified by the Afghan Minister for Defence Mohammadi Khan, who I had the opportunity to meet recently in Brussels and Kabul.

But let me be clear: the Afghan National Security Forces in Uruzgan, and across Afghanistan more broadly, will continue to face many challenges going forward.

To remain effective over the coming years, Afghan forces will require significant financial and institutional support and training from the international community.

They will need to build their capabilities in areas where ISAF currently provides support, including maintenance technicians and spare parts, and a logistics system to resupply units in the field.

Despite challenges, Afghan forces remain on-track to transition to full sovereign responsibility for security across the country by the end of 2014.

Uruzgan province, where the majority of our troops have been deployed during our mission in Afghanistan, was, and still is, one of the poorest provinces in Afghanistan.

But the Australian contribution in Uruzgan has helped to build hospitals, medical centres, schools, roads and bridges.

Hundreds of small infrastructure projects have been completed, including wells and reservoirs.

The Trade Training school in Uruzgan has also been a major success and has taught a large

number of Afghans plumbing, carpentry, concreting and bricklaying skills.

We have seen the number of health facilities increase from nine in 2006 to 29 in 2013.

There are five times the number of students in school in Uruzgan than there were in 2006; 15 percent of these are girls.

And supporting this has been successive detachments of the Australian Special Operations Task Group, which have partnered with elements of the Afghan National Security Forces to deny the influence of the insurgency and protect the population, giving the Afghan government breathing space to progress development.

As the Prime Minister said during his address at the Recognition Ceremony in Tarin Kot: we have done very good work in Uruzgan.

This work has been a whole of government effort carried out by the ADF, the Australian Federal Police as well as civilians from Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs who have come together on this difficult task.

And they have attended to their work with an extraordinary degree of professionalism and dedication.

We can look back on the last few years with pride.

As our mission in Uruzgan province draws to an end, the redeployment and remediation of our equipment and the redeployment of Defence personnel in Tarin Kot continues apace.

ADF elements, including the Force Extraction Unit, the Force Support Unit, the Force Communication Unit and the Australian Air Component, which includes the Combat Support Unit are charged with carrying out this complex task.

These ADF elements have an enormous task:

- 2700 pieces of infrastructure and 3000 pieces of fixed plant and equipment must be dealt with;
- 1364 20ft containers have to be removed from site;
- 5000 pieces of specialist, force protection, and general communications information systems equipment need to be repatriated or disposed of; and
- more than 100 commercial contracts and international agreements need to be closed or resolved.

For all that, I am pleased to report that the drawdown of vehicles and materiel, and remediation of infrastructure at the Multi National Base in Tarin Kot remains on schedule for closure of the base at the end of this year.

In December 2012 there was approximately 336 tonnes of stores and equipment at the base

in Tarin Kot.

There is now less than 26 tonnes remaining.

Site remediation works, including deconstruction, environmental remediation and hand-back or gifting of infrastructure to the Afghan National Security Forces at the base is almost complete.

And as we prepare to leave Uruzgan, we will not forget to assist those locally engaged Afghan employees who have supported us during our mission Afghanistan.

These include the Afghan interpreters and support workers who have provided an invaluable contribution to our mission by breaking down language and cultural barriers.

We acknowledge that as we leave Afghanistan, locally engaged Afghan employees who have supported Australian government agencies in Afghanistan may come under risk of harm as a consequence of their work with Australian personnel.

We are proud, therefore, to offer those employees, including their immediate family, at the greatest risk of harm the opportunity to resettle to Australia.

While this policy is being implemented, I will not comment on details to protect the safety of those locally engaged Afghan employees who are currently working with us.

But as my predecessor said, it is likely that the total number of locally engaged employees who will be resettled to Australia will be in the hundreds.

### **A change in commitment, not an end**

While we are on track to draw down our forces from Uruzgan province by the end of this year, this does not mark an end to our commitment to Afghanistan.

In 2014, around 400 ADF personnel will continue to be engaged in Afghanistan through training and advising the Afghan National Security Forces in Kabul and Kandahar.

Through to the end of 2014, Australia will provide instructors, advisors and support staff to the UK-led Afghan National Army Officer Academy in Kabul, which will include a force protection platoon.

We will have advisor and support staff working with the Australian-led Afghan National Army 205 Corps Coalition Advisory Team in Kandahar.

This commitment will continue to provide valuable advice within the Afghan National Army 205 Corps senior leadership.

We will also continue to support logistics training with the Logistics Training and Advisory

Team in Kabul and we have committed a small number of Special Forces and other Army personnel to training and advising the General Directorate of Police Special Units.

In addition, the Royal Australian Air Force Heron Remotely Piloted Aircraft deployment will be extended to provide Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance support to enhance security in Regional Command – South during the lead up to, and conduct of, the elections.

Throughout 2014 Australia will also maintain its cadre of embedded personnel at ISAF Headquarters, ISAF Joint Command and Regional Command – South, a commitment that is valuable to, and praised by, the United States and other coalition partners.

Our personnel in these roles will continue the important process of building the capability of the Afghan National Security Forces to take full security responsibility for their country.

In doing so, they will also continue to face personal danger and risks from the ongoing Taliban insurgency which will continue to seek to undermine Afghanistan's security.

The Government is committed to continuing to provide our personnel with the protection and equipment they will need to do their jobs.

### **Detainee management**

With our redeployment from Uruzgan and the change to a training and advisory mission, ADF detention operations are now also drawing to a close.

However, the ADF takes its responsibilities to treat detainees humanely very seriously, and we will continue to ensure we meet our responsibilities, consistent with Australia's international legal obligations and domestic undertakings.

#### *Detainee Management Framework in light of redeployment from Uruzgan*

In line with the wider transition of security responsibility in Uruzgan, it is appropriate that we support the Afghan National Security Forces to assume responsibility for detention operations.

ADF personnel will continue to work with the Afghan National Security Forces to develop their capacity to manage Afghan detainees appropriately.

In line with remediation timelines at Multi-National Base – Tarin Kot, Australia's detention facilities have been deconstructed. The Initial Screening Area operated since 1 August 2010 and provided a safe and humane environment to screen detainees apprehended by the ADF.

### **International engagement**

Our involvement in the mission in Afghanistan has been a shared experience amongst our key allies and other NATO partners.

### *Australia – United States alliance benefits*

Through our respective contributions to the ISAF mission, and our work together in Uruzgan province, Australia has forged closer ties with our ally, the United States.

At the Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations in Washington DC last month, I had the opportunity to discuss progress in Afghanistan with United States Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

Secretary Hagel and I agreed that Australia and the United States will emerge from our shared commitment in Afghanistan with closer practical ties than ever before.

The ADF has worked side by side with United States forces in Afghanistan, leading to improvements in interoperability, people to people links and intelligence sharing.

These improvements are testament to the benefits of our unique Alliance and have enhanced the capability of the ADF.

Australia and the United States will continue to work together to build on the links forged in Afghanistan as we prepare for the post-2014 mission, enhancing and strengthening our enduring partnership as we work to bring security and stability to Afghanistan.

### *NATO relationship*

Through our experience working together in the ISAF operation in Afghanistan, shared values and common objectives to promote peace and stability through cooperation, Australia and NATO have forged a strong and enduring relationship.

Australia remains committed to Afghanistan's long term security and stability and our contribution to the NATO-led post-2014 train, advise and assist mission will help build on the gains achieved over the last decade.

We are also committed to practical cooperation with NATO beyond transition in Afghanistan. Australia is a nation with global interests, so it is natural that we should maintain links with the NATO Alliance.

The signing of an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program with NATO earlier this year and a Joint Political Declaration in 2012 underlines the commitment Australia has made to maintaining and building the partnership we have with NATO.

Through senior visits and strategic dialogue, continued collaboration in courses and seminars, participation in NATO exercises and through bilateral exchanges and embedded personnel, Australia will maintain these vital links with NATO.

But it will also be important for Australia to remain agile and equipped to operate with NATO

when our interests align.

As a partner country to NATO, Australia brings a number of benefits to the Alliance. Far from home, we have proven to be a steadfast, capable and well regarded military partner.

As we witness a strategic shift to the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the shift of economic weight, Australia is well placed to understand and share insights into the strategic dynamics of our own rapidly developing region.

### **Australia will remain committed to Afghanistan post-2014**

We should be proud about what we and our ISAF partners have achieved in Afghanistan.

In 2000, there were 1.2 million students enrolled in school across Afghanistan; there are now over 10 million.

Nearly 40 per cent of school-age girls – that is roughly three million – are enrolled in school. Female voting participation rate is at 40 per cent.

Over the last ten years, Afghanistan has improved most out of all countries on the United Nations Development Index.

So it is important to note that Afghanistan has come a long way over the last decade.

Looking beyond 2014, the international community will remain committed to Afghanistan.

At the Chicago NATO / ISAF Summit in May 2012, the international community renewed a firm commitment to a sovereign, secure and democratic Afghanistan.

Leaders acknowledged that beyond the end of the transition period, NATO and Afghanistan will work to establish a new NATO-led Mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.

Australia will also remain committed to Afghanistan beyond end 2014, when the current ISAF missions in Afghanistan comes to an end.

In 2014, we will turn our attention to national-level support and will remain committed to supporting security in Afghanistan.

Australia has pledged to contribute to the post-2014 NATO-led 'train, advise, assist' mission, including at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy in Kabul.

Beyond 2014, a Status of Forces Agreement is required to provide the legal basis for the deployment of the NATO-led mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces.

NATO and partners, have commenced planning for a Status of Forces Agreement with Afghanistan in order to provide the legal framework for the post-2014 mission.

NATO has the lead for negotiating a Status of Forces Agreement with the Afghan Government for its post-2014 NATO-led mission and any foreign forces operating in Afghanistan post-2014 would need to do so under appropriate legal arrangements.

As I said earlier, to consolidate and build on the security gains, the Afghan National Security Forces will need ongoing training support.

Australia has a vital national interest in supporting Afghanistan's stability and security after transition.

### **Australian Battle Casualties**

The efforts and sacrifice of our men and women in Afghanistan, whether it is the various elements of the ADF, the Australian Federal Police or civilians, will not be forgotten.

As most of our troops return home, we will continue to work with them and care for them.

And we will continue to work with their families.

We will make sure that their needs are met and that they are given every opportunity to address any potential mental health issues which may have arisen as a consequence of the environment in which they have been operating in.

We continue to work closely with Veterans' Affairs on this front and acknowledge the substantial progress which we have made over recent years to improve services and assistance for ADF members, including their families.

So I want to again echo the words of the Prime Minister during his address to our troops in Afghanistan, we have done good work.

It has been a very difficult commitment.

But still, to be able to help our allies, defend our national interests and uphold our values is just about the best thing that any Australian can do.

The truth of the matter is that the ADF's sacrifices and those of the Afghans, the United States and other ISAF partners have bought time for the Afghan security forces to build and field a force able to take full security responsibility for their country.

It is now up to the Afghans to take the lead, with the international community supporting them.

The efforts of over 26,500 men and women of the ADF who have served in Afghanistan since 2002 have made this possible.

Our people have paid a high price for our achievements in Afghanistan.

261 Australians have been wounded during our mission.

We have lost 40 of our best.

We mourn them. Their families and friends mourn them.

We continue to work with their families to support them on their road to recovery.

We are better positioned than we have ever been to assist them.

Together with Veterans' Affairs we have built resilience programs and services to continue assisting the families of our wounded and we continue to work with the families of our fallen soldiers to provide assistance to them where we can.

We honour our fallen soldiers and acknowledge the ultimate sacrifice which they made for their country.

We will never forget them.

An inscription I saw during my recent visit to Tarin Kot summarised their sacrifice in a few words: "All gave some, some gave all".