HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

Wednesday, 9 August 2006

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr HOWARD (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (3.16 pm)—by leave—The purpose of this statement is to inform the House of the government’s decision to send to Afghanistan an additional 150 troops of the ADF to reinforce the reconstruction task force and to provide enhanced force protection. The statement will also provide the parliament with the government’s latest assessment of the security situation in Afghanistan and the challenges facing the Karzai government and the coalition.

The Afghan people are working to achieve stability, peace and democracy after many years of violence and extremism. For Afghanistan, the path to security will be long and hard, with many challenges lying ahead. But Afghanistan will not have to face these challenges alone. Australia, along with many others in the international community, is there to assist the Afghan people.

We have already witnessed what happens when the global community turns its back on extremism. Afghanistan was neglected for too long, condemning the Afghan people to decades of war and poverty. But the world is now much more aware of the dangers of ignoring extremism and fundamentalism. The stability of Afghanistan has wider implications for global security, and it is for this reason the Australian government is committed to ensuring that Afghanistan achieves long-term peace.

Afghanistan’s social indicators remain sobering. At 46 years, Afghan life expectancy is one of the world’s lowest, and at least 20 years lower than that of all of Afghanistan’s neighbours. One in five children still die before the age of five, and the country has some of the world’s lowest literacy rates. In addition, 3.4 million Afghans remain outside their country and there is much room for improvement in the country’s human rights situation.

Afghanistan is still one of the world’s poorest countries. Decades of war destroyed much of the country’s infrastructure and severely disrupted economic activity, including in agriculture. Criminal and terrorist activity continues to hamper economic growth, and the expansion of the drug trade remains of very deep concern. Sustained economic growth will be required to make a significant dent in the country’s chronic poverty.

These problems are complex and will not be solved quickly. But Australia cannot and will not abandon Afghanistan. We need to remain committed to supporting this fledgling democracy.

Through our aid program we are working with Afghans, international organisations including the United Nations, and our other international partners to support Afghanistan’s transition from conflict to stability, peace and democracy.

At the London conference in January 2006 the government committed $55 million in development assistance to Afghanistan through to June 2007. This is part of a commitment of up to $150 million over the next five years. These funds will go towards improving security, rebuilding institutions, protecting human rights, especially for women and girls, and improving the delivery of essential services to ordinary Afghans. It builds on the $110 million we have disbursed since 2001 to assist in reconstruction and development.

Our efforts, and those of our coalition partners, are bearing fruit. Afghans have embraced democracy and open, democratic institutions are developing. Afghanistan now has a democratic constitution and a democratically elected president and parliament. The country’s first parliamentary elections in 30 years were held in September 2005. Some 6.4 million Afghans, representing over 50 per cent of registered voters, turned out to elect representatives to the lower house and the 34 provincial councils.

In an encouraging sign for the inclusiveness of Afghanistan’s burgeoning civil society, women featured prominently in these elections: 68 women were elected to the lower house, taking 27 per cent of available seats; and 121 women were elected to provincial councils, representing almost 30 per cent of available seats at this level.

The Afghan government has made education of women and girls a priority in an effort to overcome the legacy of the Taliban. With the entry of women into Afghanistan’s parliament and provincial councils, Afghans now have an additional opportunity to address the injustices of the past.
Just as democracy is becoming more deeply rooted in Afghanistan, economic recovery is providing new economic opportunities. Real GDP is expected to grow by almost 12 per cent in 2006. This builds on strong growth rates over the past few years, even if from a low base.

The ordinary people of Afghanistan are benefiting directly from these developments. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, a UNICEF immunisation program has vaccinated more than 2.3 million children under the age of five against polio—almost eradicating that disease.

**Security challenge**

The indicators of progress in Afghanistan are promising, but significant challenges remain. Afghan society is still predominantly rural in character, and the country’s democratic institutions, though developing, remain fragile and the struggle against extremists continues.

The level of violence has increased in Afghanistan in recent months as the Taliban and other terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, seek to chip away at the credibility of the Afghan government and prevent reconstruction taking place. Security beyond Kabul, particularly in the east and the south, is the worst since the Taliban fell. Suicide bombings have increased.

Australia, as the House will know, made a significant contribution to coalition operations in Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001. With the completion of that particular task, our forces returned home with the thanks of all Australians. It is worth noting, in light of the negative and opportunistic comments now being made by some in the opposition, that at the time that decision was made, the then Leader of the Opposition, Mr Crean—

Mr Rudd—Why didn’t you tell us the truth about what the Afghan government told you?

The SPEAKER—Order!

Mr HOWARD—warmly welcomed the government’s decision—

Mr Rudd—Why didn’t you tell us?

Mr HOWARD—arguing that—

Mr Rudd—You are disgraceful!

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Griffith is warned!

Mr HOWARD—it was a vindication of his call for Australia to fight terrorism closer to home, in our region, in Australia. They were the words of the then Leader of the Opposition welcoming the government’s decision to bring home our forces then, and it gives the lie to the opportunistic comments emanating, as is apparent from his interjection, from the member for Griffith at this time.

Following a reassessment of the security situation in Afghanistan by the coalition in 2005, the government decided to again send troops to Afghanistan. We now have about 200 personnel serving in the special forces task group in Afghanistan. This task group is providing reconnaissance, surveillance and other specialised capabilities to the coalition’s operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, who continue to threaten Afghanistan’s fragile stability. In dangerous circumstances, the special forces have, as always, done a magnificent job.

Two ADF Chinook helicopters and about 110 personnel are also currently operating in Afghanistan. This capability provides aeromedical evacuation, air mobility and logistic support to Australian troops and coalition partners. As I announced in May, the Chinooks will continue to operate in Afghanistan until April 2007 providing vital airlift support.

But the struggle against the Taliban and its fundamentalist allies is far from over. The international community, including Australia, continues to have a crucial role to play in assisting the Afghan government meet its security challenges. The security challenge is twofold: firstly, to provide a secure environment to allow Afghans to rebuild their society free from violence and extremism and, secondly, to strengthen Afghanistan’s institutions so that they can provide a stronger framework for democratisation, religious tolerance and economic growth.
Of course, the two elements are linked. Removal of the immediate dangers facing the Afghan people is essential, but so too is ensuring that Afghanistan has the infrastructure and institutions to support its democratically elected government and dealing with those who may attempt to threaten Afghanistan’s democracy and security in the future. It is because of this that the Australian government has committed an ADF reconstruction task force to support the Netherlands led provincial reconstruction team. The ADF will work with the Netherlands as part of phase III of the NATO led International Security Assistance Force expansion into southern Afghanistan.

This reconstruction task force will work in Oruzgan province, in southern Afghanistan, on reconstruction and community based projects with the aim of building the long-term viability of Afghan communities. The task force will undertake construction projects, provide project management skills and deliver trade training for the local population. These activities will ensure that the benefits of the deployment continue long after our personnel have returned.

The reconstruction task force will be in Afghanistan at the invitation of the government of Afghanistan. It will work in Oruzgan for a period of two years.

The reconstruction task force will perform a vital role in what is a dangerous environment. The government is aware of the risks faced by the Australian Defence Force in Afghanistan and is committed to ensuring that the reconstruction task force is fully equipped and resourced to conduct this highly important task.

After careful consideration, the government has decided to increase the size of the reconstruction task force from 240 personnel to 270. This will enhance the security, robustness and flexibility of the task force.

The government has also decided that the reconstruction task force deployment will include an infantry company group of about 120 personnel to provide enhanced force protection. After six months, the security situation in Oruzgan will be reviewed and the task force structure will be reconsidered in the light of that review.

The additional deployments will therefore bring the total reconstruction task force strength to approximately 400.

The task force will be made up of a number of elements—command, security and protection, engineering, administrative support and tactical intelligence services. The force will be equipped with a number of Bushmaster Infantry Mobility Vehicles and a number of Australian Light Armoured Vehicles or ASLAVs. The reconstruction task force will be drawn primarily from the 1st Brigade in Darwin and will be under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Mick Ryan.

The Australian task force will have its own headquarters and will operate under the national command of Australia’s joint task force in the Middle East area of operations. ADF units and personnel deployed in Afghanistan remain under Australian national command.

The reconstruction task force will work closely with the Netherlands and other NATO partners. The government is very pleased with Dutch planning and preparations and very impressed with the military capability of the Dutch forces that are being deployed to Afghanistan. We are very confident that we will be able to work closely with them.

Advance elements of the reconstruction task force will start to deploy into Afghanistan during this August to commence preparation of base facilities and logistic support infrastructure. These elements will be followed by the majority of the reconstruction task force deploying in September with the final elements expected to deploy in November of this year.

Afghanistan remains a dangerous place, and any military operation conducted there carries significant risks. The possibility of ADF casualties cannot be discounted. I ask all Australians to support the members of the Australian Defence Force who are serving their country by helping to create an environment of security and stability in Afghanistan. I understand, and I know all members of this House will understand, that this is a difficult time for them and their families and I ask all of you to keep these brave and dedicated men and women in your thoughts and prayers.

I present the following document:

*Australian Defence Force commitment to Afghanistan—Ministerial Statement, 9 August 2006*