Ms GILLARD (Lalor—Prime Minister) (3.28 pm)—by leave—A national government has no more important task than defending the nation, its people and their interests. That is why we take so seriously any decision to go to war. The war in Afghanistan is no different. Today I will answer five questions Australians are asking about the war:

- why Australia is involved in Afghanistan;
- what the international community is seeking to achieve and how;
- what Australia’s contribution is to this international effort—our mission;
- what progress is being made; and
- what the future is of our commitment in Afghanistan.

Of course, while our troops remain in the field, I must be responsible in how much I say. But in answering those questions, I want to be as frank as I can be with the Australian people. I want to paint a very honest picture of the difficulties and challenges facing our mission in Afghanistan. The new international strategy and the surge in international troops responded to a deteriorating security situation. This means more fighting; more violence. It risks more casualties. There will be many hard days ahead.

1. Why Australia is involved in Afghanistan

Australia has two vital national interests in Afghanistan—(1) to make sure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists, a place where attacks on us and our allies begin, and (2) to stand firmly by our alliance commitment to the United States, formally invoked following the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. Last month we marked the ninth anniversary of al-Qaeda’s September 11 attacks. Before September 11 al-Qaeda had a safe haven in Afghanistan under the Taliban government, a safe haven where they could recruit, indoctrinate, train, plan, finance and conspire to kill. On September 11, al-Qaeda murdered more than 3,000 people—thousands of Americans, citizens of our ally the United States, people from many other countries and 10 Australians, 10 of our own, never forgotten. And millions of people were terrified.

So we went to Afghanistan to make sure it would never again be a safe haven for al-Qaeda. We went with our friends and allies, as part of the international community. We went with the support of the United Nations. The war has put pressure on al-Qaeda’s core leadership—killed some, captured others, forced many into hiding and forced them all onto the defensive. Al-Qaeda has been dealt a severe blow.

But al-Qaeda remains a resilient and persistent network. Our successes against it in Afghanistan are only part of our effort against terrorism. We are working to counter the rise of affiliated groups in new areas, such as Somalia and Yemen, and violent extremism and terrorist groups in Pakistan. That is why we support efforts in those countries, with those governments, to target terrorist groups there as well.

The terror did not end on September 11. Since 2001, some 100 Australians have been killed in extremists’ attacks overseas. Among them: 88 Australians were killed in the Bali bombing in 2002 and four Australians were killed in the second Bali bombing in 2005. Our embassy has been bombed in Jakarta. In each of these cases, the terrorist groups involved had links to Afghanistan. If the insurgency in Afghanistan were to succeed, if the international community were to withdraw, then Afghanistan could once again become a safe haven for terrorists. Al-Qaeda’s ability to recruit, indoctrinate, train, plan, finance and conspire to kill would be far greater than it is today. And the propaganda victory for terrorists worldwide would be enormous. So the goal of Australia and the international community is clear: to deny terrorist networks a safe haven in Afghanistan.
2. What the international community is seeking to achieve: the new international strategy

The international community has been in Afghanistan a long time—nine years.

An incident having occurred in the gallery—

The SPEAKER—Order! The gallery will come to order.

Ms GILLARD—The Australian people are entitled to know what we are trying to achieve and when our troops can come home. Removing the Taliban government in 2001 and pursuing al-Qaeda in the years since has made a crucial difference in preventing terrorist attacks. From 2001 to mid-2006, US and coalition forces and Afghan troops fought relatively low levels of insurgent violence. The international force in Afghanistan was focused on a stabilisation mission. And there were no Australian units deployed in Afghanistan between December 2002 and September 2005. Through this period, few would now argue, US and international attention turned heavily to Iraq.

Australia’s substantial military involvement in Afghanistan resumed when the special forces task force was redeployed there for 12 months from September 2005 in support of international efforts to target key insurgents. Violence increased further in mid-2006, particularly in the east and the south. Due to significant intimidation and the absence of effective governance in many rural areas, some Afghans turned to the Taliban at this time.

The mission moved to a counter-insurgency focus. Australia’s contribution increased from October 2008 on as we took a growing role in training and mentoring in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan. However, the international counter-insurgency mission was not adequately resourced until 2009. In December 2009 President Obama announced a revised strategy for Afghanistan and a surge of 30,000 US troops. NATO has contributed more. So has Australia. I believe we now have the right strategy, an experienced commander in General Petraeus and the resources needed to deliver the strategy. The overarching goal of the new strategy is to enable transition—that is, to prepare the government of Afghanistan to take lead responsibility for its own security.

But our vital national interests, in preventing Afghanistan being a safe haven for terrorists who attack us and in supporting our ally, do not end with transition. Our aim is that the new international strategy sees a functioning Afghan state become able to assume responsibility for preventing the country from being a safe haven for terrorists. Australia’s key role in that mission, training and mentoring the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army in Uruzgan, is expected to take two to four years. And President Karzai has said the Afghan government expects the transition process to be complete by the end of 2014.

But let me be clear—this refers to the Afghan government taking lead responsibility for security. The international community will remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014. And Australia will remain engaged. There will still be a need for Australians in a supporting role. There will still be a role for training and other defence cooperation. The civilian-led aid and development effort will continue. And we will continue to promote Afghan-led re-integration of former insurgents who are willing to lay down their arms, turn their backs on terrorism and accept the Afghan constitution. We expect this support, training and development task to continue in some form through this decade at least.

Our mission in Afghanistan is not nation building. That is the task of the Afghan government and people. With international aid and development, we will continue to help where we can, but entrenching a functioning democratic Afghan state could be the work of a generation of Afghan people.

The new international strategy is comprehensive. It is focused on:

- Protecting the civilian population—conducting operations together with the Afghan National Security Forces to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency.
- Training, mentoring and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces—to enable them to assume a lead role in providing security.
- And facilitating improvements in governance and socioeconomic development—working with the Afghan authorities and the United Nations to strengthen institutions and deliver basic services.

The new strategy promotes efforts towards political reconciliation. It also includes a greater focus on partnership with Pakistan to address violent extremism in the border regions that threatens both Pakistan and Afghanistan. And the new international strategy is well resourced.
The international strategy is implemented by a combined civilian and military effort under the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF. This involves 47 troop-contributing nations, working alongside a host of international bodies and aid agencies, with and at the invitation of the Afghan government, and under a United Nations Security Council mandate—a mandate renewed unanimously just this month.

This coalition includes many longstanding friends and allies of Australia, including the United States and New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, Canada and France. Singapore and Korea, among other Asian countries, contribute. And several Muslim countries are involved, including Turkey, Jordan and Malaysia.

At the Asia-Europe meeting, I spent some time with Malaysia’s Prime Minister Najib. I was particularly struck by what he said was one of Malaysia’s most important contributions to Afghanistan: doctors—doctors who are Islamic women. They are able to work with Afghan women as few foreign medical professionals can.

We are part of a truly international effort in Afghanistan. To ensure the new international strategy can be delivered, last December the United States committed to a military and civilian surge in Afghanistan. The elements of this surge are now reaching full strength. Once fully deployed, this will take coalition force numbers to roughly 140,000. US forces on the ground have tripled since early 2009. The total force now has the resources required to deliver a comprehensive international strategy focused on counterinsurgency and designed to deliver transition.

3. Australia’s contribution to the international effort

Australia’s involvement makes a real difference in Afghanistan. The government supports the new international strategy and we have supported the surge. Australia has increased our troop contribution to Afghanistan by around 40 per cent in the past 18 months. We now have around 1,550 military personnel deployed in Afghanistan. Our military force is complemented by around 50 Australian civilians.

Earlier this year we took over leadership of the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Uruzgan to spearhead our civilian efforts, and increased our civilian commitment to Afghanistan by 50 per cent. In fact since 2001 we have committed over $740 million in development assistance to Afghanistan.

The main focus of the Australian effort in Afghanistan is directed towards Uruzgan province. It is a difficult job. Uruzgan province lies in southern Afghanistan. Around half a million people live there. It has roughly the population of Tasmania, across an area about one-third the size of that state. Nearly three-quarters of the land is dry and mountainous. Most of the people live in a few major valleys alongside the rivers. Subsistence agriculture and poppy farming are the main ways to earn a living. Water is a precious and highly contested resource and overall economic prospects are poor. School attendance is low, and illiteracy is high. In fact, the female literacy rate in Uruzgan is less than one per cent. For men it is only 10 per cent.

In Uruzgan, Australia’s soldiers and civilians are part of Combined Team-Uruzgan. Combined Team-Uruzgan is a new structure that brings the military, policing, political and development elements of our assistance under a single command. The team is commanded by a senior United States military officer, Colonel Creighton, and the senior civilian official is an Australian diplomat, Mr Bernard Philip. I met them both during my visit. We are lucky to have them.

The team is built around an Australian-US partnership, with contributions from a number of countries including New Zealand, Singapore and Slovakia. Combined Team-Uruzgan was established following the Dutch drawdown in August. We appointed our senior civilian representative to lead the Uruzgan Provincial Reconstruction Team and coordinate all ISAF civilian activities in the province.

The government has worked closely with the Dutch and US governments to ensure Australian soldiers and civilians have every support they need through the period of this handover. I welcome the Dutch government’s decision to extend their attack helicopter support. This is part of a broader ISAF contribution from which Australia and all contributing nations benefit. Australia’s contribution of two Chinook helicopters is part of this.

While in Afghanistan and Europe I met with: Colonel Creighton, commanding Combined Team-Uruzgan; General Petraeus, commanding the International Security Assistance Force; NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen; and the then caretaker Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Jan Balkenende. In each of these meetings, I emphasised the strength of my view, my government’s view, that continuing this support was necessary. So I was glad to receive confirmation of the Dutch decision after my return.
Our advice is that the planned arrangements for support following the full Dutch draw-down will see equivalent support to Australian forces. While lighter in absolute numbers, the American support available to our forces is agile and highly effective in pursuing our common mission. In addition, Afghan forces in Uruzgan have increased from around 3,000 to 4,000 in the past 18 months, meaning total troop numbers are larger now than when Dutch forces were present. As Prime Minister, I am satisfied that our troops have the right support. And, of course, this is a matter we keep under constant review.

In Uruzgan, Australia’s substantial military, civilian and development assistance focuses on:

- training and mentoring the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade to assume responsibility for the province’s security;
- building the capacity of the Afghan National Police to assist with civil policing functions;
- helping improve the Afghan government’s capacity to deliver core services and generate income-earning opportunities for its people.

As well as our efforts supporting transition in Uruzgan, Australia’s special forces are targeting the insurgent network in and around the province, disrupting insurgent operations and supply routes. While not part of Combined Team-Uruzgan, the Special Operations Task Group contributes to the province’s security. Our Special Air Service Regiment and our commando regiments are the equal of any special forces in the world. They will make a difference to the outcome of the war.

I know all this is very dangerous work for our soldiers and civilians. I give you my firm assurance that this government will listen to the professional advice and provide every necessary protection and support for our soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan. Over the past 12 months the government has announced more than $1.1 billion for additional force protection measures for Australian personnel. This includes upgraded body armour and rocket, artillery and mortar protection. The continuing and evolving threat posed to our troops by improvised explosive devices has seen us pursuing the right technologies to ensure our troops can detect these devices. Our troops are protected through hardened vehicles and other protective equipment. And, of course, we will keep these force protection measures under constant review.

I have spoken to Air Chief Marshal Houston, the Chief of the Defence Force. I have spoken to Major General Cantwell, our national commander on the ground. Their advice to the government is that, as we stand today, our force structure—the number of troops on the ground and the capabilities they have—is right for our mission in Afghanistan. As Prime Minister, I want to be very clear. The government receives the advice on this decision. But we take the responsibility for this decision.

There has also been some debate about the rules of engagement for our soldiers in Afghanistan. Of course I will not comment on the particular case which is subject to current proceedings. I do, however, want to respond to some of the public comments on the rules of engagement generally. Those rules of engagement are properly decided by the government. They are consistent with the guidance provided by General Petraeus. They are consistent with the International Security Assistance Force’s rules of engagement. They are consistent with the international law of armed conflict. As with troop levels, we take the advice, but we take the responsibility.

As Prime Minister, let me say I believe the rules of engagement are robust and sufficient for the mission in Uruzgan. The Australian Defence Force is a professional military force, respected in Australia and around the world. They operate under strict rules of engagement. That is what they do. Rules of engagement are central to the mission of the ADF. Strict rules of engagement are in the long-term interests of our troops in the field. But, more than that, they are the difference between us and our enemy. As much as anything, what marks us from them is precisely this. We respect innocent civilian life. I believe Australians would not have it any other way.

4. What progress is being made nationally

The new international strategy is in place. The elements of the surge to support the strategy are now reaching full strength. The hard work is underway. We will monitor events closely. The NATO Lisbon summit in November will assess further progress against the International Security Assistance Force’s strategy. Mapping out that strategy will be a key focus of the summit. Afghanistan is a war-ravaged country that faces immense development challenges.
While the challenges are huge, I can report tentative signs of progress to date. The Afghan National Security Forces are being mentored and trained. The Afghan National Army reached its October 2010 growth objective of 134,000 ahead of schedule, and the Afghan National Police is also ahead of its October 2010 goal of 109,000. The Afghan National Army is becoming increasingly capable and supporting coalition operations more effectively. Nearly 85 per cent of the army is now fully partnered with ISAF forces for operations in the field. Afghan forces are now in the lead in Kabul.

The ability of the Afghan government to provide services to its people is being built. In primary education, enrolments have increased from one million in 2001 to approximately six million today. Some two million of these enrolments are girls. There were none in 2001. Nothing better symbolises the fall of the Taliban than these two million Afghan girls learning to read. In basic health services, infant mortality decreased by 22 per cent between 2002 and 2008 and immunisation rates for children are now in the range of 70 to 90 per cent. In vital economic infrastructure, almost 10,000 kilometres of road has been rehabilitated and 10 million Afghans now have access to telecommunications, compared to only 20,000 in 2001.

With the increase in troop levels, the fight is being taken to the insurgency. Insurgents are being challenged in areas, particularly in the south and east of the country, where they previously operated with near-impunity. Indeed, much of the increase in violence this year is attributable to the fact that there is a larger international and Afghan presence pursuing the insurgency more aggressively.

In Afghan politics, efforts are being made to convince elements amongst the insurgents to put down their arms, to renounce violence and adopt a path back to constructive and purposeful civilian life. And although we know democracy remains rudimentary and fragile, Afghanistan has a free press and a functioning parliament. Last month parliamentary elections took place—elections with real and widely publicised problems—but elections did take place. And the international community is working closely with Pakistan. Stability in Pakistan, and the uprooting of extremist networks that have established themselves in the border regions and terrorised both countries, is essential to stability in Afghanistan.

Let me turn more specifically to the progress of Australia’s mission in Uruzgan. Our Mentoring Task Force is training the 4th Brigade of the Afghan national army. The 4th Brigade, as our commanders on the ground told me during my visit, is proving to be an increasingly professional force, fighting better and becoming more capable at conducting complex operations. The brigade’s recent efforts in successfully completing a series of resupply missions between Tarin Kot and Kandahar has demonstrated improving capability. Since late last year, they have moved from observing and participating, to planning and leading these activities. The brigade also recently provided security for parliamentary elections in the province.

Our civilians are making a difference in Uruzgan. Our AFP contingent has trained almost 700 Afghan national police at the police training centre for the province. It has also contributed to the successful targeting of corrupt officials and the tackling of major crimes. We are helping build local services. In Tarin Kot township, business is flourishing at the local bazaar. There are two bank branches, crime is down, and the town is becoming a genuine provincial trading hub. I visited our trade training school on the Tarin Kot base, which is turning out 60 graduates each quarter in basic trades such as plumbing and carpentry, most of whom then contribute to reconstruction and development in the province.

Our aid to Uruzgan is increasing to $20 million in 2010-11. Already we have supported 78 school reconstruction projects and the disbursement of over 950 microfinance loans. We have helped refurbish the Tarin Kot hospital and assisted the rehabilitation and operation of 11 health centres and 165 health posts. We are constructing a new building for the Department of Energy and Water, and building a bridge crossing to connect to the Tarin Kot-Chora Road. Our civilians are working to build capacity within the provincial administration and support the reach of central government programs into Uruzgan.

We are taking the fight to the insurgency. On the C130 flight into Afghanistan, a map of Uruzgan spread out on his knees, our national commander Major General John Cantwell briefed me on our work in the field. Valley by valley, we are gradually making a difference to security. He told me about the agriculture-rich Mirabad Valley, a strategically important region with a history of violence in recent years, just to the east of the provincial capital Tarin Kot. Mirabad was dominated by the Taliban for the last seven years. It was a place where the provincial government had no influence. But over the last two years the Afghan security forces, in partnership with the Australian, Dutch and now US forces, have methodically expanded their permanent presence into the valley with the establishment of three patrol bases. Insurgents, clearly threatened by the growing reach of the Afghan national
army, attacked the bases unsuccessfully a number of times during construction. Now the bases, combined with two nearby outposts, will allow the Afghan national army to better protect Mirabad’s communities. Mirabad is far from a success story yet. Progress in development, education and democracy is yet to begin. But in the specific mission we have given our forces in Uruzgan—to train the Afghan national army to take the lead in security—we see progress being made. That is the beginning of transition.

General Cantwell also told me about Gizab. It is an isolated township in the far north of Uruzgan province that had long been a Taliban safe haven, and one which the Taliban used as a base to launch attacks against the Chora district. Earlier this year, in April, the local community rose in revolt against the Taliban and, with the assistance of Afghan and Australian forces, captured the local Taliban commander and expelled the insurgents. Gizab now has a local police force and a new district governor, and the provincial government is beginning to make its presence felt. Again, it is a place where progress is painstaking and incremental, where there will be new setbacks and where consolidation is needed. Again though, it is a place where the seeds of transition are being sewn.

I have shared some positive stories about the beginnings of transition. There are many stories which are not so positive. We should be realistic about the situation. Progress, even in security, is highly variable across the province. Any gains come off a low base. Any advances made are fragile. The challenges that face Uruzgan, and Afghanistan, are immense. But I do believe we should be cautiously encouraged.

5. The future of our commitment to Afghanistan

Australia’s national interests in Afghanistan are clear. There must be no safe haven for terrorists. We must stand firmly by our ally, the United States. There is a new international strategy in place—focused on counterinsurgency, designed to enable transition. Australia’s commitment to Afghanistan is not open-ended. We, along with the rest of our partners in the International Security Assistance Force, want to bring our people home as soon as possible. The Afghan people want to stand on their own. But achieving our mission is critical to achieving both these things.

The international community and the Afghan government are agreed on a clear pathway forward. The Kabul conference in July welcomed the Afghan government’s determination that the Afghan National Security Forces should lead and conduct military operations in all provinces by the end of 2014. At the upcoming NATO/ISAF Summit in Lisbon the international community and the Afghan government will assess progress against the international strategy. Mapping out the strategy for transition to Afghan leadership and responsibility will be a key focus of the summit.

Transition will not be a one-size-fits-all approach. It will be conditions based. It will happen faster in some places and slower in others. It will be a graduated process, not an event or a date. There is no ‘transition day’. International forces will be thinned out as Afghan forces step up and assume responsibility. In some places the transition process will be subject to setbacks. We need to be prepared for this. My firm view is that for transition to occur in an area the ability of Afghan forces to take the lead in security in that area must be irreversible. Our government will state this as a simple fact in discussions before and at Lisbon. We must not transition out, only to transition back in.

In conclusion

Australia will do everything in our power to ensure Afghanistan is never again a safe haven for terrorists. Australia will stand firm in our commitment to our alliance with the United States. The international community understands this. Our enemies understand this too. I believe that the new international strategy, backed by the surge in military and civilian forces, is sound. Protecting the Afghan people, training the Afghan security forces, building the Afghan government’s capacity, working with the international community, Australia is making a real difference in Afghanistan. Delivering on the international strategy in Uruzgan province—and supporting transition in the country as a whole.

Australia will not abandon Afghanistan but we must be very realistic about the future. Transition will take some years. We will be engaged through this decade at least. Good government in the country may be the work of an Afghan generation. There will be many hard days ahead, but I am cautiously encouraged by what I have seen.

I believe this debate is an important one for our people and our parliament. That is why today I announce as Prime Minister that I will make a statement like this one to the House each year that our Afghanistan involvement
continues. This will be in addition to the continuing ministerial statements by the Minister for Defence in each session of the parliament.

Attending funerals for Australian soldiers is the hardest thing I have ever done. And it is nowhere near as hard for me as it is for the families. There is nothing I can say to change their long walk through life without a loved one. A loved one, lost for our sake. In the ultimate, I can promise them only this: we will remember them. Their names are written on the walls of the War Memorial in Canberra. Their names are written in the walls of our hearts. When I think of these Australians we have lost in Afghanistan, I think of the Australian poet James McAuley’s words:

I never shrank with fear

But fought the monsters of the lower world

Clearing a little space, and time, and light

For men to live in peace.

I know the professional soldiers of the Australian Defence Force are proud people. They offer their lives for us. They embrace wartime sacrifice as their highest duty. In return, we owe them our wisdom. Our highest duty is to make wise decisions about war. I look forward to the deliberations of this parliamentary debate on Afghanistan. I hope we do our duty as well as they do theirs. I present my statement, entitled No safe haven.