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Speaker O'CONNOR, Brendan, MP	Question No.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Gorton—Minister for Home Affairs, Minister for Justice and Minister for Privacy and Freedom of Information) (10.35 am)—I would like to begin by acknowledging the bravery of the Australian troops, the police and the civilian officers who have served in Afghanistan since 2002. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the 21 fallen Australian soldiers and extend my condolences to their families. These soldiers have served their nation with great distinction and we honour their memory. I also wish to acknowledge and pay tribute to those wounded in this war.

As the Prime Minister yesterday and the Minister for Defence today have stated clearly, Australia has two vital national interests in Afghanistan: to make sure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists and to firmly stand by our alliance commitments to the United States. The primacy of Australia's long-term security interests are inherent in the decision to participate in the war in Afghanistan. We are there together with 46 other countries forming the International Security Assistance Force, known as ISAF, and operating under a United Nations mandate. This is therefore an international effort to stabilise Afghanistan and to prevent it from again becoming a safe haven for terrorists. To this end, a combined military and civilian effort is necessary to help build the capability of Afghan national security forces so that they can take responsibility for managing the security of Afghanistan. We are also supporting governance and development efforts that will strengthen the capacity of the Afghan government to deliver critical services.

The purpose of the Australian military and civilian mission is clear and it is resolute. It is to help build an Afghan military and policing capacity able to manage Afghanistan's security, guard against violent extremism and avoid a return to the conditions that existed before 2001. This will also help protect the Afghan people, who yearn for peace and prosperity but for too long have been held back by protracted war and instability. The fear of terrorists or insurgent violence has, over the years, created both bloody and psychological obstacles to the ability of many Afghans to live a decent life. The Australian Federal Police are making an important contribution to Afghanistan by mentoring, training and developing the Afghan National Police. This is a vital element of the international mission to build stability, establish the rule of law and prepare the government of Afghanistan to take lead responsibility for its own security and policing.

As part of this historic parliamentary debate, I wish to highlight the importance of the contribution of the men and women of the Australian Federal Police to Australia's civilian effort in Afghanistan and, so it is more widely understood, to outline both the challenges and the progress that has been made since the AFP presence commenced in 2007. My insight into this effort was greatly enhanced by the privilege of visiting Afghanistan in May this year. I was able to personally thank the AFP contingent for their good work and to hear firsthand of local conditions and challenges that confront the military and civilian mission. I was able to learn from them of the Australian troop bravery and the bravery of the Afghan people in their quest to overcome the Taliban insurgency.

On my visit to Tarin Kowt an AFP officer recounted an extraordinary story of a woman currently serving as an officer of the Afghan National Police elsewhere in the country. The woman had been preceded in her role by two other female officers. The first woman to occupy the role had been killed. She was not killed as part of her general policing duties but deliberately targeted and killed by those who do not wish to see an Afghan woman in the workforce, let alone as a serving police officer. This woman was then replaced by another female police officer who was also threatened and subsequently killed. The third woman to take up the role had also been threatened with death but, even knowing of the dangers, she remained in the role. Her courage, quite simply, is astonishing.

Without security in daily life there can be no enduring quality of life. Without a capable local police force, criminals and terrorists will prosper. In too many parts of Afghanistan the effects of the insurgency have restricted the ability of women and girls to participate fully in public life, including to work or study. Without advances in the fundamental rights of men and women there can be no true civil society. In collaboration with international and Australian partners, the AFP is working on the ground to support the development of police and law enforcement institutions that will provide the Afghan people with that basic security so necessary to human wellbeing.

The AFP commitment to Afghanistan began small with an initial deployment of just four personnel in October 2007. Two of these members mentored Afghan National Police as part of the US led Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan, while the other two members provided training and mentoring support to the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan. The AFP commitment grew to eight members between October and December 2008 with an emphasis on counternarcotics. Operation Contago, as this mission was called, saw AFP members deployed to criminal intelligence and strategic advisory roles within Regional Command South which included Oruzgan Province.

In April 2009 the government announced a refocus of the strategic objectives in Afghanistan and, in support of this, an additional 10 Australian Federal Police personnel were deployed. This deployment marked the birth of the AFP's second mission to Afghanistan, namely, Operation Synergy, under which members acted as advisers to ANP training staff at the provincial training centre at Camp Holland, Tarin Kowt. The increased civilian commitment to Afghanistan was in response to the renewed ISAF strategy which increased priority for protecting key population centres and implementing a more effective civilian partnership with the Afghan government. The AFP, together with their colleagues from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID and Defence, form part of the provincial reconstruction team—under Combined Team Oruzgan,—which coordinates all ISAF civilian activities in the province.

DFAT officials build relationships with key tribal leaders and political actors and assist the coordination of Australia's whole-of-government efforts. AusAID development advisers engage with the Afghan government to design and monitor a growing suite of stabilisation and development activities focused on health, education, agriculture, water and basic infrastructure. The ADF contribution includes a force protection element as well as personnel for the trade training school and the ADF managed works team.

In July this year, in further keeping with Australia's commitment to increase its civilian contribution to Afghanistan, operations Contago and Synergy were amalgamated into a single and larger mission, Operation Illuminate. Operation Illuminate provides for the deployment of 28 AFP capacity development and training specialists to various posts throughout the country with a primary focus on Oruzgan province as part of ISAF's Combined Team Oruzgan. The ISAF that Australia is part of has a clear strategy. It is to protect the civilian population; train, mentor and equip the Afghan National Security forces and the Afghan National Police to enable them to assume a lead role in providing security; and facilitate improvements in governance and socioeconomic development by working with the Afghan authorities to strengthen institutions, deliver basic services and generate income-earning opportunities for its people.

The AFP mission is a critical enabler to this strategy and has clear goals in Afghanistan, namely to help build a viable Afghan police force and to help build Afghan civil society. The first goal is being met directly by the training and mentoring the AFP undertakes with the Afghan National Police. The second goal is being served through the less publicised AFP contribution to the international counternarcotics effort in Afghanistan and through the collaborative work it undertakes with its Australian civilian counterparts. Working to build police capability both in front line community policing and in combating organised crime is a key goal of the Australian government's capacity-building effort. Young girls will fear going to school, women will not be able to participate in the workforce and young men will not be able to avoid the lure of violent fundamentalism without an effective Afghan police service that can ensure safety, protect the population, combat criminality and allow legitimate trade and commerce to prosper.

The Afghan National Police face immense challenges. Policing in Afghanistan is limited by a range of factors, including a low education base and very low literacy levels, poor police training, inadequate equipment, poor governance, tribal affiliations and infiltration by criminal or insurgent elements. This also results in lack of public confidence. Our first challenge is to address this lack of public confidence. Our second challenge is that some ANP officers are beholden to corruption and in some cases they are drug dependent. The third significant challenge centres on access to justice. Women in Oruzgan province, where the AFP is mainly based, have almost no access to justice and suffer from poor knowledge of their rights. There are only three female ANP officers in Tarin Kowt province, but this is three more than 12 months ago. In the last three years the AFP have trained a total of 682 ANP officers. These officers are being deployed across the country. While efforts to build public confidence will be slow, we are seeing real progress. In addition to the basic police training, the AFP has also provided advanced investigations training to 143 personnel at the Afghan Major Crimes Task Force in Kabul and it is anticipated that an additional 1,000 ANP will be provided with basic or advanced investigations training next year.

Growth of the Afghan National Police is ahead of schedule, with the ANP having reached its October target of 109,000 personnel three months ahead of schedule. The Afghan Minister of Interior's goal for the Afghan National Police is that within five years the people of Afghanistan will consider their police to be a valued institution which is honest, accountable, brave, impartial and striving to create a secure and lawful society. Whilst that may be hard to imagine now, growth of the Afghan National Police is ahead of schedule, with the ANP on target to hit its 2011 target of 134,000 officers. While the challenges the Afghan National Police force face are enormous, the reality is that the gains we are making by training and building local police capability will be lasting gains.

The AFP's secondary but significant effort concerns counternarcotics. The AFP also works to influence the development of strategic policy through involvement and placement in local and multilateral fora. Nationally the AFP participates in the senior police advisory group which provides guidance and advice to the Afghan Ministry of Interior. Regionally the AFP participates in Afghan national security forces development cell, which provides Regional Command South in Kandahar with direction and advice on governance and structural reform of the ANP. Locally, through its contribution to Combined-Team Oruzgan, the AFP shapes, influences and directs police reform in Oruzgan by coordinating training programs and ensuring that all localised training is in line with national programs.

Like its international partners, the AFP recognises that Afghanistan's narcotics industry poses a major threat to stabilisation efforts by fuelling the Taliban-led insurgency and undermining governance. The impact of the narcotics industry, however, does not stop at the Afghan border. Studies estimate that as much as 90 per cent of global opium production occurs in Afghanistan. The adverse socioeconomic impacts of the narcotics industry extend far beyond Afghanistan's borders, including to Australia. While it is difficult to state precisely how much of the heroin entering Australia comes from Afghanistan, the fact that such a significant proportion of the world's opium begins its journey in Afghanistan has a clear consequence for Australia and it is why we are dedicated to the eradication of opium cultivation and associated crimes.

Through mentoring and training, AFP members and coalition partners work to develop an Afghan national investigations capability to target high-level corruption, kidnapping and organised crime, including drug trafficking. In addition to 21 Oruzgan based members, like other Australian government agencies the AFP supports its Oruzgan effort through the strategic placement of members in Kabul, the hub of national police and decision making, and Kandahar, the headquarters of Regional Command South. To this end, four AFP members in Kabul and three in Kandahar are working to effectively shape and influence national policing strategies and policies in Oruzgan province.

One sign of the AFP's effectiveness is that a number of the Afghan National Police trainers who have been trained by the AFP are now working at the provincial training centre in Oruzgan, providing training to Afghan police recruits. ANP officers who had received training under the AFP program show increased adherence to practices learned following completion of training. In addition, there have been clear quantitative improvements such as higher attendance rates, adherence to uniform standards and retention of staff. Although these achievements may sound small, we recognise that building a local police force is a challenging endeavour, and they are in fact significant when considered within the social and occupational context to which I referred earlier.

The AFP, Australian partners and international partners will continue to promote the rule of law through justice and security reform. Like AusAID, the AFP continues to rely on the provision of security by the ADF. The longevity of Australia's civil commitment is therefore intricately tied to the training and mentoring of the Afghan National Army. This gets to the very heart of the relationship between the rule of law and the development of a civil society. Without security, there is no development. Without an ongoing international effort to support the challenge of local police reforms, Afghanistan will continue to be inhospitable to its citizens and pose a continuing threat to the global community.

The strategic objective of ISAF is to deny extremists and terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan. The effort in Afghanistan is about simultaneously helping the government of Afghanistan take responsibility for its own security and defending Australia's security interests. Our support, training and development are critical enablers in achieving these objectives. This government is committed to assisting the Afghan government to assume lead responsibility for governance and the delivery of basic services, including policing, within a reasonable time frame.

There does remain a significant challenge, and we need to be realistic about the speed and consistency of progress. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, 'we should be cautiously encouraged' by progress to date. Helping to build an effective and legitimate Afghan national police force is now part of the core of our efforts in Afghanistan. Without security there can be no flourishing of a civil society. Without freedom of movement there can be no economic development, no access to services and no opportunity to be transformed by education. Without stability, people are denied their fundamental right to participate in social, economic and political life. Put simply, the absence of security and stability makes it impossible to build a safe and functioning nation. These are not easy tasks, but they are tasks that we can and should continue to support.

I never had an opportunity to ask that Afghan police officer why, despite knowing that the two before her had died, she was willing to risk her life. But I can imagine her response. Until that police officer and other women like her are no longer targeted because of their gender and because they want a peaceful and just society, we still have work to do. The Gillard government's primary responsibility is to defend and secure Australia and its citizens. Helping to develop the rule of law in Afghanistan is consistent with this objective, and the Afghan people deserve no less.