Mr STEPHEN SMITH (Perth—Minister for Defence) (5.08 pm)—As I said during last year’s parliamentary debate on Afghanistan, ‘There can be no more serious endeavour for any country or government than to send its military forces into conflict.’ That is why it is appropriate that Australia’s commitment to Afghanistan is the subject of ongoing parliamentary and public scrutiny. As part of this, the government and I are committed to providing regular reports and updates on Afghanistan, including to the parliament.

My report on this occasion includes the recent NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) defence ministers meeting in Brussels, which I attended earlier this month.

Why we are there

It is worth reminding ourselves why we are in Afghanistan and what our goal is. The government’s strong view is that it is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan, not just with our alliance partner the United States but also with 46 other members of the international community acting under a United Nations mandate.

Australia has a responsibility to help stare down international terrorism and ensure stability in Afghanistan. Our 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. To achieve that goal we must help prepare the Afghan government to take lead responsibility for providing security for the Afghan people. We must stabilise the security situation and mentor and train the Afghan security forces.

Progress

There are signs that the international community’s recent troop surge, combined now with a strong military and political strategy, has reversed the Taliban’s momentum. This progress is incremental and hard-won, but it is apparent. As International Security Assistance Force Commander General Petraeus told the US Congress on 15 March, districts west of Kandahar city—the birthplace of the Taliban—have recently been cleared by ISAF and Afghan troops.

In recent months, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of weapons and explosive caches turned in and found. Around 700 former Taliban have now officially reintegrated with Afghan authorities, with some 2,000 more in various stages of the reintegration process. But I do urge caution. United States Defense Intelligence Agency head, General Ron Burgess, has cautioned that ‘the security situation remains fragile and heavily dependent on ISAF support’ and that the Taliban ‘remains resilient and will be able to threaten US and international goals in Afghanistan through 2011.’

We must expect pushback from the Taliban, particularly in areas recently claimed by ISAF and Afghan troops, when this year’s fighting season commences in April or May. We do need to steel ourselves for a tough fighting season. United States Secretary of Defense Gates was correct when he said in Afghanistan on 8 March that the coming spring and summer fighting seasons would present an ‘acid test’ of whether our gains could hold. As well, the international community must continue to press President Karzai and his government to deliver on his undertakings at the London conference in January 2010 to improve governance, pursue electoral reform, take effective anti-corruption and anti-narcotics measures and create social and economic opportunities for all the Afghan people, including Afghan women and girls.

As United States National Intelligence Director Jim Clapper advised the United States Congress recently, which he repeated to me when I met him in Australia last week, there remains concern about the ability of the Afghan government to deliver on governance. Without progress on governance, security gains will remain fragile.

International commitment

Leaders of the 48 ISAF countries met at the Lisbon summit last November and resolved that a conditions based transition to Afghan led security begin this year, 2011, with the aspiration of completing transition by the end of
2014. NATO and ISAF members also made an important long-term commitment to support Afghanistan beyond the transition of security responsibility. Good progress has been made since the Lisbon summit, with the first Joint Afghan-NATO Inteqal Board report on transition and the development of ISAF Transition Implementation Principles.

Australia endorses the first Inteqal report and its recommendation to begin transition, as the Brussels NATO-ISAF defence ministers meeting also did, and as announced by President Karzai on 22 March, which I will refer to shortly. The Inteqal report’s commitment to coordinate transition planning with both Afghan and ISAF stakeholders will ensure all partners are consulted throughout the transition process, including on future tranches for transition. It is essential to get this right, to ensure the sustainability of the transition process. As the Prime Minister said at the Lisbon summit, there is no point transitioning out only to have to transition back in later.

The ISAF Transition Implementation Principles emphasise a shared, long-term commitment, a properly resourced mission, and investment and reinvestment in training. I attended the recent NATO-ISAF defence ministers’ meeting in Brussels. Building upon the Lisbon summit, this meeting delivered the message that ISAF partners are committed to achieving a conditions based, irreversible and sustainable transition of security responsibility to Afghan National Security Forces. Working hand in hand with the Afghan government, ISAF intends to complete the handing over of security responsibility to Afghan authorities by the end of 2014. This is an achievable task, and it has already started.

**Transition**

We must remember that transition will be a process rather than a single event. It will take place at different times in districts and in provinces only as security circumstances permit. The pace of this transition will depend on conditions on the ground, in particular the operational readiness of the Afghan National Security Forces.

On 22 March President Karzai announced the first provinces and districts to transition to Afghan authority. These include the provinces of Bamyan (all districts), Panjshir (all districts), and Kabul (all districts except Surobi) and the districts of Mazar-e-Sharif (Balkh province), Herat (Herat province), Lashkar Gah (Helmand province) and Mehtar Lam (Laghman province).

This first tranche of provinces and districts identified for transition has been selected on the basis of an assessment that their security, governance and development conditions are sufficient to commence transition. The decision to commence transition was made by the Afghan government based on the assessment and recommendation of the Joint Afghan-NATO Inteqal Board. In these areas the Afghan security forces have been assessed as capable of taking on additional security tasks with less assistance from ISAF.

**Progress in Oruzgan**

Transition is what Australia is working towards in Oruzgan province with the Afghan National Security Forces and our partners in Combined Team-Oruzgan, the United States, New Zealand, Singapore and Slovakia. There was never an expectation that Oruzgan would be in the first tranche of districts and provinces to begin transition. We believe the Oruzgan transition process can occur over the next three years, between 2012 and 2014.

Over the past six months, the Afghan National Security Forces and Combined Team-Oruzgan have expanded security over areas previously controlled by the Taliban. This has been made possible in part through the transfer of several patrol bases from ISAF or Afghan National Army control to the Afghan National Police, which has in turn allowed the Afghan National Army to move into contested areas.

The increasingly competent Afghan National Security Forces, with the support of Combined Team-Oruzgan, are covering more and more ground, extending the reach of the Afghan government throughout the province. Australian mentored Afghan forces are expanding the security footprint from the Tarin Kowt bowl to the Mirabad Valley in the east, Deh Rawud in the west, and north through the Baluchi Valley into Chora. Our task now is to ensure that this progress in security, development and governance and the gains we have made are consolidated and not reversed.

**Progress in training the Afghan National Security Forces**

As part of the overarching transition strategy in Afghanistan, Australia is committed to mentoring and training the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army (ANA) in Oruzgan province to enable them to take on responsibility
for security arrangements in the province between 2012 and 2014. Australia’s assessment of the 4th Brigade’s capacity is that it is effective with assistance and increasingly capable.

A further infantry Kandak has now arrived in Oruzgan to bring the 4th Brigade to full strength. While this 6th infantry Kandak lacks experience, it is trained and equipped for initial tasks, has strong leadership and is a strong graduate of the Consolidated Fielding Centre in Kabul. The 6th Kandak is currently mentored by US forces.

The next rotation of Australian forces—Australian Task Force 9—will be deployed into Oruzgan province in June, and will take on the additional task of mentoring the newly formed 6th Infantry Kandak of the 4th Brigade. As we hand over patrol bases and establish new ones, and see ANA Kandaks conduct more unaccompanied activities, Australian forces can be released for additional training and mentoring tasks, including responsibility for additional ANA forces in Oruzgan. As the Kandaks become more capable and self-reliant, Australian forces can move into an enabling and overwatch role.

**Support for our troops**

Our troops and personnel in Afghanistan are performing extremely well in dangerous circumstances on a daily basis. Australians are proud of the fact that our troops have a well-deserved reputation for their effectiveness and their conduct. Afghan government ministers—including Defence Minister Wardak, whom I met again in Brussels—and ISAF Commander General Petraeus praise the work and reputation of Australians deployed in Afghanistan, including in their engagement with local Afghan communities.

The support and protection of Australian personnel in Afghanistan is, rightly, our highest priority. The provision of new capability is part of the package of initiatives worth $1.6 billion that the government committed to, following the Force Protection Review effected by my predecessor Minister Faulkner, and underlines the commitment to provide our troops with the best available equipment.

Of the 48 recommendations made by the review, 42 are now complete or on track. They include enhanced counter IED measures, better armour and heavier calibre weapons for our Bushmasters, the placement of medics with each platoon operating in Afghanistan and the introduction of 1,000 sets of lighter combat armour.

**US related allegations**

Recent media reports of allegations of pre-meditated murder of Afghan civilians by a small number of US soldiers are deeply disturbing. The allegations were first reported last year, at which time the United States launched a criminal investigation into the allegations. Criminal charges were laid following the investigation and are now the subject of United States court martial proceedings.

The United States Army has apologised for the distress the terrible incident and the publicity has caused, saying they stand ‘in stark contrast to the discipline, professionalism and respect that have characterised our soldiers’ performance during nearly 10 years of sustained operations in Afghanistan’.

In this context, the United States Army has restated its commitment to the ‘adherence to the law of war and the humane and respectful treatment of combatants, noncombatants, and the dead’ and acknowledged that ‘when allegations of wrongdoing by soldiers surface, to include the inappropriate treatment of the dead, they are fully investigated; soldiers who commit offences will be held accountable as appropriate’. Australia very firmly believes that strict adherence to rules of engagement is essential on the battlefield.

**Rule of law and the protection of civilians**

The rule of law is an essential basis for international relations and for national security policy. The force of international law, and the protection it offers the Afghan people, clearly distinguishes the international effort in Afghanistan from the actions of the Taliban and its associates. On the ground, international humanitarian law—including the principles of military necessity, proportionality, distinction and discrimination—provides the framework for Australia and ISAF’s rules of engagement.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has built a reputation over the years for professionalism and compliance with such rules of engagement. Australian forces take all possible steps to ensure their operations do not endanger the lives of civilians. We have prided ourselves on our high standards and we have a well-regarded international reputation for doing so. When, for example, there are incidents involving civilians, they are always investigated.
In that context, the Registrar of Military Justice has convened a general court martial to try charges against two of the three Australian Defence Force members relating to an incident in Afghanistan on 12 February 2009. Pretrial directions hearings for the court martial are scheduled to commence soon in Sydney and the trial has been set down for 11 July 2011.

Casualties

It has already been a difficult year for the Australian Defence Force. This year, Australia has lost two more brave soldiers. Corporal Richard Atkinson was killed in an improvised explosive device strike on 2 February. Sapper Jamie Larcombe died as a result of gunshot wounds sustained during an engagement with insurgents on 19 February. Our thoughts continue to be with the families, friends and colleagues of Corporal Atkinson and Sapper Larcombe, as they too come to terms with their great loss. These soldiers served their country well and will always be remembered.

We have lost 23 fine Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. As well, four Australian soldiers have been wounded in Afghanistan this year, with 168 ADF personnel wounded in action since 2002. Our thoughts are also with our wounded and their families. The sacrifice our men and women make is great, as is the appreciation of our nation and our people. Our forces face a resilient insurgency, who, in coming months, will seek to retake ground. In this environment, we must steel ourselves for the possibility of further casualties, of further fatalities. Despite these tragic losses and the challenges ahead, Australia remains resolute.

Conclusion

We are seeing progress in Afghanistan. This progress is fragile. The Taliban know they need to regain momentum, so we can expect them to fight back. The coming fighting season will be tough. As we prepare for it, we are also mindful of the civilian toll of the war. We can expect high-profile attacks by Afghan insurgents to continue and to increase, like the 21 February suicide attack in Kunduz province that killed around 30 Afghans and wounded 36 others. An increasing number of civilian casualties are caused by insurgent attacks and the deliberate targeting of civilians or tactics which result in civilian casualties. These attacks are aimed at undermining Afghan and international confidence in the progress that is being made on security, governance and development and on transition.

Transition has commenced with President Karzai’s announcement earlier this week of the first provinces and districts to transition to Afghan authority. Transition must be conditions based and irreversible. Transition can not be and must not be a signal to premature withdrawal.

The international community must continue to provide a long-term commitment to Afghanistan. That is why Australia has made clear it expects to maintain a presence in Afghanistan after our current training mission in Oruzgan has concluded, either in further specialised training, overwatch or through civilian capacity building and development assistance. Australia is confident that the international community has the right strategy for putting Afghanistan in a position to take responsibility for security matters and prevent it from again becoming a haven for international terrorists. This military and political strategy and the required resources are now, at long last, in place and delivering hard-won progress. We see this in Oruzgan as we see it elsewhere in Afghanistan. Australia stands firm in its continuing commitment to Afghanistan.

I present a paper providing more detail on Afghanistan and I ask leave of the House to move a motion to enable the member for Fadden to speak for 17 minutes.

Leave granted.

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the member for Fadden speaking in reply to my statement for a period not exceeding 17 minutes.

Question agreed to.

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—on indulgence—Before the member starts, I apologise to him in advance. I need to go to a cabinet committee meeting. I will of course very carefully read his contribution. I thank him for his indulgence.