



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MOTIONS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

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Page 3348
Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (21:21): Recent events have once again brought into sharp focus our role in Afghanistan, and I do not think anyone here is under the illusion that our task there is simple. Restoring stability to the nation of Afghanistan is a complex and long process and, yes, the incidents we have heard so much about lately do make our mission more challenging. I know Afghan President Hamid Karzai has, in the face of these unforgivable circumstances, made a number of statements in the last few weeks. But the important thing to remember here is that there is a commitment in place that has not been broken. President Karzai has spoken to US President Barack Obama, and both have recommitted to the strategy made by international partners at the Lisbon summit, where it was agreed to hand over the lead on security to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. Australia, too, remains firmly committed to this strategy.

We are continuing our important work in Oruzgan where we are training and mentoring the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army. More importantly, we are confident we can transition to Afghan-led security responsibility in the Oruzgan province by 2014—perhaps even earlier. Following that milestone, Australia will continue to have a role in Afghanistan, possibly through institutional training, a special forces presence, military advisory roles, capacity building and development assistance.

This transition process is extremely important to the future of Afghanistan and of the Middle East more generally. For the transition to be successful, the Afghan national security forces need to assume their security responsibility on a sustainable and irreversible basis. This will require some level of continued support from international forces. To withdraw would put this strategy in jeopardy.

Transition is a long process, which the Gillard government is committed to. We want to ensure Afghanistan has as orderly a transition as possible. We need to remember why we are in Afghanistan. We are there at the request of the government of Afghanistan and we operate as part of the United Nations mandated International Security Assistance Force. There are 49 other members of the ISAF who are working alongside us and we are making good progress. We have helped build up the Afghan national security forces from around 192,000 in late 2009 to around 300,000 today. While much of the focus on Afghanistan is on the military, one must not forget the broader mission we are engaged in. We are doing very important work in Afghanistan. We are doing good work.

I know this because in May last year I visited Afghanistan as part of the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and I saw firsthand the important work Australia is doing. I gained a greater understanding of what we are there to do—to not only combat terrorism and stabilise Afghanistan but also nurture and grow much more fundamental human rights within the country. I gained a greater understanding of the great work being done by our serving men and women. Australia has done a lot of good in Afghanistan. We have helped build infrastructure—we have constructed training centres, roads, airfields and mosques. Better roads mean food can get to market and local economies can prosper. Alternative crops have been introduced to help stop the country's addiction to the poppy trade and we are giving young people skills so they can help build up their nation.

We have seen the beginnings of an education revolution within Afghanistan, where girls are going to school and getting an education for the very first time. Six million children now go to school in Afghanistan and we are still counting—and one-third of them are girls. In 2001, the number of children in school was around one million and none of them were girls. We are also teaching soldiers to read.

Despite what others might say or suggest, there continues to be universal support in the international community for the transition process in Afghanistan to go ahead. Australia's involvement in Afghanistan is important and our transition strategy is well in hand. It is something our troops have been working extremely hard to achieve for some years, and something we must continue to support, for the people of Afghanistan and for those soldiers from all nations who have lost their lives in trying to restore security and stability.