Afghanistan

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 October 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr STEPHEN SMITH (Perth—Minister for Defence and Deputy Leader of the House) (09:01): The government is committed to providing regular reports and updates on Afghanistan, including and in particular to the parliament. This year I have reported to the House on three prior occasions, in March, May and July.

I last reported to the House on 7 July, which followed my attendance at the meeting of NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) defence ministers’ meeting in Brussels in June, the beginning of the northern summer fighting season, United States President Obama’s statement on Afghanistan on 23 June and the commencement of transition to Afghan-led security. My report on this occasion follows my visit to Afghanistan on 3 October and my attendance at last week's NATO and ISAF defence ministers’ meeting in Brussels on 5 and 6 October.

Why we are there

My visit to Afghanistan and my attendance at the NATO/ISAF defence ministers’ meeting in Brussels has reinforced the government’s view that it is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan, not just with our alliance partner the United States (US), but also with 47 other members of ISAF acting under a United Nations mandate.

Australia’s 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. Last month’s commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks was a sober reminder that there are serious and horrifying consequences if international terrorists are allowed to operate unchecked.

It is therefore imperative that we remain focussed on our goal to help prepare the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take lead responsibility for providing security for the Afghan people. To do so we must continue in our efforts to stabilise the security situation and to mentor and train the Afghan security forces. To leave now would be to put at risk the gains so hard fought for and won.

ISAF campaign progress

In Afghanistan and Brussels I met senior NATO/ISAF commanders and my defence ministerial colleagues from a number of NATO/ISAF contributing countries including Afghanistan, the United States and the United Kingdom. Ministers and commanders are confident of the good progress that is being made in Afghanistan. We are now seeing results from a clear strategy, appropriate resources and a realistic transition time line. Afghan and ISAF forces have stalled, then reversed, the Taliban’s momentum. This fighting season, the Taliban has been unable to retake any ground in Oruzgan, or indeed across Afghanistan. The transition to Afghan-led security commenced with the handover of seven provinces and districts to Afghan-led security in July this year. This process has not been reversed by the Taliban.

In my March update to parliament, I warned that we had to expect the Taliban to fight back through high-profile, propaganda motivated attacks. Regrettably these high-profile attacks have come to pass. While the Taliban have not been successful at the tactical or operational level, high-profile attacks have occurred with a high civilian casualty toll and the terrible loss of former Afghan President and Chairman of the High Peace Council, Professor Rabbani. These high-profile attacks are aimed at undermining confidence in Afghanistan and sapping political will in the international community:

undermining confidence in the minds of the Afghan people that the ANSF will not be able to provide them with security; and

sapping the political will of the international community in the United States, in Europe and in Australia by distracting from the real progress we are making.
Australia condemns these civilian casualties. A failed insurgent attack on Oruzgan province Governor Shirzad on 28 July resulted in the deaths of 16 civilians, including 12 children killed in a callous way. There have been more such instances across Afghanistan. As the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, Steffan di Mistura, advised the NATO/ISAF defence ministers’ meeting in Brussels, around 85 per cent of civilian casualties are caused by the Taliban. Afghanistan and the international community need to make clear that the change of tactics by the Taliban to mount such high-profile, propaganda motivated attacks and suicide-bomb assassinations is a sign of Taliban weakness not strength.

Oruzgan campaign progress

During my visit to Afghanistan, I visited Australian troops serving in Oruzgan province in the south of Afghanistan. I met Australian troops at the multinational base in Tarin Kowt and Patrol Base Wali in the Mirabad Valley and again thanked them for their excellent work. I met with Australian and United States operational commanders in Oruzgan province, including the United States Commander of Combined Team Uruzgan, Colonel Robert Akam. I also met with Oruzgan Governor Shirzad and his provincial security chiefs; the Commander of the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army, Brigadier Zafar; the Provincial Chief of Police, Brigadier Mattiullah Khan; and the Provincial Chief of the National Directorate of Security, Colonel Khan Muhammed.

In Oruzgan, Australian troops are working under an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) flag with their colleagues from the United States, Singapore and Slovakia in Combined Team Uruzgan. Their mission is to train the Afghan security forces to take on lead responsibility for security by 2014. They are well on track and making good progress to achieve that objective. ISAF, working closely with Afghan partners, has expanded its security footprint across Oruzgan to encompass over 30 operating bases and checkpoints. In turn, this has allowed the Afghan government to expand its influence and provision of basic services to the people of the province. Since 2008, Australia has increased its effort from the mentoring of a single kandak (battalion) to mentoring six kandaks plus the brigade headquarters.

At times the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has had a presence in more than a dozen different bases in Oruzgan. Due to the increasing size and effectiveness of Afghan forces in Oruzgan, ISAF is progressively transitioning control of these checkpoints and operating bases to Afghan counterparts. This has included the recent handover of three patrol bases to Afghan forces. By the first half of next year, 2012, it is anticipated that the Australian Mentoring Task Force (AMTF) will be in a position to reduce its footprint to as few as four main locations in Oruzgan, with mobile mentoring teams able to assist Afghan partners at their operating bases for periods as required.

Australian forces continue to make important progress towards training the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade so that it can take responsibility for security in Oruzgan. As part of this work, on the advice of the Chief of the Defence Force, the government has authorised a number of Mentoring Task Force personnel to continue the training and mentoring of the 6th Kandak of the 4th Brigade in northern Kandahar, south of the Oruzgan border.

The 4th Brigade has increasingly assumed the lead for the planning, preparation and execution of tactical operations, allowing Australian forces to concentrate on mentoring and partnering Afghan command and combat support functions. The 4th Brigade is also demonstrating progress towards operating independently, with a number of infantry kandaks now expected to be capable of conducting independent operations by early 2012.

On current advice and projections, the 4th Brigade, as a whole, is expected to be operationally viable and ready for provincial transition by 2014. As my predecessor and I have previously advised the House and the Senate, Australian Special Forces are authorised to operate in adjoining provinces on operations that have security benefits in Oruzgan province. This involves operations to maintain pressure on insurgent leadership in Oruzgan, and its surrounding provinces including Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Daykundi.

So far this year, our Special Forces have conducted around 40 out-of-province operations, directly contributing to the security of Oruzgan and facilitating our ongoing training mission. Australian Special Forces and their Afghan partners, the Provincial Response Company (PRC) and the National Interdiction Unit (NIU), also continue to disrupt the insurgency in and around Oruzgan province by taking insurgent leaders and bomb makers off the battlefield and reducing the insurgency revenue stream from narcotics. This has helped create the environment necessary for ISAF forces to finalise their training mission and to create a safer environment for the Afghan people in Oruzgan.
Weapons cache finds have increased significantly and there has been some success in interdicting the movement of Taliban forces and supplies from Pakistani tribal areas across the border into Afghanistan. Australia's support to the NIU has reduced the insurgency's ability to fund its campaign by targeting the sale of narcotics. This support, commencing at the Afghan government's request, has led to a series of successful operations in and around Oruzgan. In September, the Afghan National Security Forces, supported by Australia's Special Forces, seized and destroyed a record amount of drug products in southern Afghanistan.

Transition

My visit to Afghanistan also confirmed that the international community is on track to achieve nationwide transition of security-led responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces by the end of 2014. In July, Afghanistan and the international community welcomed the formal start of the transition process in the first tranche of provinces and districts across Afghanistan. This marked an important step towards President Karzai's objective that Afghan authorities assume lead responsibility across Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

The first tranche of provinces and districts to have transitioned to Afghan-led security accounts for around 20 to 25 per cent of the Afghan population. President Karzai is expected to announce the second tranche of districts and provinces for transition later this month. When this second tranche of transition occurs, Afghan security forces will provide lead security for up to 50 per cent, half, of the Afghan population. Subsequent tranches will see international forces continue the process of handing over the lead security responsibility across the country. The Taliban will continue to test the transition process through more high-profile attacks and assassination attempts.

Australia is confident that the Afghan National Security Forces will continue to demonstrate their resolve and growing capability by standing up to and against such violence. In Oruzgan, as I have previously indicated, we continue to do well in training and mentoring the 4th Brigade of the ANA. We are confident that we can transition to Afghan-led responsibility in Oruzgan by 2014.

Post-transition

As the international community looks ahead, ISAF must maintain its Lisbon summit commitment to transition to Afghan-led security by 2014. Likewise, both NATO and the United States must maintain their commitment to a long-term, enduring strategic partnership with Afghanistan. NATO and the United States confirmed their long-term commitments at the defence ministers' meeting in Brussels last week. NATO and ISAF defence ministers welcomed the outline of the NATO Strategic Plan for Afghanistan which sets out the proposed approach to the NATO/ISAF presence in Afghanistan for the 2012 to 2014 period, and, most importantly, for the post 2014 period. This continuing long-term commitment and continued investment in Afghanistan's future is a key to ensuring that Afghanistan and its neighbours—including Pakistan—also invest in a peaceful future for Afghanistan.

It is important to begin work on the post 2014 period now. Not to set this out soon will undermine what we have achieved, jeopardise Afghan confidence in the international community's long-term commitments to their country and send the wrong message to regional neighbours, in particular Pakistan. Australia looks forward to continued work on the strategic plan ahead of the Chicago summit in May next year.

Australia has made clear it expects to maintain a presence in Afghanistan after our current training and mentoring mission has concluded, potentially through institutional training, a Special Forces presence, military advisers, capacity building and development assistance. Important into the future will be continued international community support for the Afghan National Security Forces. The international community must ensure the Afghan National Security Forces are provided with the resources they need to maintain security into the future.

Conclusion

Australia has lost 29 members of the Australian Defence Force in Afghanistan. Since my last update to the parliament, Private Matthew Lambert died as a result of an improvised explosive device attack on 22 August. We remember him and express our condolences to his spouse, his family and his friends.

In this period, New Zealand has also lost two fine soldiers with the tragic fatalities of Corporal Douglas Grant and Lance Corporal Leon Smith. I conveyed Australia's condolences to my New Zealand counterpart, Dr Wayne Mapp, New Zealand's Minister for Defence, at the time. I was pleased that Australia was able to assist with the
initial transportation through our C130s with the repatriation of both Corporal Grant and Lance Corporal Smith to New Zealand.

New Zealand is doing excellent work and making an important contribution to the international community's efforts in Afghanistan through the provincial reconstruction team in Bamiyan province and support to the Afghanistan National Police Crisis Response Unit in Kabul. At this time of tragic loss on both sides of the Tasman, we remember our losses with our age-old refrain, so fitting for our Anzacs, 'Lest We Forget.'

With these terrible tragedies, we must continue to be clear sighted about our objective in Afghanistan. Our objective is to prevent Afghanistan, in particular the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, from again becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

We will not be in Afghanistan forever, and we are on track to transition to Afghan-led responsibility for security arrangements in Oruzgan in 2014. It is important that the international community now begin work on planning for the post-2014 commitment in Afghanistan. This will send the right signal to Afghanistan and its neighbours to invest in a peaceful future for Afghanistan.

I table a paper in conjunction with my ministerial statement, and I ask leave of the House to move a motion to enable the member for Fadden to speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

Leave granted.

**Mr STEPHEN SMITH:** I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent the member for Fadden speaking in reply to the ministerial statement for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

Question agreed to.