



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

Wednesday, 12 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 12 August 2009
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Questioner
Speaker Faulkner, Sen John

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator FAULKNER (New South Wales—Minister for Defence) (5.32 pm)—by leave—I indicate to the Senate that at the end of a somewhat truncated statement in the chamber I intend to seek leave for the full ministerial statement to be incorporated in *Hansard*. This is something I have spoken with the opposition about. I thought it would be useful for me to say that at the commencement of my remarks, because I want the *Hansard* record to be complete if it can be on this matter. I thank the Senate in relation to that.

On the 29 April this year, the Prime Minister made a major statement about Australia's role in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is an important and challenging commitment for Australia, and it is my intention as the Minister for Defence to give the parliament regular reports on our progress in this conflict.

It is also my intention in these statements to provide a frank and objective assessment of the security situation in Afghanistan. I want to ensure that the Australian parliament and the Australian people are properly informed and able to make considered judgements about our involvement in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

Australia's contribution in Afghanistan should be seen in its international context. It is central to the government's broader commitment to international efforts to defeat terrorism. The terrorist attacks in Jakarta on 17 July, in which three Australians died, are a grim reminder that terrorism remains a constant threat, with a global reach.

Afghanistan has been a training ground for terrorists, including those who perpetrated the attack against our embassy in Indonesia, and the attacks in Bali which resulted in close to 100 Australians losing their lives. Recent events here, in Australia, also underscore this global threat.

I want to be absolutely clear that we cannot ignore this reality: an Afghanistan which allows terrorists to flourish means less security for Australians. If the International Security Assistance Force partners, comprised of 42 different countries, were not in Afghanistan, then Afghanistan would be in danger of returning to Taliban control.

The Australian government has clearly set out the specific goals underlying Australia's commitment and military involvement in Afghanistan, which the Prime Minister identified in April this year. They are:

- (1) helping to stabilise the country through combined and coordinated military, police and civilian assistance;
- (2) training sufficient Afghan security and police forces in Oruzgan province to allow Afghan authorities to take over within a reasonable timeframe; and
- (3) helping to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a training ground and operating base for international terrorists.

This approach aligns with the renewed focus of our partners on a coordinated and comprehensive campaign, and the efforts of our partners in Oruzgan should be acknowledged. In particular, I thank the Netherlands and its forces for their strong support and leadership in Oruzgan province.

To ensure Australia's whole-of-government commitments are integrated into the broader international effort, the government has appointed Mr Ric Smith as Australia's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mr Smith will assist in Australia's diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan, meeting with representatives of other governments, reporting to us on progress, and working to improve coordination and cooperation with our key partners.

As the Prime Minister said in April, Australia has fundamental interests at stake in Afghanistan. We need to ensure that Islamist extremists and terrorist groups are denied safe havens in Afghanistan.

The government also believes in honouring our international commitments. We must continue to play our part, along with our allies, the US and NATO led coalition, to ensure that we prevail in Afghanistan.

Today I will focus on our military strategy, and report on the progress we are making on each of the goals identified by the Prime Minister.

Stabilisation

With respect to the first of these goals—stabilisation—this is a threshold year for Afghanistan and the international community's stabilisation efforts. In just over a week the people of Afghanistan will go to the polls to elect their government. Every vote cast will represent a step forward, distancing the country from a violent and repressive past under the Taliban. But senators should make no mistake: the election period will be a dangerous time. The Taliban will undoubtedly seek to deny Afghans their rightful voice in the affairs of their own country.

Significantly, security for these elections will be Afghan led, provided first and foremost by Afghan National Security Forces, with international forces playing a supporting role. This is indicative of the improved capacity of the Afghan forces. Australia is making a significant contribution to support these elections. We have deployed an election security force of about 120 troops and are also providing additional military airlift capacity to help provide logistics support during the course of the election. We are also sending a civilian team to observe the electoral process.

As part of our election support efforts, Australian forces are mentoring and supporting their Afghan counterparts in providing security around polling booths in Oruzgan province. This is in addition to operations to ensure a safe environment in the lead-up to, and during, the election.

Building security capacity in Oruzgan

Our second goal is to train Afghan security and police forces in Oruzgan province to build their capacity. In late 2008, Australia deployed an Operational Mentor and Liaison Team to Afghanistan to train the 2nd Infantry Kandak (or battalion equivalent) of the 4th Afghan National Army Brigade in Oruzgan province. Our work there is succeeding. On 11 July 2009, the 2nd Kandak was assessed at capability milestone 3 with the prospect of moving to capability milestone 2 by the end of the year. This means the Kandak mentored by Australia will move from an initial operational capability where it is reliant on coalition support to a point where the Kandak will be capable of conducting independent missions and tasks, and will require only routine support from the coalition. With our support, the 2nd Infantry Kandak has planned and conducted a number of major operations in the province. The majority of these combined operations are conducted on foot, amongst the population, and frequently under Afghan National Army leadership. Australian mentored Afghan elements are assuming greater responsibility, focusing on critical regions such as the Chora and the Baluchi valleys, and are establishing new combat outposts. As the Prime Minister announced on 29 April, over the coming months our Operational Mentor and Liaison Team will be supplemented by two additional Australian training teams.

This significant increase in Australian trainers will help to increase the throughput of Afghan soldiers and accelerate training outcomes. Training foreign soldiers is a job Australians do well. We demonstrated this in both East Timor and Iraq. Yet, despite our strong track record, and our progress to date, we must be careful not to set unrealistic time limits on our training commitment. Raising an effective and professional fighting force takes time.

Strategic denial of terrorists

The third goal is to deny terrorists any sanctuary in Afghanistan. Our forces are disrupting insurgent networks by denying them effective leadership, reducing their freedom to move and disabling their methods of supply. Only last week, Australian soldiers, in a combined operation with Afghan and coalition forces, successfully captured four key Taliban leaders and three lower level insurgents. Their capture, along with a cache of improvised explosive devices components, will substantially reduce the Taliban's ability to conduct indiscriminate attacks.

In fighting the Taliban, we face an enemy that is ruthless, determined and willing to commit unlawful and repugnant tactics to achieve its aims. Taliban insurgents continue to deliberately place innocent Afghan civilians at risk. A common Taliban tactic, for example, is to launch attacks from heavily populated civilian areas, using local Afghans as human shields.

Let me assure senators that this government and our Defence Force take the issue of civilian casualties extremely seriously as well. I also acknowledge, however, that there could be times when mistakes are made on our side, in the course of conducting the kinds of complex, dangerous counterinsurgency operations that this conflict involves.

But unlike our enemy, and this is, I think, a very important distinction, we will continue to make every effort to reduce the risks posed to civilians by our military activities. We are also committed, publicly, to investigating all claims of Australian involvement in civilian casualties in an open and transparent manner. All civilian deaths are a tragedy and our forces work very hard to avoid them. By contrast, the Taliban show no sign of abandoning their wilful disregard for the security and safety of Afghan civilians.

Notwithstanding the progress made in Afghanistan to date, the road ahead is likely to be long and difficult. Oruzgan is amongst the most impoverished of Afghanistan's provinces. And the Taliban led insurgency remains a highly mobile and resilient enemy. It is almost inevitable that there will be further Australian casualties. This will be a long and difficult struggle and success will depend on the sustained commitment of the Afghan government working with the international community. But contributing to the long-term stability of Afghanistan and the defeat of the Taliban led insurgency is, as I have said, vital to our national security.

Under the leadership of the recently appointed ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, partners are focussed on doing what is necessary to succeed in Afghanistan. As recently reported, General McChrystal recognises that the insurgency remains stronger in some parts of Afghanistan than the coalition would like. For Australia, Afghanistan remains a difficult and dangerous operation. Eleven of our soldiers have died there, most recently Private Benjamin Ranaudo. They will not be forgotten. Over 70 have been wounded. Australia honours the courage and the sacrifices made by all of these soldiers for their country. Our coalition partners have also endured significant losses, and will face more. In the last month alone coalition forces suffered over 70 fatalities in Afghanistan, the deadliest month of the campaign so far.

As Minister for Defence, I have made it clear that the security of our soldiers remains our highest priority. I assure senators that we are making every effort to reduce the risks posed to Australian troops through appropriate preparation and training, and ensuring that our troops have the equipment they need for this particular mission. Helping Afghanistan recover from decades of civil war, the repressive rule of the Taliban and the aftermath of the insurgency is a long-term challenge for the international community. At times, the challenges confronting us may obscure our achievements. But the difficulty of the task should not deter us from our objectives in this conflict, given the critical importance of security and stability in Afghanistan.

Madam Acting Deputy President, I seek the leave of the Senate to incorporate the full ministerial statement in the *Hansard*.

Leave granted.

The speech read as follows—

On 29 April this year, the Prime Minister made a major statement about Australia's role in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is an important and challenging commitment for Australia, and it is my intention as the Minister for Defence to give the parliament regular reports on our progress in this conflict.

It is also my intention in these statements to provide a frank and objective assessment of the security situation in Afghanistan. I want to ensure that the Australian parliament and the Australian people are properly informed and able to make considered judgements about our involvement in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

Australia's contribution in Afghanistan should be seen in its international context. It is central to the government's broader commitment to international efforts to defeat terrorism. The terrorist attacks in Jakarta on 17 July, in which three Australians died, are a grim reminder that terrorism remains a constant threat, with a global reach.

Afghanistan has been a training ground for terrorists, including those who perpetrated the attack against our embassy in Indonesia, and the attacks in Bali which resulted in close to 100 Australians losing their lives. Recent events here, in Australia, also underscore this global threat.

I want to be absolutely clear that we cannot ignore this reality: an Afghanistan which allows terrorists to flourish means less security for Australians. If the International Security Assistance Force partners, comprised of 42 different countries, were not in Afghanistan, then Afghanistan would be in danger of returning to Taliban control.

If al-Qaeda were allowed to regroup and launch further attacks, as the Taliban regime previously allowed, the consequences for our own security would be serious.

The Australian government has clearly set out the specific goals underlying Australia's commitment and military involvement in Afghanistan, which the Prime Minister identified in April this year. They are:

1. helping to stabilise the country through combined and coordinated military, police and civilian assistance;
2. training sufficient Afghan security and police forces in Oruzgan province to allow Afghan authorities to take over within a reasonable time frame; and
3. helping to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a training ground and operating base for international terrorists.

This approach aligns with the renewed focus of our partners on a coordinated and comprehensive campaign, and the efforts of our partners in Oruzgan should be acknowledged. In particular, I thank the Netherlands and its forces for its strong support and leadership in Oruzgan province. While Australia would welcome continued Dutch leadership in the province beyond 2010, we recognise that this is a matter for the government of the Netherlands.

To ensure Australia's whole-of-government commitments are integrated into the broader international effort, the government has appointed Mr Ric Smith as Australia's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mr Smith will assist in Australia's diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan, meeting with representatives of other governments, reporting to us on progress, and working to improve coordination and co-operation with our key partners.

As the Prime Minister said in April, Australia has fundamental interests at stake in Afghanistan. We need to ensure that Islamist extremists and terrorist groups are denied safe havens in Afghanistan. Failure to achieve this objective could lead to a jihadi state that would again allow international terrorists to re-establish themselves in Afghanistan.

To achieve this, we must ensure that the Afghan government offers better security and more economic benefits for the Afghan people than the Taliban and other extremist groups can offer.

The government also believes in honouring our international commitments. We must continue to play our part, along with our allies, the US and NATO-led coalition, to ensure that we prevail in Afghanistan.

Although defeating the Taliban and other extremist groups is an ultimate objective, the immediate aim must be to restore the initiative to ISAF and Afghan government forces and to secure the population by focusing operations on protecting local communities.

Today I will focus on our military strategy, and report on the progress we are making on each of the goals identified by the Prime Minister.

Stabilisation

With respect to the first of these goals—stabilisation—this is a threshold year for Afghanistan and the international community's stabilisation efforts. In just over a week the people of Afghanistan will go to the polls to elect their government. Every vote cast will represent a step forward, distancing the country from a violent and repressive past under the Taliban.

But senators should make no mistake: the election period will be a dangerous time. The Taliban will undoubtedly seek to deny Afghans their rightful voice in the affairs of their own country.

Significantly, security for these elections will be Afghan-led, provided first and foremost by Afghan National Security Forces, with international forces playing a supporting role. This is indicative of the improved capacity of the Afghan forces, to provide for their own security.

Australia is making a significant contribution to support these elections. We have deployed an election security force of about 120 troops and are also providing additional military airlift capacity to help provide logistics support during the course of the election. An Australian Army officer, Brigadier Damian Cantwell, is the Chief of the Election Task Force within the Headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force. We are also sending a civilian team to observe the electoral process.

As part of our election support efforts, Australian forces are mentoring and supporting their Afghan counterparts in providing security around polling booths in Oruzgan province. This is in addition to operations to ensure a safe environment within the province in the period leading up to, and during, the election. Significantly, our troops have also helped to establish an Operational Coordination Centre in Tarin Kowt that will serve as the central command and control point for all election security operations within Oruzgan.

Our work in stabilisation, however, is much broader-ranging than the election or the election period.

The Australian Defence Force is continuing to contribute to stabilisation efforts through a programme of reconstruction and trade skills development. These activities are improving access to essential health and education services for local Afghans, are supporting economic development, and are teaching locals new skills to improve their employment opportunities in Oruzgan province.

Through the construction of new schools, health clinics and roads, our engineers are making a tangible difference in Oruzgan and are helping the provincial government to deliver essential services. For example, our forces have overseen the development of Oruzgan's primary healthcare facility, the Tarin Kowt Hospital. This has included the addition of a women's hospital, a blood bank and other facilities. Australian Defence Force efforts have seen the hospital develop from a poorly equipped facility that struggled to deliver basic health services, to today being a more advanced medical facility that provides important health services to the people of Oruzgan.

Our reconstruction efforts use locally sourced labour, stimulating the local economy and developing the indigenous construction sector.

Our forces operate a trade training school that provides a variety of trade training courses for local Afghans. This is an example of the real difference Australia's commitment is making to the lives of ordinary Afghans. Graduates receive Afghan government recognition for completed courses and a greatly improved opportunity for employment in the community. The school also helps to grow a pool of local trainers through continued development of their teaching skills and by employing graduates as instructors for future courses.

Building security capacity in Oruzgan

Our second goal is to train Afghan security and police forces in Oruzgan province to build their capacity.

In late 2008, Australia deployed an Operational Mentor and Liaison Team to Afghanistan to train the 2nd Infantry Kandak (or battalion equivalent) of the 4th Afghan National Army Brigade in Oruzgan province. This team has made—and continues to make—steady progress in improving the Kandak's ability to plan, conduct and command operations.

Our work there is succeeding. On 11 July 2009, the 2nd Kandak was assessed at Capability Milestone 3 with the prospect of moving to Capability Milestone 2 by the end of the year. This means the Kandak mentored by Australia will move from an initial operational capability where it is reliant on coalition support, to a point where the Kandak will be capable of conducting independent missions and tasks, and will require only routine support from the coalition.

Working with Afghan forces, Australian troops are also helping to build enabling capabilities within the Afghan engineering and intelligence systems. We are also working with the Afghans to improve the Kandak's command and control functions.

Beyond the training ground, our mentoring efforts are making a real and significant contribution to security in Oruzgan. With our support, the 2nd Infantry Kandak has planned and conducted a number of major operations in the province. The majority of these combined operations are conducted on foot, amongst the population, and frequently under Afghan National Army leadership. Australian-mentored Afghan elements are assuming greater responsibility for sectors within the Tarin Kowt area. They are focussing on critical regions such as the Chora and the Baluchi Valley, and are establishing new combat outposts.

Local communities in these areas are welcoming the presence of Afghan forces as evidence of the increasing reach of the Afghan state and the security it brings with it. This is hugely important.

Along with the United States and other coalition partners, Australia is also helping to appropriately equip Afghan forces. Australia's major commitment of US\$200 million over five years to the Afghan National Army Trust Fund will assist the continued capability growth of Afghan forces. This government is proud to acknowledge Australia's position as the largest contributor to the fund (outside the US). Such is our commitment to ensuring that Afghan security forces have the equipment and resources necessary to do their job.

With our assistance, Afghan soldiers are courageously standing up to the threat of insurgents. They are helping to spread security into districts that were once Taliban strongholds. With greater security, locals are starting to rebuild their homes, gain new skills and get on with their lives. This is the positive impact our troops are making in Oruzgan today.

As the Prime Minister announced on 29 April, over the coming months our Operational Mentor and Liaison Team will be supplemented by two additional Australian training teams.

As significant increase in Australian trainers will help to increase the through-put of Afghan soldiers and accelerate training outcomes. These efforts will deliver more trained Afghan soldiers who will, over time, move out further into the province, consolidating security. Our training of Afghan troops today will mean a more secure future for Afghanistan tomorrow.

Training foreign soldiers is a job Australians do well. We demonstrated this in both East Timor and Iraq. Yet, despite our strong track record, and our progress to date, we must be careful not to set unrealistic time limits on our training commitment. Raising an effective and professional fighting force takes time. And it takes a concerted effort. It is hard graft in times of peace, and much tougher when confronted with an aggressive insurgency.

We are aiming to build an effective Afghan National Security Force in Oruzgan province that is able to provide security for its own people. This will set the conditions for the withdrawal of Australian combat forces.

We remain confident that we will prevail. Our progress is evidenced by the Afghan National Army's growing capability in Oruzgan. And, with the deployment of two additional Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams, we will carry this momentum forward.

Strategic denial of terrorists

The third goal is to deny terrorists any sanctuary in Afghanistan. This is an important priority for our mission in Afghanistan, and Australian and international forces are making strong ground against the Taliban-led insurgency. Our forces are disrupting insurgent networks by denying them effective leadership, reducing their freedom to move and disabling their methods of supply. This is creating the environment necessary for reconstruction and development activities that improve the quality of life for Afghans.

Our special forces, in particular, continue to conduct successful operations against Taliban leaders and bomb-makers in Oruzgan province. Our forces also mentor Afghan security personnel on combined operations. Increasingly, it is Afghan soldiers who are engaging with the local population. That we have made much headway in such difficult conditions is a tribute to our force's comprehensive counterinsurgency capabilities, drawn from a long history of operational experience.

Our special forces soldiers have participated in numerous operations against senior Taliban leadership, culminating in the death or capture of key insurgent leaders directly involved in planning attacks against coalition and Afghan forces, or against Afghan civilians. During such operations, caches of weapons, ammunition, rockets, mortars and explosives are routinely seized.

Only last week, Australian soldiers, in a combined operation with Afghan and coalition forces, successfully captured four key Taliban leaders and three lower-level insurgents. Their capture, along with a cache of improvised explosive devices components, will substantially reduce the Taliban's ability to conduct indiscriminate attacks against coalition and Afghan forces, and the local population in Oruzgan.

In fighting the Taliban, we face an enemy that is ruthless, determined and willing to commit unlawful and repugnant tactics to achieve its aims. Taliban insurgents continue to deliberately place innocent Afghan civilians at risk. A common Taliban tactic, for example, is to launch attacks from heavily populated civilian areas, using local Afghans as human shields.

The use of such appalling tactics by insurgents is roundly condemned. A June 2009 United Nations report found that insurgents are increasingly responsible for the vast majority of civilian fatalities, particularly through the use of indiscriminate suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices. The report said that most civilian casualties stem from the activities of the Taliban and terrorist groups, deliberately targeting civilians. That report acknowledged the international community's commitment to reducing civilian casualties, while also finding that more work needed to be done.

Let me assure Senators that this government and our Defence Force take the issue of civilian casualties extremely seriously. We strongly support the International Security Assistance Force's continued efforts to reduce the risks posed to civilians by operations in Afghanistan.

I also acknowledge, however, that there could be times when mistakes are made on our side, in the course of conducting the kind of complex, dangerous counter-insurgency operations that this conflict involves. This is not least because the Taliban will seek to engineer this outcome.

But unlike our enemy, and this is a very important distinction, we will continue to make every effort to reduce the risks posed to civilians by our military activities. We are also committed, publicly, to investigating all claims of Australian involvement in civilian casualties in an open and transparent manner. All civilian deaths are a tragedy and our forces work very hard to avoid them. By contrast, the Taliban show no sign of abandoning their wilful disregard for the security and safety of Afghan civilians—men, women and children.

I also want to address the issue of detainee management by Australian forces. As Senators would know, our forces are required to apprehend detainees during operations in Afghanistan. Let me be clear: Australian forces treat these detainees humanely, with dignity and respect, and in accordance with all of Australia's obligations under domestic and international law. The government, and our Defence Forces, take any allegation of detainee mistreatment very seriously. The Australian Defence Force has undertaken appropriate investigations into any allegations received. Our commitment to an open and transparent approach on these issues is clear.

Whole-of-government effort

This conflict in Afghanistan will not be ended by military force alone. Greater economic development and the promotion of good governance are essential. But a secure environment remains a necessary precondition to enabling the Afghan government, both at the national and the provincial level, to meet the needs of its people.

The Australian Defence Force presence in Afghanistan is a critical enabler for Australia's whole-of-government effort. This includes the important work of our diplomats, the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Agency for International Development.

And our whole-of-government assistance is substantial. Since 2001, Australia has committed \$600 million in funding for aid, capacity building and reconstruction and strengthening the Afghan police force. This incorporates part of our 2008 commitment of \$250 million in development assistance over three years.

In parallel, the Australian Federal Police is deploying approximately ten additional officers to train and advise the Afghan National Police in Oruzgan province. These additional officers will complement the efforts of the Australian Defence Force by consolidating stability and the rule of law within Oruzgan.

The benefits of our assistance are clear. With the support of international partners, including Australia, over six million Afghan children are now receiving an education. This is the highest number in Afghanistan's history and, significantly, includes a large proportion of female students who are now benefiting from an education that was once denied to them. Over 85 per cent of the population now has access to primary healthcare. Since 2001 there has been a 26 per cent decline in mortality amongst children under five—resulting in 80,000 lives saved every year—and during this time incomes have doubled. More than three million Afghans have also benefited from rural water and sanitation projects.

These advances reflect the achievements of the coalition in Afghanistan and provide stark contrast to the Taliban's rule. Under that brutal regime, public executions were commonplace, and even the common children's pastime of kite-flying was outlawed. Men were forced to grow beards and subject to beatings if they refused. Most shocking of all, however, was the treatment of women who were forbidden from working, were denied access to education and health care services, and were prohibited from leaving their homes without a male relative. Thankfully, with the support of the international community, the Afghanistan of today is a different place.

Ongoing challenges

Notwithstanding the progress made in Afghanistan to date, the road ahead is likely to be long and difficult. Tough challenges remain. The Taliban-led insurgency is determined to prevent us from improving security in Afghanistan, and wants to turn back the clock on the country's progress. Worst of all, their continued use of indiscriminate violence is likely to result in further Afghan, coalition and Australian casualties.

The challenge in Afghanistan is considerable. The country has suffered from decades of continual conflict. Oruzgan is amongst the most impoverished of Afghanistan's provinces. And the Taliban-led insurgency remains a highly mobile and resilient enemy. It is almost inevitable that there will be further Australian casualties.

Progress will not be easy and it is unrealistic to expect early success in Afghanistan. This will be a long and difficult struggle and success will depend on the sustained commitment of the Afghan government working with the international community. But contributing to the long-term stability of Afghanistan and the defeat of the Taliban-led insurgency is, as I have said, vital to our national security.

Under the leadership of the recently appointed ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, partners are focussed on doing what is necessary to succeed in Afghanistan. In particular, the government acknowledges and welcomes the additional troop contributions recently made by our coalition partners, including the significant increases by the United States. In recent months, we have and will continue to see a renewed focus from NATO and the United States on how best to respond to the Taliban-led insurgency. As recently reported, General McChrystal recognises that the insurgency remains stronger in some parts of Afghanistan than the coalition would like.

For Australia, Afghanistan remains a difficult and dangerous operation. Eleven of our soldiers have died there, most recently Private Benjamin Ranaudo. They will not be forgotten. Over 70 have been wounded. Australia honours the courage and the sacrifices made by all of these soldiers for their country.

Our coalition partners have also endured significant losses, and will face more. In the last month alone coalition forces suffered over 70 fatalities in Afghanistan, the deadliest month of the campaign so far. This rising toll underscores the dangers involved in overcoming the insurgency and highlights the fact that the war is far from won.

As Minister for Defence, I have made it clear that the security of our soldiers remains our highest priority. I assure senators that we are making every effort to reduce the risks posed to Australian troops through appropriate preparation and training, and ensuring that our troops have the equipment they need for this particular mission.

The government will continue to work to mitigate the threats that our forces face, particularly from improvised explosive devices. The Australian designed and built Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicle (or PMV) is a good example of our approach to equipping our soldiers with the mobility, protection and combat endurance they require to operate in Afghanistan. The Bushmaster has been enhanced for employment in the Middle East Area of Operations and has been directly responsible for saving the lives of Australian soldiers.

I am confident that Australia's current contribution to this campaign remains targeted and appropriate for the mission at hand. The international community must not allow this shared threat to go unchallenged. Australia remains committed to assisting our coalition partners with the heavy lifting.

Helping Afghanistan recover from decades of civil war, the repressive rule of the Taliban and the aftermath of the insurgency is a long-term challenge for the international community. At times, the challenges confronting us may obscure our achievements. But the difficulty of the task should not deter us from our objectives in this conflict, given the critical importance of security and stability in Afghanistan.