Afghanistan

SPEECH

Thursday, 18 March 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator FAULKNER (New South Wales—Minister for Defence) (3.35 pm)—by leave—Today I present my third ministerial statement on Afghanistan. I remain committed to keeping the Australian people fully informed about progress in the campaign and our military contribution.

Since my last statement, President Obama announced the United States’ revised strategy for Afghanistan. Australia fully supports that revised strategy.

2010 will be a pivotal year in the campaign. In recent weeks there has been much reporting of Operation Moshtarak in central Helmand province. Operation Moshtarak is the practical implementation of General McChrystal’s new strategy, which places paramount importance on protecting the population, reversing the Taliban’s momentum and creating the space to develop Afghan security and governance capacity.

Australia’s Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force has made great progress in its work with the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade. In a recent joint operation with our Afghan partners, we established a permanent security presence in the Mirabad Valley, east of Tarin Kowt. During the operation 50 caches of weapons were seized, which included rocket propelled grenades and mortars, improvised explosive device components and thousands of rounds of ammunition.

Our gains were also most recently demonstrated with the capture of Mullah Janan Andewahl, a key facilitator of improvised explosive devices, who is considered to have been behind a number of executions and organised attacks against the local population.

The taskforce continues to have a strong reconstruction capability that will maintain the high tempo of engineering work, through projects such as the construction of girls’ high schools and the re-development of the Oruzgan Ministry of Energy and Water compound. It is efforts such as these that help to win the support of the Afghan people, build trust in the Afghan government, and make the insurgency less relevant.

I would also like to respond to some recent suggestions in the media that the Australian forces training the Afghan National Army in Oruzgan are prevented from guiding Afghan soldiers through real-life combat situations. This is patently false and misrepresents the role our troops are playing. It also shows a lack of understanding of the mentoring and partnering process. Partnering involves the embedding of a small group of ADF personnel within a larger Afghan National Army battalion. They plan, execute and review operations with their Afghan counterparts. Together they regularly face the lethal threat of rockets, small arms and improvised explosive devices.

The primary focus of our military mission in Afghanistan is to train the 4th Brigade in Oruzgan to the level where it is able to take responsibility for the security of the province. Most of the fighting our soldiers see is in Oruzgan, where our primary base is located. Although concentrated on Oruzgan, elements of Australia’s forces also participate in operations outside the province. In Operation Moshtarak, for example, ADF personnel conducted operations in Kandahar province to disrupt insurgent routes in Helmand. Australia has other force elements deployed in support of broader ISAF efforts, such as our artillery group in Helmand and our Chinooks.

The focus of the coalition is turning to the insurgency in Kandahar province. I expect Australian forces will again be involved in supporting General McChrystal’s strategy. Australia will play its part, which could again see ADF elements and their ANA partners supporting the fight.

Australia is making a very significant contribution to the coalition effort in Afghanistan. The government believes that the current level of our contribution is appropriate. On current operational planning, Australia will maintain an average personnel level of around 1,550 throughout 2010. I say ‘average’ because shifting operational requirements mean troop numbers in-theatre inevitably fluctuate.

I am also pleased to announce that Australia will fulfil a request by ISAF to provide 10 personnel from within our embedded staff in Afghanistan to develop a training concept for Afghanistan’s Combat Arms Artillery
School. This school will provide artillery training for the whole of the Afghan National Army and contribute to a broader NATO effort to enhance training across the spectrum of Afghan National Army requirements.

**Wounded in action**

In my last statement, I undertook to regularly and openly report about the status of ADF personnel wounded in action in Afghanistan. Today, I provide the most up-to-date information available. It is a harsh reality that the men and women of the ADF work in a dangerous environment. This danger was again made clear only a couple of days ago, when five Australian soldiers were wounded when their vehicle was struck by an improvised explosive device. I am advised that all five soldiers are now stable, although two remain in a serious condition. Some of them will be returning to Australia shortly for further specialist care. Our thoughts are with these soldiers and their families.

Since the beginning of 2010, 13 Australian soldiers have suffered wounds as a result of battle. Three have returned to Australia for specialist care and, as I have said, others may return due to the recent incident of 16 March. Let me take this opportunity on behalf of the government, and I know all senators, to wish those wounded personnel all the best for a full and speedy recovery. As Minister for Defence I have now met and talked to a number of wounded soldiers and discussed their treatment and rehabilitation with them and their families. Defence is committed to ensuring that our troops that are wounded receive excellent care and their families are supported, but there is always room for improvement in this area.

Defence is also working hard to progress and implement the outcomes of our force protection review. Some measures are under way, including replacing some body armour, improving counter measures against improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and improving IED detection equipment. Consideration of the remaining recommendations is well under way, including enhanced medical support, the upgrading and hardening of living and working accommodation in Tarin Kowt, as well as other capability enhancements. This work will continue to be progressed as a priority.

**Leadership in Oruzgan province**

During this decisive period in Afghanistan, Australia faces a particular challenge with the anticipated departure from Oruzgan of our senior partner, the Netherlands. Unless a new Dutch government decides otherwise, we understand the Dutch will proceed to implement parliament’s decision to relinquish leadership in Oruzgan province from August 2010.

If, as expected, the Netherlands relinquishes leadership of Oruzgan province later this year, they will leave a legacy of success. The Dutch have developed strong relationships with the local community, with the provincial administration and with non-government organisations. The number of non-government organisations in Oruzgan has risen from six to over 50 since 2006. The number of basic health clinics has increased from one to six. The number of operating schools has more than doubled since 2006.

NATO is working to identify a new senior partner in Oruzgan, and I will not pre-empt the outcome of that work. But the challenge this poses to our deployed forces and the Dutch replacement is not insignificant. There will be operational impacts as forces flow in and out of the province; as force enablers, such as the hospital, are replaced; as responsibility for base maintenance is transferred. Along with Australia, replacement forces will also need to harness Dutch knowledge about the province. The transition process will be, on any view, an added challenge.

Mr Deputy President, there are a number of other challenges for the international coalition, including the issues of civilian casualties, detainee management, and Afghan government-led reintegration and reconciliation efforts. These are very important issues and I address them in detail in the full ministerial statement which I intend to incorporate at the conclusion of my remarks. I commend those elements of my statement to the Senate.

I also acknowledged the progress NATO has made in taking a more inclusive approach in consultations on Afghanistan. To further strengthen our relationship with NATO and to help ensure we are included in all relevant NATO and ISAF decision-making processes, I have agreed to post a senior ADF officer, Major General Dawson, as the Australian military representative to NATO. And, at the request of NATO, on my direction the ADF has also placed a second senior ADF officer, Major General Power, as the senior military adviser to the Afghan Minister for Defence, General Wardak.

The early gains of Operation Moshtarak highlight the value of ISAF’s revised strategy. As Admiral Mullen said in New York only a few days ago, ‘The objective is not the enemy’s defeat but the people’s success.’
Enormous difficulties will continue to test our resolve. As Australia responds to these challenges, I remain committed to keeping the Australian public and the Australian parliament fully informed. I look forward to delivering a further report on Afghanistan in the next sitting of parliament. I commend my full ministerial statement to the Senate and I seek the leave of the Senate to have the full ministerial statement incorporated in Hansard.

Leave granted.

_The statement read as follows—_

Statement by the Minister for Defence

Senator the Hon John Faulkner

Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan

18 March 2010

Mr President, today I present my third Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan. As with the previous two statements, my intent is to be frank and comprehensive. I remain committed to keeping the Australian people fully informed about progress in the campaign and our military contribution.

The Government is immensely proud of the continuing efforts of the men and women of the Australian Defence Organisation serving in Afghanistan and their colleagues from other Australian Government agencies. Australia is committed to achieving our mission in Afghanistan: to fight insurgency and deny sanctuary to international terrorist groups such as al-Qa’ida, who still threaten and attack innocent civilians the world over; to assist in stabilising Afghanistan; and to stand firmly by our alliance commitment to the United States.

**Recent Developments**

**Revised ISAF Strategy**

Mr President, since my last statement, the US Administration and NATO have acted decisively against the insurgency. In December, President Obama announced the United States’ revised strategy for Afghanistan. The US is already deploying the additional 30,000 US military personnel promised for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). NATO advises other coalition nations are contributing 9,000 extra troops to the campaign. Australia fully supports the revised strategy for Afghanistan. The planned enhanced civilian component of Australia’s effort in Afghanistan is being designed to ensure our efforts are fully aligned with the broader coalition strategy.

2010 will be a pivotal year in the campaign - for Afghanistan, and for Australia. In recent weeks there has been much reporting of Operation MOSHTARAK, in which Afghan National Security Forces and ISAF forces have pushed into the strategically important area of central Helmand province. Operation MOSHTARAK is the practical implementation of General McChrystal’s new strategy which places paramount importance on protecting the population, reversing the Taliban’s momentum, and creating the space to develop Afghan security and governance capacity.

As General McChrystal, Commander of ISAF forces said, “The government of Afghanistan is in the position now of having the opportunity…to prove they can establish legitimate governance.” The strategy is that once Afghan and ISAF troops gain control of the region, the Afghan Government will move in quickly to establish civil authority and government support. Shuras (community meetings) are held to ensure local needs and concerns are understood and accommodated. ISAF is working with the Afghan Government to establish the conditions in which basic services can be provided to the Afghan people. This is where progress needs to be made – with the people of Afghanistan experiencing the benefits of security, better governance, justice and economic opportunities. It is critical this opportunity be seized.

**Operational Update**

Mr President, I would like to take this opportunity to update the Senate on Australian operations in Afghanistan. ADF operations in Oruzgan continue to improve the situation in the province. The Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force has made great progress in its work with the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade. In a recent joint operation, Afghan troops and their Australian mentors established a permanent security presence in the Mirabad Valley, east of Tarin Kowt. During the operation they seized weapons from over fifty caches, which included rocket propelled grenades and mortars, Improvised Explosive Device components, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. The improvement to security in Mirabad has boosted the capacity of the ANA 4th Brigade to protect the population from the insurgency and paved the way for development in that region.

Our gains were most recently demonstrated with the capture of a key Taliban insurgent commander in a joint Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Australian Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) operation. Mullah Janan Andewahl, a key
facilitator of Improvised Explosive Devices used against the local population and international forces, is considered to have been behind a number of executions and organised attacks against the local population in the Mirabad district.

The Task Force continues to have a strong reconstruction capability that will maintain the high tempo of engineering work, through projects such as the construction of girls’ high schools and the re-development of the Oruzgan Ministry of Energy and Water compound. It is efforts such as these that help to win the support of the Afghan people, build trust in the Afghan Government, and make the insurgency less relevant.

The Task Force also has the additional task of supporting and protecting Australia’s civilian presence in Afghanistan. The ADF ensures that Australian officials are afforded the highest level of protection, and the support necessary to carry out their tasks.

Mr President, I would also like to respond to some recent suggestions in the media that the Australian forces training the Afghan National Army in Oruzgan are prevented from guiding Afghan soldiers through real-life combat situations. This is patently false and misrepresents the role our troops are playing. It also shows a lack of understanding of the mentoring and partnering process. Partnering involves the embedding of a small group of ADF personnel within a larger Afghan National Army Battalion, or Kandak. As part of their mentoring duties the Australians plan operations with their Afghan counterparts.

They execute those operations with their Afghan counterparts. And then they review those operations with their Afghan counterparts. Together they regularly face the lethal threat of rockets, small arms and improvised explosive devices.

Australian troops put their lives on the line every day in an extremely dangerous and hostile environment. To date, eleven have lost their lives and over a hundred have been wounded. The Australian forces partnered with the Afghan National Security Forces in Oruzgan province live, work and fight side-by-side with their Afghan counterparts.

The primary focus of our military mission in Afghanistan is to train the 4th Brigade in Oruzgan to the level where it is able to take responsibility for the security of the province. Most of the fighting our soldiers are involved in is in Oruzgan, where our primary base is located. Although concentrated on Oruzgan, elements of Australia’s forces also participate in operations outside the province in response to operational requirements. In Operation MOSHTARAK, for example, Australian Defence Force personnel conducted operations in Kandahar Province to disrupt insurgent routes in Helmand, which will have a direct impact on security in Oruzgan. Australia has other force elements deployed in support of broader ISAF efforts, such as our artillery group based with our British allies in Helmand, and our Chinooks that conduct activities in a range of provinces.

The focus of the coalition is turning to the insurgency in Kandahar province. I expect Australian forces will again be involved in supporting General McChrystal’s strategy. Australia will play its part, which could again see ADF elements and their ANA partners supporting the fight in areas nearby which have a direct bearing on the security and stability of Oruzgan province and the Australian forces deployed there.

Mr President, as this description of our operations attests, Australia is making a very significant contribution to the Coalition effort in Afghanistan. We are the largest non-NATO contributor to ISAF and the tenth largest overall. Through my frequent dealings with our ISAF and other coalition partners I know that Australia’s contribution and the efforts of our troops are widely recognised and greatly appreciated. The Government believes that the current level of our contribution to Afghanistan and ISAF is appropriate. On current operational planning, Australia will maintain an average personnel level of around 1,550 throughout 2010. I say ‘average’ because shifting operational requirements mean troop numbers in theatre inevitably fluctuate.

Our operations in Afghanistan are dynamic. Varying seasonal conditions demand flexible responses. For example, each year between March and November, with 2010 no exception, Australia contributes a Rotary Wing Group, consisting of two helicopters, operators and maintenance personnel, to provide air-lift support to coalition operations in southern Afghanistan.

This contribution is essential, yet its requirement is seasonal.

I am also pleased to announce that Australia is able to fulfil a request by ISAF to provide ten personnel from within our embedded staff in Afghanistan to develop a training concept for Afghanistan’s Combat Arms Artillery School. This school will provide artillery training for the whole of the Afghan National Army, and Australia will play an integral role in its establishment. The Australian team will work to develop a training needs analysis and operating concept for the Artillery School located in Kandahar. This will contribute to a broader NATO effort to enhance training across the spectrum of Afghan National Army training requirements.

Wounded in Action

Mr President, in my last statement, I undertook to regularly and openly report to the Australian people about the status of ADF personnel Wounded in Action in Afghanistan. Today, I provide the most up-to-date information available. It is a harsh reality that the men and women of the ADF work in a dangerous environment. The threats to our deployed personnel are serious.

This danger was again made clear only a couple of days ago, when five Australian soldiers were wounded when their vehicle was struck by an Improvised Explosive Device. I am advised that all five soldiers are now stable, although two remain in a
serious condition. Some of them will be returning to Australia shortly for further specialist care. Our thoughts are with these soldiers and their families. We wish them a speedy recovery.

All up, since Operation SLIPPER commenced, 113 ADF personnel have been Wounded in Action. Since the beginning of 2010, 13 Australian soldiers have suffered wounds as a result of battle. Three have returned to Australia for specialist care, and as I have said, others may return due to the recent incident of 16 March. Of those wounded in 2010, twelve soldiers were involved in improvised explosive device attacks and one soldier was wounded during contact with the Taliban. The specific injuries include five soldiers who suffered fractures, two soldiers who suffered hearing loss and one soldier who suffered a penetrating wound. One soldier suffered from a laceration and one received wounds from other causes. Three of the soldiers suffered mild traumatic brain injury.

In 2009, in addition to those four who were tragically Killed in Action in Afghanistan, 37 Australian soldiers have suffered wounds as a result of battle. Thirty soldiers were involved in improvised explosive device attacks either during dismounted patrols or in vehicles – underlining the constant danger these devices present to our personnel. Five soldiers suffered gunshot wounds. Ten soldiers suffered concussion and other non-penetrating mild brain injuries while six soldiers suffered fractures. Seventeen soldiers have returned to Australia for medical care and rehabilitation.

Let me take this opportunity on behalf of the Government, and I know all Senators, to wish those wounded personnel all the best for a full and speedy recovery. As Defence Minister I have now met and talked to a number of wounded soldiers and discussed their treatment and rehabilitation with them and their families. Defence is committed to ensuring that our troops that are wounded receive excellent care, and their families are supported, but there is always room for improvement in this area.

Of course, one of the biggest challenges for any Minister for Defence is to ensure the men and women of the ADF are protected when deployed on an operation. As reported in my previous statement to Parliament, Defence is working hard to progress and implement the outcomes of our Force Protection Review. Some measures have been implemented already, including replacing some body armour, improving counter measures against improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and improving IED detection equipment. Consideration of the remaining recommendations is well underway, including enhanced medical support, the upgrading and hardening of living and working accommodation in Tarin Kowt, as well as other capability enhancements. This work will continue to be progressed as a priority.

Since my last statement, there have been no Australian fatalities in Afghanistan. This is heartening and gives great credit to the professionalism of our people, as well as their equipment, training, and discipline that mitigates the risks they face. We must not, however, become complacent. It would serve us well to remember those 11 soldiers Killed in Action in the service of their country since we deployed to Afghanistan, and the families, friends and colleagues of these 11 brave men.

In 2009, the international coalition suffered 508 fatalities in Afghanistan. And the Afghan National Security Forces face the day-to-day reality of losses. Today, I pay tribute to those men and women who have fought alongside Australians, and who commit themselves to the service of their own countries and the Afghan people. Their efforts will not be forgotten.

Leadership in Oruzgan Province

During this decisive period in Afghanistan, Australia faces a particular challenge with the anticipated departure from Oruzgan of our senior partner, the Netherlands. As you would be aware the coalition government in the Netherlands has dissolved following disagreement between the coalition parties about their future military commitments in Afghanistan. It will be several months before a new Government is in place. Unless a new Dutch Government decides otherwise, we understand the Dutch will proceed to implement Parliament’s decision to relinquish leadership in Oruzgan province and draw down its military forces from August 2010.

Whether the Dutch continue to make any contribution in Afghanistan is a matter for the Dutch to determine once a new Government is formed. Australia would, of course, welcome a continued Dutch commitment in Oruzgan. The Dutch Forces have been, and continue to be, a first rate partner to the ADF in Oruzgan province. Our forces work well together and have garnered mutual respect and delivered significant progress together.

If, as expected, the Netherlands relinquishes leadership of Oruzgan province later this year they will leave a legacy of success. The Dutch have developed strong relationships with the local community, with the Provincial Administration, and with non-government organisations. Under Dutch leadership, the number of non-government organisations in Oruzgan has risen from six to over fifty since 2006. The number of Basic Health Clinics has increased from one to six. The number of operating schools has more than doubled since 2006, and more than 130 accelerated learning classes have been established for students who missed out on education under the Taliban. And a new Oruzgan Business Development Centre has opened, providing Afghan men and women with bookkeeping, management, computer and language courses. Efforts such as these have made lasting improvements to the livelihood of the citizens of Oruzgan province.

On the issue of leadership in Oruzgan, NATO is working to identify a new senior partner in Oruzgan, and I will not pre-empt the outcome of that work. But the challenge this poses to our deployed forces and the Dutch replacement is not insignificant. There will be operational impacts as forces flow in and out of the province; as force enablers, such as the hospital, are

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replaced; and as responsibility for base maintenance is transferred. Along with Australia, replacement forces will also need to harness Dutch knowledge about the province. The transition process will be, on any view, an added challenge.

**International Engagement**

In recent weeks, both the Minister for Foreign Affairs and I have attended meetings with our ISAF counterparts. On 28 January this year in London, representatives from more than 70 countries and international organisations discussed improving governance and increasing foreign aid to Afghanistan, and pledged their long-term commitment to stabilising the country.

Participants at that conference (including my colleague the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who reported to the House on the outcomes of that meeting), also acknowledged the difficulties faced during last year’s Presidential elections, and the requirement for the electoral system to be strengthened to deliver a fairer and more transparent election process. Australia is playing, and will continue to play, its part.

In early February, I attended a meeting of ISAF Defence Ministers in Istanbul. This meeting provided an important opportunity to discuss the campaign in Afghanistan directly with my counterparts, and hear first-hand of progress being made. Key themes of these discussions included the criticality of progress in ISAF’s mission this year and a developing optimism about how the campaign was progressing. I highlighted to that meeting, however, what I highlight now to the Australian people: gains made are often fragile, and we must be cautious of being overly hasty in transferring responsibility for security to Afghan security forces. The transfer must be conditions-based. It was a sentiment shared and echoed by others present.

I also acknowledged the progress NATO has made in taking a more inclusive approach in consultations on Afghanistan.

To further strengthen our relationship with NATO and to help ensure we are included in all relevant NATO and ISAF decision-making processes, I have agreed to post a senior ADF officer, Major General Dawson, as the Australian Military Representative to NATO. And, at the request of NATO, on my direction the ADF has also placed a second senior ADF officer, Major General Power, as the Senior Military Adviser to the Afghan Minister for Defence, General Wardak.

**Key Challenges**

**Civilian Casualties**

Mr President, the distressing issue of civilian casualties is also a challenge for the international coalition. ISAF partners take all reasonable steps to ensure that contact with insurgents does not put the lives of Afghan civilians in jeopardy. However, as we have recently witnessed, tragedies do occur.

I can assure Parliament that whenever there is a case where we become aware that an action of the ADF has potentially led to a civilian casualty – either through credible allegations or through our own operational analysis – we take it very seriously. ISAF’s Commander, General McChrystal has stated repeatedly that the Coalition could lose this war if we do not keep faith with the Afghan people. Civilian casualties must be minimised and it is critical that, where allegations of civilian casualties arise, such incidents are properly investigated and the outcomes openly reported.

We have already reported on two incidents in 2008 - 5 and 15 July 2008 - where it was found that civilian casualties did, regrettably, occur. Defence has reassessed its Standard Operating Procedures to address these incidents.

I also want to address three incidents in 2009. The first is the 12 February 2009 civilian casualty incident, recently covered by the SBS Dateline program, in which six Afghans were killed and four injured. Any civilian casualty is a tragedy, but especially so when, as in this case, it involves the deaths of children. The Government and the ADF take incidents such as this very, very seriously. It is essential this incident be investigated thoroughly and due process followed.

In this case the Director of Military Prosecutions has not yet completed her review of the facts and circumstances surrounding the incident. Legal processes are continuing and I am advised that the Director of Military Prosecutions will be making a decision in the near future. At the earliest opportunity, when the legal processes have concluded, I will make the outcomes of the investigation public. Until then, it is inappropriate for me, or for Defence, to make specific comments about the case.

Two other incidents in 2009 are still under review. I am advised that Defence has completed the investigation into an incident that occurred on 11 August, in which one Afghan man was killed and another injured. The injured man was aero-medically evacuated to the Tarin Kowt military hospital for emergency treatment. Once final advice on the investigation has been provided to the Chief of the Defence Force, the findings will be publicly released.

I also wish to give the Senate advance notice of another matter that Defence is currently examining. Following a request received from ISAF in February this year, Defence is reviewing its records and operational documents to establish whether the ADF was involved in a particular operation in early 2009. I will make a public statement on this matter as soon as I am able to do so when more information is available.

Protecting the Afghan population and providing for their security remains ISAF’s top priority. But we should not forget that the greatest number of civilian casualties comes at the hands of the insurgents. The attack in Kandahar by Taliban suicide
bombers last weekend resulted in the death of over thirty Afghan civilians and police. While we make every effort to avoid civilian casualties, the Taliban routinely uses tactics that deliberately put innocent civilians at risk.

Detainee Management

Mr President, I also want to address the issue of detainee management. Australia has a strong commitment to ensuring that our forces treat all detainees humanely, with dignity and respect, and in accordance with all of Australia’s obligations under domestic and international law. The Government, and the ADF, takes any allegation of detainee mistreatment extremely seriously. We will continue to ensure the proper handling of detainees and the ADF will continue to undertake appropriate investigations in the event of any allegations of mistreatment.

The ADF is currently upgrading its detainee screening facility in Tarin Kowt. As the Chief of the Defence Force has previously outlined during Senate Estimates hearings, third parties, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, conduct regular inspections of the ADF screening facility to verify it is of the highest standard. I have asked to meet with representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross when I am next in Afghanistan. With this level of assurance and oversight, the ADF can be confident its practices will accord with our legal obligations and best practice.

The expected Dutch withdrawal from the leadership role in Oruzgan province also poses some challenges for detainee management. Currently, under an arrangement with the Netherlands, Australian forces transfer detainees to the Dutch. I have asked for a review of this policy, noting the Dutch will be withdrawing their forces, and I expect that I will be able to come back with an update on this issue in a subsequent report to Parliament.

Reconciliation

Mr President, on the issue of reconciliation and reintegration, Australia supports ISAF’s involvement in Afghan-led efforts to reach out to elements of the insurgency that might be prepared to permanently lay down their arms and rejoin their community. These efforts need to be consistent with the conditions set out by the Afghan Government. This includes acceptance of the Afghan Constitution and severance of links to terrorist groups. The Government has made it clear that we will not negotiate with hardline terrorists like al-Qa’ida.

Political reconciliation and, ultimately, settlement between the Afghan Government and insurgents is essential to a lasting and durable solution. The insurgency is not a monolithic and tightly structured organisation. There are a variety of reasons why different fighters take up arms. And there are also good reasons why some of them might want to contemplate an alternative to fighting. If provided with options such as employment and training opportunities in their communities, or participation in local decision-making processes, some insurgents may choose the peaceful alternative.

For these reasons, Australia supports Afghan-led reintegration efforts. As announced at the London Conference this year, Australia will contribute $25 million to the proposed Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund, subject to the establishment of appropriate governance arrangements. I have also agreed to place an ADF officer into ISAF’s newly formed Force Reintegration Cell. This small cell has been set up by General McChrystal to support reintegration as an essential element of his counter-insurgency strategy. It will provide support to the Afghan Government to establish conditions which will give disaffected individuals an incentive to reintegrate into the mainstream.

Pakistan

I also want to touch on the situation in Pakistan. Pakistan remains a critical partner in our efforts to tackle international terrorism and violent extremism. Encouragingly, Pakistan has made further headway against both over the past few months, including recent arrests by Pakistani authorities of senior Taliban leaders.

However, the international community needs to further support Pakistan in addressing its significant security challenges. Australia is contributing to the strengthening of Pakistan’s counter-insurgency capability through our Defence Cooperation Program. Over the last year, we have increased the number of Australian-based military training and education courses offered to Pakistan, from 70 positions in 2009, to over 140 positions in 2010. This training focuses on building a broad range of skills relevant to counter-insurgency warfare.

We are also working with Pakistan to enhance broader based strategic dialogue, to improve bilateral understanding and further our collective interests in regional stability.

Conclusion

Mr President, in conclusion, I can assure the Senate that the Australian Government remains committed to working with its partners in Afghanistan to achieve the best outcomes for the Afghan people. The Minister for Foreign Affairs plans to attend a meeting of ISAF Foreign Ministers in Tallinn, Estonia, late next month and the follow-up to the London Conference in Kabul midway through the year. I plan to attend the next NATO Defence Ministers’ Meeting in June this year.

Mr President, the early gains of Operation MOSHTARAK highlight the value of ISAF’s revised strategy. As Admiral Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in New York only a few days ago, “The objective is not the enemy’s
defeat but the people's success.” With a reinvigorated international effort, momentum is building. This new strategy provides a path towards peace and stability, towards ending the conflict, and, towards the completion of our mission.

Enormous difficulties will continue to test our resolve. As Australia responds to these challenges I remain committed to keeping the Australian public and the Australian Parliament fully informed.

Mr President, I look forward to delivering a further report on Afghanistan in the next sitting of Parliament.
