



Defence Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 3280 Fax 020 7219 6952 Email defcom@parliament.uk Website www.parliament.uk/defcom

From the Chairman, Rt Hon James Arbuthnot MP

The Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth MP,
Secretary of State for Defence,
Ministry of Defence,
Floor 5, Zone D,
Main Building,
Whitehall,
London SW1A 2HB

Tuesday 2 February 2010

Dear Bob,

As you may be aware, Members of the Defence Committee recently visited Afghanistan. We were able to observe operations both in Kabul and in Helmand, and meet with various representatives from the Military, development agencies and parliamentarians to discuss operations in Afghanistan. Given the recently published findings of General McChrystal, this was a very apt time to undertake such a visit. We were struck by the cautious optimism with which operations are progressing - both in terms of the military effort, and in relation to the reconstruction programme. We observed a new unity of purpose and approach between the different strands of activity, with a recognition that the war cannot be won on military terms alone. This is very welcome. However, there are massive tasks still facing troops in the region. I am therefore writing to you on behalf of the Committee to summarise some of the key issues that we identified on our visit.

The move towards improving cooperation and gaining the trust of the Afghan people is very positive and shows that the International Community is finally embracing the need for a comprehensive approach to operations in Afghanistan. The strategy of focusing on protecting the population and creating stability in key regions by encouraging local governance and development recognises the variation between the needs of the Afghan people in different regions; security cannot be imposed from Kabul. It is vital, however, that there are sufficient troops and resources available for this strategy to be effective. We were told that in Helmand, despite the surge of US Marines into the province, the number of troops in theatre will be below the ideal optimum level identified in General Petraeus' Counter-Insurgency doctrine. Building the capability of the Afghan National Army would be an effective way of meeting this need.

The training of the Afghan National Army is key to enabling Afghanistan to take control over its own security and we were grateful for the opportunity to meet some recruits at the Kabul Military Training Centre. From our discussions with British soldiers involved in the process of building the ANA's capability, it appears that this programme is progressing well. We were encouraged to hear that Afghan Security Forces were able to react to the insurgent attack on Kabul on 18 January without substantial support from ISAF, and to date nearly 14,500 soldiers have completed training. However, it is crucial that training capacity is adequate to meet the needs of the growing Army, and a lack of training personnel was identified as a concern. We were told that at present, 100

British personnel are involved in training the ANA - 1% of our deployment. While other nations are contributing significantly to this effort, it is important that we make use of our expertise in this area. Particularly emphasised to us was the need for the UK to play a lead role in the planned Afghan Defence University. We were told that to redeploy 150 troops from tasks in Helmand to training would be transformational, and would make the task in Helmand itself easier to carry out, but also that a mere 15 extra troops devoted to the Defence University would make a significant difference.

We were interested to hear about the utilisation of partnering and mentoring schemes between ISAF troops and Afghan forces, as an effective way of building both trust and mutual respect, and ensuring the continued development of the latter. It is important that such support is extended beyond the military, to building effective governance and developing Afghan institutions, both centrally and locally, in partnership with the people of Afghanistan. The long term success of operations in Afghanistan rests on creating a society which is capable of maintaining itself; effective democracy, justice, transparency and women's rights cannot merely be imposed by the International Community.

We noted with concern that while both parliamentarians in general, and women parliamentarians and civic society representatives in particular, seemed to be keen to be involved in the preparatory discussions for the London Conference, they often felt quite strongly that they were not. It is important that this is addressed in the work between now and the Kabul conference. The Secretary of State will be aware of the statement issued by Afghan women leaders following the conference, which refers to UN Resolution 1325. This statement is enclosed with this letter.

We were pleased to hear that development activities, partly led and funded by the UK in Helmand, have had some success over the last year, with the Helmand Counter-Narcotics Strategy achieving a 33% reduction in opium cultivation and a significant increase in the growing of wheat as a substitute. The success of this, and other development initiatives and NGO activities, is inevitably connected to the security situation in Helmand: farmers need to be able to transport their produce to market, for example, and NGOs need to be able to access communities safely. This continues to be a concern. We were pleased to hear from Major General Nick Carter has requested an investigation into construction and logistical contracts taken out by ISAF with Afghan firms, with a view to ensuring that money does not go to firms funding the Taliban or continuing corruption, but instead helps the local economy.

The growing emphasis on reconciliation and reintegration of members of the Taliban has proved controversial. It was not clear to us from our discussions that this move has broad political support within Afghanistan. Such programmes can only prove successful if the Afghan Government gains the trust of the wider population and it is shown that stability and peace in Afghanistan will be achieved through a democratically elected Afghan Government, rather than through the Taliban. Financial incentives may have a role to play, but cannot be effective in isolation. We were told by Dr Jack Kem, Deputy to Lieutenant General Caldwell, that there was a recognition that such a programme needs to be deployed in a way which does not stimulate perverse incentives in communities where insurgent influence and activity has been less prevalent. Such a scheme cannot be perceived to reward individuals, but should benefit communities as a whole. The role of the UK military in implementing this programme is also an issue that we would like to investigate further. It is also vital to recognise that there will be those who are irreconcilable on ideological terms and for whom reintegration will not be a realistic possibility.

The message that we heard repeatedly throughout our visit was that the next 18 months will be absolutely critical for demonstrating that the war can be won in Afghanistan. The increase in troops and new approach to the conflict has undoubtedly provided a momentum, which must be used to provide both the Afghan and the British public with proof that progress can and is being made. We believe that the Government must do more to communicate to the British public that we have a purpose in Afghanistan and that our troops are not fighting for a lost cause: this message is not getting through at present.

We will look forward to hearing what you have to say on all of these issues in our meeting with you next week. In addition, we will seek reassurances that the period of *pardah* before the election will not prevent necessary military decisions being taken.

Yours ever
James

CHAIRMAN