By Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

Somewhere in Afghanistan a man kneels in front of an open suitcase. He's a figure of some power and influence locally; may be the village headman, or the patriarch of a particular clan. The suitcase been handed to him by an American. Inside, row after row of crisply banded dollar bills, of a denomination that can be usefully brandished in the world's sixth poorest country.

What is he going to do with the money? Will he buy guns, bankroll militiamen, bribe an official to ease the passage of some private business; or build roads, rebuild a bombed-out school, say, compensate a family for the loss of a limb, or life, or livelihood ? Will he be accountable to anyone for his transactions? Who, exactly, gave it to him, and for what purpose, and on whose authority? Will they meet only once, or share a regular brew of tea, discuss affairs of mutual interest, come to respect and trust each other? Is the suitcase a one-off, or part of a matching set of luggage ?

This suitcase of cash floats, sometimes real, sometimes phantom, through our own tribal gatherings to debate our ongoing Afghan expedition. It's a staple of the SF pulp novel – for instance, Damian Lewis's 'Bloody Heroes', set in Afghanistan. In 2005, former CIA Operative Gary Schroen allegedly told Associated Press reporters that he had personally taken a suitcase of $3m to obtain the support of Northern Alliance warlords in 2001.

Christina Lamb, of the Sunday Times and freelance author, and a twenty years' veteran of the country, holds it aloft in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in April this year:

[In 2001] American special forces were coming to [the warlords] giving them briefcases full of dollars. I witnessed in Jalalabad a warlord being given a briefcase full of hundreds of dollars by somebody from Delta force. In return he gave a list of names that were supposed to be al-Qaeda people that the force was looking for. It was actually a list of names of his enemies, whom it would be very convenient for him to be rid of.

In 2009 our direction has changed. The Afghanistan mission is now spoken of in multi-departmental, or comprehensive, terms,.Military people have long been saying that military effort alone will not bring 'success' there. No-one is more keenly aware of the limitations of force majeur in pacifying an insurgency, reconstructing a shattered infrastructure, and creating the preconditions for the withdrawal of ISAF forces from a hopefully stabilised state. Where is our phantom suitcase now, and of what use might it be in realising this comprehensive approach?

Through the Emergency Response program, the US's military-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in-country have access to, and control of, a suitcase of $100 000 per month. The Brits don't have anything comparable. Official British PRT policy is to encourage 'aid through

stabilisation', working in partnership with natives, rather than a stark cash deal. It sees virtue in avoiding the use of cash as a weapons system. Commanders on the ground may look at the carnage and calculate the cost of battles, and wish that they had instead a suitcase tucked under their arm to simply walk unblooded into the villages and bargain for their objectives.

One of the obvious arguments against the suitcase option is that the six-month British tour does not equip commanders with sufficient local knowledge to make properly informed judgements about the money's recipients, and their likely use of it.

And what are the dangers and consequences of throwing hard cash about in a culture notorious for corruption, where desperate personal poverty raises the stakes and blunts the scruples, where local loyalties and allegiances can seem to us impenetrable, while the legitimacy and purpose of our mission in Afghan eyes may seem equally opaque?

Christina Lamb again:

I said to these [American] special forces guys, "How do you know that these are al-Qaeda people?" They did not really care. They said, "Well, we are going to enter the names in the computer and we have our list." So, they were quite happy. Seeing these warlords who had caused all this damage suddenly being paid huge amounts of money and being allowed to then become powerful again gave such a bad signal to ordinary Afghan people.

Christina Lamb is one of many who think the six-month tour almost a waste of time. It's far shorter than the American deployment. Senior British commanders are now required to complete a 12 month tour, with two two-week breaks only.

The success of aid through stabilisation depends on a British sensitivity to real Afghan needs, and the ability to respond. These are often going to be small-scale, unspectacular projects. They will lack trophy-value. If you're on a short tour of duty and unfamiliar with the customs of the country, let's hope you're a fast learner, and that the support systems you're going to need are in place. If you're on a short tour and want high-visibility achievements on your report card, this kind of undertaking may not be attractive.

Different funding arrangements for different British government departments may hamper co-operation between them in their pursuit of the Comprehensive Approach. . There are three visible players in Afghanistan; the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Department for International Development (DfID). The MoD is traditionally geared towards excess capacity. And the Treasury pays campaign costs out of the reserve. DfID, on the other hand, has no financial surge capacity. And the FCO is not much more flexibly funded than is DfID.

There is also a fourth, unseen player; the Treasury. In 2005/06, the number of personnel deploying to Afghanistan was capped at a little over 3 300. Not, according to Brigadier (retired) Ed Butler, former Commander of British forces in Afghanistan , by military judgement, or by foreign policy fiat. By the Treasury.

So what happens to Comprehensive Approach theory in theatre?

What happens is that those who can, do. The military, in a non- or semi-permissive environment, often perform what they know is not their proper role, but they do what they are able when no-one else is.

For example, aid workers often do not come equipped with their own road or air vehicles. How do they get about? Courtesy of the Forces; which places even more importance on their getting adequate logistical support. What happens when aid is needed but the people designated to deliver it have been denied permission to travel to areas deemed to be too risky? The Army goes in.

In Whitehall in 2006, Brigadier Butler says, the perception was that all Helmand was burning. It wasn't. There were development opportunities, urgent development needs, in many parts of the province, which weren't addressed because the entire area was written off as a no-go area.

We missed the first 100 days – a macrocosmic equivalent of medicine's golden hour - post-conflict in Afghanistan. We missed it again in Iraq.

Who is making these risk assessments? A definition of security is often a function of departmental mindset. At the DfID end of the spectrum, the mindset is the most risk-averse.

And on what evidence does the Treasury base its vetoes ?

In July 2006, when Brigadier Butler had command of 3 Para battlegroup, he had many official visitors, surveying, noting, collecting data, seeing for themselves conditions and requirements. In fact, there were only three days in the whole month when he hadn't.

Any were any of these high-powered official visitors from the Treasury ?

No.

(Brigadier Ed Butler retired from the Army in January 2009. An article in the Daily Telegraph described him as one of the most brilliant stars of his generation. In an interview, brigadier Butler cites as one of many reasons for his decision the recent increase from 6 to 12 months of a senior commander's tour of duty in Afghanistan, and the possible effect this might have on his family life.

At the time of his return from Afghanistan in October 2006 the number of British troops deployed had risen above 5,000. As at 15th June 2009 the "residing level" was 8,300 with a "surge" temporary level for the Afghanistanb Presidential Elections of 9,000)

Postscript : The Sunday Times reported (14 June 2009) that agents of M16, M15 and GCHQ are to be permitted to give cash directly to the Taleban.

Proposing to exempt the security services from the provisions of the Anti-Bribery Bill, currently

before a parliamentary committee in draft, Justice Secretary Jack Straw describes the circumstances in which operatives could use financial inducements as 'carrying out statutory functions. This would have to be authorised by the secretary of state.'

We no longer trust our military commanders or our aid workers with access to upfront cash, to be disbursed directly to Afghans, at their discretion, and entailing, it would seem to follow, some degree of transparency and accountability. We are too fastidious for such direct action and too distrustful of our own people's judgement, or of the integrity of its recipients.

But we will allow anonymous and highly autonomous agents to use undisclosed sums in secret transactions with the Taleban not subject to any kind of public or parliamentary scrutiny.

Is this symptomatic of a British addiction to secrecy, or is it simply grown-up realpolitik to be seen to do one thing while covertly pursuing its opposite ?