

A team of experts deployed to Libya to assist the transitional government there in preventing the spread of thousands of man-operated portable air defence systems (MANPADS) has returned to the UK.

The military and civilian personnel, who worked alongside Libyan, American and French colleagues, first deployed to Benghazi in August last year and have since operated from Misrata and Tripoli. The joint teams have inspected more than 1,600 bunkers and identified, and secured, disabled or confirmed as destroyed, 5,000 components and complete systems.

Having inspected the majority of the former Qadhafi regime's ammunition storage, and following the use and destruction of thousands of MANPADS during last year's conflict, the team has concluded that most remaining MANPADS are likely to be under the control of regional military councils and militias. The UK will therefore support the Libyan authorities and the UN as they implement a comprehensive disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration (DDR) programme to bring these remaining systems back under the control of central government and undertake broader work to ensure the destruction of conventional weapons in the round including MANPADS, unexploded ordnance and mines.

Secretary of State for Defence, Philip Hammond MP, said: "Following the fall of the Qadhafi regime, the security and counter-proliferation of man-portable surface to air missiles became an immediate priority, both for us and Libya's National Transitional Council. We acted swiftly and now we can see the positive results of having done so.

"The weapons found and secured could be dangerous in the wrong hands. I pay tribute to the British experts who carried out this challenging work, as well as the international partners they worked alongside. I also welcome the next phase in this programme, which will see Libya take forward its own conventional weapons destruction programme including mine clearance and dealing with unexploded ordnance.

As well as financing this work, the UK has provided £1.4m and a civilian expert to support the provision of teams who will continue the inspection of ammunition storage areas. These contractor teams will also help clear unexploded ordnance within Libya's towns and villages as well as in and around ammunition storage areas that were hit by NATO airstrikes or in fighting between the National Transitional Council and pro-Qadhafi forces. This continues the vital work done by the Royal Navy during the conflict to clear mines from Libya's key ports and waterways to allow the free flow of civilian shipping.