

UK force levels in Afghanistan are to reduce to around 5,200 by the end of 2013, the Prime Minister announced today.

In Parliament, the Prime Minister said UK forces would shift from mentoring Afghan troops at battalion level to brigade level next year. This reflects the progress made in Helmand and the increasing ability and confidence of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to lead security operations.

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The drawdown, agreed by the National Security Council (NSC) this week, is in line and consistent with both UK military advice and the NATO strategy agreed at the Lisbon Summit in 2010, under which ISAF forces continue to operate across the country. UK forces will end combat operations by the end of 2014. It is part of transition to an enduring commitment to Afghanistan.

Today's announcement comes as the previously announced reduction of UK force levels from 9,500 to 9,000. Detailed work on how force levels will reduce in 2013 is ongoing and will be conducted in line with operational requirements and the transition process which remains on track, says the MoD.

But as the Afghan forces increasingly take the lead, UK combat operations will give way to an increasing focus on training and advising. By the end of 2013 it is expected that UK forces will not routinely need to mentor Afghan forces below Brigade level, allowing the reduction in numbers.

Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, said: "The Afghan National Army and Police have greatly improved in the past years. Their capability has increased so that today they enjoy the trust of some 84 percent of the population.

"As they develop, and in agreement with the ANSF, the efforts of our Armed Forces will continue to shift from a combat role to one that focuses on training, advice and assistance. That will allow us to make appropriate and measured reductions in our force levels in line with the ISAF plan and our Chicago commitments.

"These drawdown plans are based on military advice and following discussion with Gen Allen, COMISAF. I am confident that the progress we have seen in Helmand and across Afghanistan can be maintained and that we can complete the tasks we have been set.

"To be in the position where we are now able to commit to reducing UK force levels to around 5,200 by the end of next year is testament to the professionalism and courage of those personnel who have served, and continue to serve, in Afghanistan.

"We must remember that the UK's commitment to the operation in Afghanistan will continue beyond the end of 2014 as DFID and the Foreign Office continue to build the government and nation while the UK's pledge to support the ANSF, including training the military's officers, will be ongoing."

Significant progress in Afghanistan continues with 75 per cent of the Afghan population now being secured by the ANSF and at least 80 per cent of all patrols being ANSF-led.

Of 80 UK bases at the start of the HERRICK 16 deployment this April, only 32 remain active with the others having been handed over to Afghan forces or closed. While in 2009 there was one Afghan National Army brigade in Helmand, now the 4th Brigade brings ANA numbers in the Province to about 18,000.

Afghans are now expressing greater confidence about security and the ability of Afghan forces. The recent Asia Foundation survey shows that 93 per cent and 82 per cent of respondents had a fair amount or great deal of confidence in the army and police and ANP respectively.

Key facts : ANSF

Over 75% of the Afghan population is being secured by the ANSF and at least 80% of all patrols are ANSF-led.

In response to the increasing capability of the ANSF, mentoring focus has begun lifting from Tolay/Precinct to Kandak/District.

Afghan National Army

Since Feb 2012 the ANA's 215 Corps has increased in size by a Brigade HQ, an Infantry Kandak, a Combat Support Kandak and a Combat Service Support Kandak. Since Nov 2011 the Regional Military Training Centre at Shorabak has trained 7,500 ANA soldiers.

Afghan National Police

Since Feb 2012 the Lashkar Gar Training Centre has trained 1,141 ANP personnel.

Development/Governance

Asphalt and gravel roads are being built to allow safe freedom of movement between villages and markets, encouraging travel and trade to become re-established (52km complete, 106km ongoing). Mobile phone coverage and supporting infrastructure continues to expand (a third of the population have mobile phones). Government officials now have freedom of movement between Lashkar Gah and the five central Helmand districts. There are District Governors in 12 of Helmand's 14 districts.

Transition in Task Force Helmand Districts:

Lashkar Gah: With effect from Mar 12 security for all eight precincts and Route 601 transferred to ANSF lead control. Security for the entire district is now an Afghan lead. ISAF forces represent less than 20% of security forces in Lashkar Gah.

Nad-e Ali: Lead security has been handed from ISAF to ANSF in nine out of ten precincts. ISAF forces currently represent less than 50% of security forces in Nad-e Ali.

Nahr-e Saraj: The Afghans are now firmly in the lead in Gereshk Town and along the strategically important Highway 1 and they are not far behind in most of the other, outlying rural areas.

Defence Secretary Philip Hammond MP has also reported to Parliament on progress in the last 3 months :

Since operations began in 2001, 438 members of our Armed Forces have made the ultimate sacrifice. In the face of such sacrifice, we should be in no doubt about why we are operating in Afghanistan. It is for one overriding reason: to protect our national security. Atrocities on the scale of September 11 2001 must never be allowed to happen again. We seek an Afghanistan able to effectively manage its own security and prevent its territory from being used as a safe haven by international terrorists to plan and launch attacks against the UK and our allies. This is an objective shared by our coalition partners in ISAF and by the Afghan Government. We in NATO fully support the ambition of the Afghan Government for it to have full security responsibility across Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Our strategies are firmly aligned. The phased process of transition of security responsibility agreed at the Lisbon summit, is well advanced and on track.

In accordance with ISAF planning, by the end of 2013 we expect that UK forces will no longer need to routinely mentor the Afghan National Army below Brigade level. This is a move up from our current Battalion level mentoring and is a reflection of rapidly improving Afghan capacity and capability and is in line with the Chicago milestone.

As the Prime Minister has just announced, a progressive move to Brigade level mentoring will also allow us to make further reductions to our force levels from the 9,000 we will have at the end of this year. Our current planning envisages a reduction to around 5,200 by the end of next year. This number is based on current UK military advice and is in line with the NATO strategy agreed at Lisbon and the emerging ISAF planning. It also reflects the real progress being made in Helmand.

We will keep this number under review as the ISAF plan firms up and other Allies make drawdown decisions in the New Year. Let me be clear: this reduction is possible because of the success of the Afghan national security forces in assuming a lead role.

Across many parts of Afghanistan security is already delivered by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Today the ANSF have lead security responsibility in areas which are home to three quarters of the population including each of the 34 provincial capitals

and including all three districts that make up the UK's area of operations. Across Afghanistan, the ANSF now lead on over 80% of conventional operations and carry out 90% of their own training. They set their own priorities, lead their own planning and conduct and sustain their own operations. By the middle of next year - marking a moment of huge significance for the Afghan people - we expect the ANSF to have lead security responsibility for the whole country. This national picture is replicated in Helmand. The ANSF now are firmly in charge in the populated areas of central Helmand, increasingly with the ability and confidence to operate independently. As the ANA's confidence in its own ability grows, they are showing an appetite to conduct Afghan intelligence-led raids and we are focussing our advisory effort accordingly. The focus of our assistance to the ANSF in Helmand is increasingly switching from Company level activities to mentoring at Battalion level. Kandaks from the ANA's 3/215 Brigade in Nad-e Ali and Nahr-e Saraj have already moved to the new model, working alongside the UK-led Brigade Advisory Group, and further Kandak Advisory Teams will be in place shortly. The reaction of the leaders and commanders - at all levels in 3/215 Brigade - has been one of pride based on increased self-confidence. This phased transition has allowed the UK-led Task Force Helmand to reduce its footprint significantly and since April, nearly 50 permanent British base locations, over 60% of the pre-April total, have been closed or handed over to the ANSF. But while the progress on security has been real and meaningful, partnering is not without risk. The attacks on our forces, including so called 'insider attacks' perpetrated by rogue members of the ANSF, remind us how difficult the mission is. We are working at every level to suppress this threat. However, while we are doing everything we can to thwart them, we are clear that we will not allow these terrible incidents to derail our strategy or our commitment to the Afghan people. The insurgents remain committed to conducting a campaign of violence in Afghanistan. They continue to represent a threat to the future stability of the country. The ANSF, supported by ISAF where necessary, are taking the fight to the insurgents and pushing them away from the towns, markets, key transport routes and intensively farmed areas towards the rural fringe. As a result, the Afghan-led security plan is increasingly able to focus on disrupting the insurgency in its safe havens. While we cannot be complacent, the picture as a whole is of an insurgency weakened. Enemy initiated attacks have fallen by an average of over 10 percent in those areas that have entered the transition process, demonstrating that the Afghans are managing their own security. More importantly, the geographical pattern of enemy initiated attacks shows a significant reduction in impact on the local population. While our combat mission will be ending in 2014, our clear message to the Afghan people remains one of firm and ongoing commitment. On the security front, at the Chicago Summit in May, the International Community agreed to provide funding to support the continued development of the Afghan National Security Forces in the years after 2014. NATO itself has agreed the establishment of a new, non-combat mission after transition completes. The UK will support this, including through our role as the lead Coalition partner at the new Afghan National Army Officer Academy. That is our baseline commitment and, as the Prime Minister said earlier, we will consider other options after 2014. In terms of supporting the Afghan Government as a whole, the Kabul conference in June sent a clear message of regional engagement and, at the Tokyo conference in July, \$4bn per year was pledged to meet Afghanistan's essential development needs. The UK's combined funding

commitments from Chicago and Tokyo are almost £250m a year. For the value of this support from the international community to be fully realised, the Afghan Government will need to address the corruption which remains rampant and could become a very real threat to the long term stability of Afghanistan. The Afghan Government now needs to deliver on its commitments through the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) to establish a legal framework for fighting corruption, improve economic and financial management and implement key economic and governance reforms, including elections. Democracy is taking hold in Afghanistan. Not, of course, in the same shape as here in Britain, but Afghan voters can look forward to a future of their choosing, rather than one that is imposed upon them. Afghan women enjoy a level of participation in their society and their politics that few could have dreamed of even half a decade ago. DFID will continue to provide funding and support to further advance this agenda. In Helmand, the process of local representation has seen marked improvements. Voter participation during 2012 for district community council elections in the traditionally challenging districts of Sangin, Nahr-e Saraj and Garmsir have been impressive by comparison with levels during previous Presidential and Parliamentary elections in the same areas. October's announcement of the 2014 Presidential Elections is another important milestone in Afghanistan's history. Many challenges remain, but an inclusive and transparent electoral process will be a sign of real progress. Ultimately, Mr Speaker, the best opportunity for a stable and secure Afghanistan for the long-term lies in a political settlement; one that draws in those opponents of the Afghan Government willing to renounce the insurgency and participate in peaceful politics. Any political process will, in the end, require the Afghan Government, the Taliban and other Afghan groups to come together to talk and to compromise. We appreciate how difficult this is for the respective parties, so we are working with our international allies to help bring all sides together. In particular, the engagement of Pakistan in this process is hugely important. Our aim is to generate confidence and dialogue. Our message to the Taliban is that reconciliation is not surrender; it is an opportunity for all Afghans to sit down together and help shape their country's future. Common ground can be found, focused on the need for a strong, independent, economically viable Afghanistan. The future of Afghanistan can be seen in the increased level of economic activity across the country. Bazaars that had been deserted are re-opening and commercial investment is evident in the towns. Basic public services are available to increasing percentages of the population. Nevertheless, Afghanistan, although rich in culture and natural resources, remains one of the poorest countries in the world - a legacy of thirty years of conflict. Its people are proud and hospitable, yet they have suffered unimaginable brutality and deprivation. Our combat mission is drawing to a close, but our commitment to the Afghan people is long term. Progress is clear and measurable and our determination to complete our mission and help Afghanistan secure its future remains undiminished.