

By a special correspondent

Britain's commitment to a stable Afghanistan was in the interests of UK security, the Foreign Secretary has today claimed.

The Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees were taking evidence on Afghanistan from Defence Secretary John Hutton and Foreign Secretary David Miliband. Joining the Secretaries of State were Lieutenant General Peter Wall and Sir Mark Lyall Grant of the FCO.

Opening the session, Conservative MP and Defence Committee Chair James Arbuthnot asked if Afghanistan was more stable than a year ago. The Taliban had turned from conventional military operations to an insurgency, David Miliband replied. Furthermore, the situation in the East had significantly improved, he told the Committee.

That being said, the Foreign Secretary observed that the asymmetric tactics of the Taliban were hard to counter and this underlined the need for a continued coalition presence in the region. Although violence in Helmand was increasing, there were signs that progress was continuing, John Hutton claimed, stating that the Afghan National Army is growing in capability. However, Mr Hutton concluded that 'the Taliban are well resourced and they're fighting us hard'.

Mr Arbuthnot asked how the Government would address British scepticism of operations in Afghanistan. David Miliband replied that there was a clear rationale and mission in Afghanistan: to prevent it becoming a haven for terrorists like the Taliban. The Government had to show it had a comprehensive strategy for this, he said. Furthermore, stability in Afghanistan was contingent on stability in Pakistan, and vice versa, and the Foreign Secretary stated that the international community had a responsibility to raise its game in Afghanistan.

Liberal Democrat MP Paul Keetch asked if other NATO countries were playing enough of a role. The Government wanted more countries to do more, Mr Miliband admitted, but welcomed the renewed and increased commitment by the French government. He praised the military contribution of Croatia and Estonia, but pointed out that the economic and social development roles were also of importance.

Conservative MP Malcolm Moss highlighted comments by an Afghan diplomat that only one district in Helmand was under government control. The UK had a security presence in eight of the 13 districts, Mr Hutton replied, adding that the Afghan National Army was growing in capability.

The Taliban could 'no way' win the campaign in Helmand militarily, General Wall told the Committee. However, he stated that the building of governance structures had to be done by the Afghans themselves. The General argued it was misleading that progress could be made

by 'flooding more forces in' alone. British forces were holding five key districts encompassing the main Helmand valley, he explained, adding that this represented the majority of agricultural land and sixty per cent of the population.

Labour MP Eric Illsley observed that some regional warlords still controlled their own private armies, funded through the narcotics trade. Mr Miliband replied that the warlords were not a part of the insurgency, but acknowledged that they were beyond the control of the state. There were a significant number of armed men not under government control funded by drug money, the Foreign Secretary admitted, but pointed out that 18 provinces were now poppy-free, while John Hutton pointed out that the UK and NATO provided support to the Afghan government to help it tackle narco-crime.

Conservative MP Adam Holloway suggested that the situation in Helmand amounted to a revolt against a 'corrupt and inept' central government. David Miliband replied that the Government always raised the issue of corruption in discussions with its Afghan counterpart. He argued that governance structures were being improved at both a central and regional level.

On British war aims in Afghanistan, Conservative MP David Heathcoat-Amory suggested that there had been mission creep from guaranteeing UK security to pacifying an unruly country. David Miliband replied that allowing Afghanistan to become a haven for the Taliban would constitute a threat to the west. Therefore, Britain had to support the government of Afghanistan to protect its own people, the Foreign Secretary asserted.

Liberal Democrat Sir Menzies Campbell observed that a former British commander in Iraq had warned that fighting insurgency would be an ongoing task and had spoken of bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Training the Afghan army to defend the state was wholly consistent with the Government's aims, Mr Miliband replied. If former Taliban fighters were willing to play by the rules then they should be brought within the political process, he added.

Labour's Linda Gilroy asked if enough was being done to win the propaganda war. It was important to ensure that Afghans knew that the international community would support them against the Taliban, Mr Miliband replied. The Army had been assiduous in allowing British journalists to report on the situation in Afghanistan and that helped to redress Taliban propaganda, the Foreign Secretary said.

Conservative MP Robert Key argued that the determination to establish a western liberal democracy in Afghanistan was misplaced. Whether security came before democracy was a profound debate in foreign policy, David Miliband observed. He argued that elections were an important part of the picture in Afghanistan, but warned against the idea that this meant that a 'democratic and genteel' society was being created.

Both US presidential candidates had committed to a 'surge' in Afghanistan, Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin observed, asking what the UK would contribute to this. John Hutton welcomed the potential deployment of more US troops, but stressed that no requests to increase British commitments had yet been received. The UK was currently pulling its weight and could not be expected to fill all the gaps in ISAF, the Defence Secretary said.

David Miliband noted that US commanders recognised the need for a comprehensive approach encompassing politics, economics and social development as well as more troops. John Hutton added that British NGOs such as Oxfam were active in Afghanistan, working through Afghan employees.

Liberal Democrat MP Richard Younger-Ross observed that NGOs no longer had free movement in the south of Afghanistan. This was a matter of security and the UK was working with the governor of Helmand and the Afghan National Army, John Hutton said. He rejected the idea that problems were getting worse.

David Miliband replied that highway security had considerably risen up the agenda. On securing the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Foreign Secretary called for comprehensive action from both sides.

The Afghan government did not accept the Durand line as an international border, Foreign Affairs Committee Chair and Labour MP Mikes Gapes observed. Sir Mark Lyall Grant observed that there was significant political goodwill between the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. There was a need to diffuse this down to the military and intelligence services, allowing for effective joint operations, Sir Mark said. Pakistan faced challenges over its economic situation, he continued, claiming that if these could be overcome there was an opportunity for the type of joint action he had already described.

Conservative MP Sir John Stanley observed that the writ of the Afghan government only extended to a fifth of the country. While rejecting this statistic, Mr Miliband acknowledged that there were parts of the country beyond central control. Following up, Sir John asked which other countries were committed to remaining in Afghanistan for as long as the UK. In response, Mr Miliband highlighted that the German government had just agreed to increase both troop numbers and aid to Afghanistan, Mr Miliband highlighted.

Labour MP Ken Purchase suggested that more effort should be placed on stopping drug trafficking. John Hutton pointed out that NATO Ministers had agreed to place greater efforts on tackling narcotics, focusing efforts on laboratories and traffickers rather than small farmers.