

Just before the Summer Recess, Parliament dealt with Defence Questions. Here's the underlying Government brief on the current situation.

Britain is in Afghanistan as part of one of the widest ever international coalitions, to protect democracy in Afghanistan, our own national security and global stability.

The Taliban who seized power through violence and ruled Afghanistan with utter brutality and contempt for human rights also provided a safe haven for Al Qaeda to launch the September 11 attacks. Today, Al Qaeda has moved across the border to the tribal areas of Pakistan and most of the terrorist threats to Britain are linked back to there.

We cannot allow this region to remain a lawless place, sheltering terrorism, criminal drugs networks and destabilising the whole region.

We knew from the start that the British task of bringing security to Helmand would be a hard and dangerous job. It has come at a tragic cost, particularly in the last ten days and our sympathies are with all those who have lost loved ones. This weekend, Britain grieved as one, but we will not walk away in the face of adversity. We will continue to do everything we can to support our forces as they put their lives on the line for their country giving them the right vehicles, helicopters, and other equipment.

The Americans have sent over 20,000 more troops and we have increased our troop levels to more than 9,000. The immediate priority is to ensure the Afghan elections this summer are free and fair.

Operation Panchai Palang (Panther's Claw) 3,000 soldiers from Task Force Helmand, together with Danish, Estonian and Afghan forces, are involved in Operation PANCHAI PALANG, or Panther's Claw. The operation is taking place in a heavily-populated area between Gereshk, the economic hub of Helmand, and Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital.

Meanwhile US-led Operation KHANJARI or Strike of the Sword aims to bring greater security to areas of Southern Helmand not previously under Afghan government control.

Both operations aim to extend security throughout the areas to protect the local population and allow them to enjoy a more normal life, in particular to take part in the forthcoming elections free from intimidation and violence. By improving security and allowing freedom of movement the operation will also allow reconstruction and development to take place straight after military operations are complete.

Wider UK strategy in Afghanistan

The mountains bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan are a crucible for terrorism that threatens the UK.

In Pakistan, violent extremists pose a threat to internal security as well as providing support and guidance to those planning terrorist attacks in the UK.

In Afghanistan, international and Afghan forces are engaged in a hard struggle to secure the country against the Taleban insurgents who once sheltered Al Qaeda and could do so again if we let them. Britain's own security is at direct risk if Afghanistan again becomes a safe haven for terrorists.

The Prime Minister announced a comprehensive UK strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan on 29 April this year. As that strategy set out in detail, the UK's goal is to ensure that Afghanistan becomes a secure and stable state, and that both Pakistan and Afghanistan are able to suppress violent extremism within their borders.

That is an ambitious goal, and a long term goal, but it is not an unrealistic goal; and we are not pursuing it alone.

Current tactical issues

In Helmand, we are currently engaged in joint operations with Afghan forces and other coalition partners, in particular the US. The casualty rates reflect increased military activities by the coalition. These are aimed at increasing security in Central and Southern Helmand ahead of August's Presidential elections, providing ongoing safety for the local people and enabling more of them to cast their vote. Ultimately it's about winning more and more people to the side of the Afghan government and stability, leaving fewer people on the side of the Taleban and the terrorists.

We are engaged in a

very hard battle with the insurgency in Helmand and we have tragically lost many good men and women in that fight, particularly in recent days. But we wouldn't be there if it wasn't important - for the UK's national security as well as the stability of the region.

◆ We are the 2nd largest troop contributor and 3rd largest aid donor to Afghanistan, and we will see through the commitments we have made.

◆ UK Forces are doing a large part of the heavy lifting in Afghanistan, having provided the vast majority of international forces in the most difficult province in the country for the past three years.

◆ We have increased our military forces in Afghanistan progressively since 2006 (from 5,500 in the autumn of 2006, to around 7,800 in the summer of 2007 to around 8,100 in summer of 2008, to around 9,000 now).

◆ We announced in April an increase in UK troop numbers to 9000 on a temporary basis to provide greater security for the elections in Helmand this summer, returning after the elections to 8300 troops. Within that figure we have deployed permanent additional units for protecting our forces from mines and roadside bombs.

◆ The UK is one player in a much wider coalition. It is not a question of denying British commanders the troops they need. It is a question of sharing the burden with our allies, so that we can each make a fair contribution to improving security in the trouble spots in Afghanistan's South and East.

◆ We know that Helmand is one of those trouble spots. In a coalition effort, as General Sir Richard Dannatt has said, it does not matter whether the extra boots on the ground in Helmand are British, American or Afghan ◆ and we have more of all three there right now.

◆ We welcome the US deployment of 10,000 further forces to Helmand. There is no question of "British failure" ◆ both US and UK recognise that Helmand is the heartland of the insurgency (and the drugs trade which feeds it), and so both countries have increased the number of troops we have deployed there.

◆ Working with our Afghan and international allies, we can and will make slow but steady progress in combating the very severe security problems Helmand faces.

◆ In the long term it is the Afghan troops who matter most and who will provide security for their own people. The Afghan National Army has made strong progress. In 2008 it expanded by another 26,000 soldiers and the ANA led on 60% of the operations in which they participate.

◆ We have approved over ◆4.2Bn on emerging Urgent Operational Requirements for current operations; the majority on force protection measures. Of this, we have now spent well over ◆1.2Bn on around 1500 new vehicles:

◆ In the past 2 years 1200 new vehicles have been ordered and a large number have already been delivered. The remainder will be delivered in 2010

◆ We have purchased Mastiff and Ridgback. We have also placed contracts for Wolfhound and Husky, the heavy and medium Tactical Support Vehicles and Warthog which is to replace Viking on operations. All these have added to the Protected Mobility capabilities available to UK Armed Forces.

◆ We continue to respond to new and changing threats on the ground by providing our serving personnel with the highest levels of protection and mobility that technology will allow.

◆ Between November 2006 and April 2009 we increased helicopter numbers in Afghanistan by over 60% and the helicopter hours available to commanders by 84%. We anticipate making further increases over the next 12 months.

◆ From the end of this year, the RAF Merlin helicopters will deploy to Afghanistan having completed their mission in Iraq. The aircraft will provide a significant increase in our Helicopter Lift capability. In summer 2010, Army Lynx equipped with more powerful engines will also deploy to Afghanistan providing commanders with a year-round Light Helicopter capability. Currently Lynx can only operate in the cooler months.

◆ The MoD is also making extra money available to recruit, train and retain additional crews to fly and maintain our helicopters, improving the security of the fleet and

ensuring that manpower resources are prioritised to those units providing Battlefield Helicopter support to operations.

◆ Over the next ten years the MoD intends to invest some
◆6bn to replace and enhance helicopter capability through the Future Rotorcraft capability programme. This includes procurement of Future Lynx WILDCAT, which we confirmed in December 2008.

◆ A number of nations have benefited from the UK-French helicopter initiative to make their helicopters more deployable, and the international operation in Afghanistan has benefited accordingly.