

Defence Secretary Des Browne today paid another visit to Afghanistan – his seventh – and he gave an interview to BBC radio which doesn't seem to have appeared elsewhere. We are pleased to bring you these highlights:

Shaun Ley, presenter: The Defence Secretary, Des Browne, is on a visit to British troops in Helmand province. He's on the line from there now. Mr Browne, good afternoon.

Des Browne, Secretary of State for Defence: Good afternoon, Shaun.

SL: 17 British deaths since the beginning of last month – are you worried that this might indicate the Taliban becoming more effective in the tactics it's using?

DB: Well, I mean, certainly, since I was last here in May, you know, the troops out here have had a very difficult June and July, and that's... they've been very tough months for them. And we've paid a high price over those months for the progress that we have made. But, you know, I stood this morning on the top of the district centre in the town of Sangin – finally, I've never been able to go there before – but I could see with my own eyes that a town which the Taliban effectively denied to us and to their own people only a matter of months ago is now, to the extent that any place ever can be in a country like Afghanistan, a thriving community. As far as the eye could see, you know, we were controlling the ground and allowing the people to get on with their lives. The market was thriving: 700 people there this morning selling their wares; and the town was working away. Now I'd just say in seven visits to Afghanistan I've never been able to go to Sangin.

(Editor's Note: We seem to recall that it was almost exactly a year ago that Mr Browne talked enthusiastically about 'moving around the streets' of Lashkar Gah...)

SL: But is that simply what Professor Clarke was talking about, that the British presence is buying time? And if that's the case, rather than actually, as the Prime Minister put it in December, "winning the battle", if UK troops are really just facilitating a stalemate is that enough to justify the level of casualties they're facing?

DB: I mean, I just want to make it clear, of course, that, you know, every individual casualty is a tragedy, and a tragedy for those people who have lost a loved one or a friend, you know, a relative or a comrade. So, I mean, I don't devalue in any sense the individual casualties, and this is not... even on, you know, the side of our enemy, an issue about body counts. There is strong evidence on the ground that we are making progress. I mean, coming down from Sangin I went to the Afghan National Army camp, where there are literally thousands of Afghan troops being trained to a very high standard by 1 Royal Irish, and doing a very, very good job there in producing an army which has the confidence of its people. So that's the first element of what we're about here, which is Afghan ownership of security. We're starting to deliver that, and people now know how effective that can be because they've seen what's happened over

the last month in Iraq. So we're making progress. It's a long and difficult road, there are lots of things to be done, but we're making progress, and I'd happily discuss the other elements of that progress with you if you wanted to.

(Editor's Note: The radio interviewer failed to follow this up. We have asked the MOD press office to provide us with more examples. We'll relay them to you when received)

SL: General Sir Michael Rose says that one way we could accelerate that progress is if we concentrated on Afghanistan and got out of Iraq, that in a sense we can't do both. And indeed he's echoing what Sir Jock Stirrup, the Chief of the Defence Staff, said last month, when he said until we get down to one operation of this scale we're always going to be stretched.

DB: Well, I mean, we are, I think, being stretched by the fact that we have two medium-size operations going on. I've never made any bones about that. But equally well, I've never made any bones about the fact that our intent is to hand over responsibility to the Iraqi army, and they're looking more and more competent by the day to take that responsibility. The Prime Minister made a very detailed statement to the House just before it broke up, to the House of Commons just before it broke up for the summer there. I don't think we can be any clearer that that's the direction of travel, and I am confident that we will continue to make that progress. Now, we're not doing that to release additional troops for Afghanistan. The force level that we have in Afghanistan is one that was placed there on advice to do the job that we wanted to do, and I have, you know, twice or three times now increased that force level. So I'm willing to do that if that's the military advice. But, you know, another element of what we are about strategically, of course, is getting other countries to share with us responsibility for what we are doing in Afghanistan and to make a greater contribution to share the burden with us.

SL: Let me interrupt at that point just to ask you about one other development today, which obviously does affect Afghanistan, and that's the possibility of President Musharraf being impeached. What impact might that have on the stability of the region and therefore on what's happening in Afghanistan?

DB: Well, I mean, I agree wholeheartedly with General Massoud who clearly has much greater knowledge of his own country than I could have, but I have some knowledge of it, and that is that we should support the democratic forces in Pakistan, just as we do in Afghanistan. For the interests of stability in this region, you know, if we are to ensure that UK interests not to see terrorism born in this part of the world develops [sic] on our streets, then we need to support governments – good, democratic, responsible governments – both sides of this border. And I and our Government support wholeheartedly the institutions of democracy and I note... although I'm remote from this story at the moment, but I note that the democrat... the heads of the two democratically elected parties who hold power in Pakistan are talking to each other. That seems to be me to be because of this development and we should encourage them to speak to each other.

SL: Des Browne in Helmand province, thank you.