

Elayne Jude of Great North News Services reports on the UK Secretary of State for Defence, Rt Hon John Hutton MP, in session with the House of Commons Defence Select Committee:

READINESS AND RECUPERATION FOR THE CONTINGENT TASKS OF TODAY on 28 April 2009

It's difficult to find a critic of Urgent Operational Requirements; Defence Select Committee Chairman James Arbuthnot described them as 'the new black'.

But aren't they, he asks, rather an expensive way to get kit into theatre ?

Secretary of State Hutton and Mr Arbuthnot agree that the core programme will never be able to provide essential theatre-specific equipment; Hutton asserts that he does not see an alternative, and that UORs deliver good value for money. Arbuthnot observes that many people "would love to get their programme into the heading of UOR because it makes it more likely that it will be acceptable both to the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury", but asks whether "does it not just add extra cost, as well as a vast variety, for example, of different vehicles that then you find difficulty being maintained in theatre?"

To which Secretary Hutton replies that "The extent to which that equipment will form part of what we take away and what we continue to operate and deploy is not clear yet. So quite what the implications will be for the long-term fleet maintenance, the fleet support systems for the Army, it is not clear yet...We do look very carefully at what is coming out of the UOR programme and what needs to be to be incorporated into the core equipment front. I think this year about £50 million worth of kit equipment has been absorbed into the core programme".

Secretary Hutton declares himself 'not happy' with the current acquisition process, and looks forward to Bernard Gray's recommendations on changes to procurement.

Praising the personnel at Defence Equipment & Supply, he says that we are not getting as much value out of the process as we should, citing delivery delays.

In answer to Mr Arbuthnot's question on industrial capacity, Secretary Hutton says:

I have not seen any evidence to make me think that we cannot get what we need when we need it. The truth is that it will not all be manufactured in the UK. Some of the equipment that we have procured under the UOR umbrella has come from other countries, rightly so, because we want the kit when we can get it as quickly as possible, and if we cannot get it done in the UK, we will go elsewhere to get it, and that is simply how it is. I would like as much of this capacity to be here in the UK, that is a strategic consideration for us, but we will go where we need to to get the kit that we want and we have not really suffered any fundamental problem, either in the UK

or elsewhere, in getting the kit when we need it, certainly for UORs. "

Dai Havard raised the topic of a vehicle repair facility currently being built in Afghanistan, and of who would be engaged in staffing it.

Secretary Hutton: "The basic idea is a very simple one, which is to make sure that when the vehicles need to be maintained and fixed, put back together again sometimes, we can do as much of that as possible in Afghanistan, lessening the pressure on the air bridge, making sure that equipment becomes available once again to front-line troops as quickly as possible....You referred earlier to whether some industry employees themselves would be out in theatre. Yes, they will be, they are already, and some very important bits of kit are actually operated for us out there by civilians sent out there by their companies. We should look at all these options. If that particularly takes some of the pressure off REME and some of the uniformed Services, I say bring it on."

Linda Gilroy questioned the Minister on the deferral of the MARS programme:

Secretary Hutton:"I do not like to see any delay in procurement. I think there is a way of getting better value for money out of the MARS programme; that is why we have terminated the current procurement. ..We terminated the competition, I think, for very good and sound reasons, but we will have to find a better value for money way forward than the MARS programme itself offered."

Vector, which is being withdrawn, was singled out by the Chairman for particular criticism.

Secretary Hutton:" Probably been the least successful of all the vehicles we have procured through the UOR process." He was unable to give details to the Committee of the assessment and acquisition process, but promised to provide them.

Full text of the Committee's session can be found at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdfence/uc122-iii/uc12202.htm>