

By Nick Watts, Defence Correspondent, Great North News Services

The progress made by ISAF forces during 2010 is encouraging, but not yet irreversible, according to the UK's senior general in Afghanistan.

The remarks by Lt General James Bucknall, Deputy Commander of ISAF and UK National Contingent Commander, were made during an MOD briefing today. Reflecting on how the campaign had progressed during 2010 Lt Gen Bucknall said that ISAF now had sufficient numbers in place to begin to make a difference. He added that the last US troops forming part of President Obama's surge only arrived in theatre in October. 2010 has seen a change of tempo in both the level of operations which has increased, as well as a higher profile for Afghan security forces.

British and US commanders see the key to securing progress in Afghanistan arising from village and district level, which will take time. Gen Bucknall expressed confidence that the coalition was on track to see a handover of security responsibility to Afghan forces by the 2014 date imposed by the NATO Lisbon summit. ISAF now has the right strategy and the right structure to begin to deliver meaningful progress. However, NATO will continue to have a strategic relationship with Afghanistan after this date, meaning that the Taliban insurgents cannot succeed by waiting for NATO forces to leave.

Gen Bucknall stressed that this was not an exit strategy, but a shift in posture and any draw down of forces will be conditions based and will be achieved from the bottom up. Efforts will continue to develop the Afghan National Army and police. Good governance at village and district level is seen as a key measure of progress by both ISAF and the Afghan government. This provides the local framework within which former Taliban fighters can be re-integrated back into village and tribal life.

The strategic objective for 2011 is to expand the footprint of security to embrace Kandahar and Helmand and to secure the highway that links these areas. There is still tough fighting ahead according to Gen Bucknall. It will be some time before ISAF commanders can discern a change in pattern of activity between a winter lull in insurgent activity, and a sustainable drop in violence. ISAF now has sufficient forces to pursue Taliban insurgents into areas they think of as their safe havens. Attrition of the Taliban is being conducted by Special Forces and this is believed to be having an effect on the morale of mid level commanders and their facilitators. Meanwhile indirect lines of communication continue to be open between Taliban commanders and the Afghan government.