

Since UK forces first deployed to Afghanistan in 2001, over 100,000 personnel have served on operations there, many for more than one tour, and many more, military and civilian, have supported the mission, Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP the Defence Secretary has told the House of Commons.

Since the surge in the international commitment to the mission as a whole in 2009, which boosted the forces available to ISAF by 30,000, the United Kingdom has maintained an enduring level of conventional forces in Afghanistan of 9,500, the great majority of whom are now in the UK area of operations in Central Helmand. This has been a critical period for the mission, for UK Forces, for ISAF and, significantly, for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Our combined efforts have arrested the momentum of the insurgency, diminished its capability, and weakened its strategic position. But it still represents a threat to the people of Afghanistan and to the security of Afghan territory. It retains the ability to launch significant operations, as the attack on Kabul on April 15th and 16th demonstrate. The response of the ANSF to that attack demonstrated just how far they have come in terms of their capability and their ability to undertake major operations autonomously. They are justifiably proud of their performance. Our aim in Afghanistan is to build Afghan governance and security forces to the point where they are resilient in the face of any residual threat from the insurgency, are confident in their ability to protect their own citizens and able to deny safe haven to terrorists who seek to use Afghan territory as a base from which to threaten international security. Significant progress is being made across Afghanistan and the Monthly Progress Report for March, published today by the FCO, DfID and MOD sets out more details. Nowhere is that progress more obvious than in Helmand. There are now 12 District Governors in Helmand's 14 districts, up from just 5 in 2008. 30 extra schools have opened since 2010 with another 46 currently being built. 29 extra health clinics open. More roads; more bridges; bazaars re-opening, meaning more commerce and opportunities for ordinary Helmandis. In the last year alone, income levels in Helmand have increased by 20%. Prosperity will be a critical weapon in the battle against the insurgency. All of this social and economic progress has been made possible by the improvements in security across the province. This has been facilitated not just by the surge in ISAF troops, but by the increasing number and quality of Afghan National Security Forces. The size of the Afghan National Army in Regional Command (South West), which includes Helmand Province, has increased by 30% in the last 18 months. Two of the three districts in Task Force Helmand's area of operations have now entered formal transition. The security situation in these districts is unrecognisable compared with the start of British operations in 2006. The whole of Lashkar Gah District and the most populous 60% of Nad-e Ali is now completely under Afghan control. The ANSF has demonstrated repeatedly its ability to provide security in these areas and, as a result, 36 of Task Force Helmand's checkpoints, patrol bases and military positions have been handed over to the ANSF in the last 6 months, while a further 16 new posts have been constructed and occupied by Afghan Forces. This has enabled Task Force Helmand to reduce its basing footprint by 50% and, as circumstances allow, UK and ISAF forces are progressively moving towards the support role of training, advising and assisting. During 20 Armoured Brigade's recent tour, the campaign moved to being run on an Afghan formulated campaign plan - written in Dari by the Afghans and executed by them.

Seven major operations were carried out over the six month period of Herrick 15 - a pace that in the words of the UK Brigade Commander, "sometimes left us running to catch up with our Afghan colleagues". In the recent Operation Now Roz over 1,000 members of the ANSF, supported by British forces, cleared insurgents from a key heartland within the Helmand river valley. While UK Forces secured the flanks, the Afghans cleared more than 200 compounds, made safe 44 IEDs, found seven bomb-making factories and confiscated over 145 kilograms of homemade explosives. This is the fourth major ANA operation in Central Helmand in four months and the largest and most complex so far. The success of that operation further demonstrated the ANSF's increasing professionalism and capability. Mr Speaker, Helmand remains difficult and challenging and the insurgency remains a constant threat, but the progress we have made demonstrates that we are on target to meet the transition objectives agreed by President Karzai and the international community at Lisbon in November 2010. Maintaining that momentum will be the challenge of the transition process between now and the end of 2014. There is no room at all for complacency and much work needs to be done to maintain the momentum of progress in building ANSF capability. But the reality on the ground is that Afghan forces are increasingly taking the lead. This allows ISAF, including UK Forces, to gradually reduce force levels and to change their role. The Prime Minister announced in July last year that we would be drawing down UK forces by 500 to 9,000 by the end of this year. The Chief of the Defence Staff has now provided military advice on how these reductions will be achieved. The House will understand that it is not appropriate to go into exact operational details or to talk about specific capabilities, but I am able to give the House a general overview of how the manpower reductions will be achieved: First, I can confirm that, reflecting the reduction in the need for ISAF ground holding capabilities as transition progresses and the Afghans take over positions, the majority of the 500 being withdrawn will be combat troops. Secondly, we will merge the UK Forces Headquarters in Nahr-e Saraj North and Nahr-e Saraj South to better align with the increasingly important Afghan administrative boundaries and the civilian control structure. This will deliver us efficiencies and manpower savings. Thirdly, there will be a reduction in support personnel and enablers commensurate with the changes I have set out. Finally, we will withdraw some combat support capabilities for which there is no longer an operational need as a result of the availability of alternative weapons systems in theatre. These measures will reduce the United Kingdom's enduring conventional force levels to 9,000 and will be completed by the end of this year. I can also inform the House that, in addition to the overall reduction in numbers, a further 200 combat troops will be transferred from a ground holding role to Security Force Assistance teams working with the ANSF. For avoidance of doubt, I should be clear that, whatever role is being fulfilled, including the training of ANSF forces, British forces in Afghanistan will retain combat capability until the end of 2014. Mr. Speaker, The details I have announced today are consistent with our intention to move out of a combat role by the end of 2014. They demonstrate our commitment to the process of transition, and the increasing capacity and capability of the ANSF, reflecting their real achievements on the ground. As they grow, and gradually take lead responsibility for security across the country, ISAF's military footprint will reduce further, including that of the

United Kingdom, and we will keep the House informed of future plans for further reductions in UK troop numbers as conditions on the ground permit. Our combat role will end by December 2014, but the United Kingdom's commitment to Afghanistan is for the long-term. This is demonstrated in part by the announcement I made last week at the NATO ministerial meeting that we will commit £70m per year to the future funding of the ANSF after 2014, and by our commitment to run the Afghan National Army Officer Training Academy which we are currently building outside Kabul. Each nation has its own constitutional processes in which to consider its contribution as transition moves forward. But all agree that ISAF cohesion must be maintained. The UK will continue to work and plan closely with our ISAF partners, particularly those operating alongside us in Helmand, including the United States, who provide the bulk of coalition forces. As the Prime Minister told the House yesterday "The speed of the reductions between now and the end of 2014 will be in accordance with the conditions on the ground and with what is right in terms of transitioning from allied control to Afghan control-and at all times, of course, paramount in our minds is the safety and security of our brave armed forces." That safety and security will be best assured by working with our allies in a co-ordinated drawdown as responsibilities are handed progressively to the ANSF. That is the way to honour and protect the legacy of our involvement in Afghanistan, and of the sacrifice made by the 409 servicemen and women who have given their lives, and the hundreds who have suffered life-changing injuries.