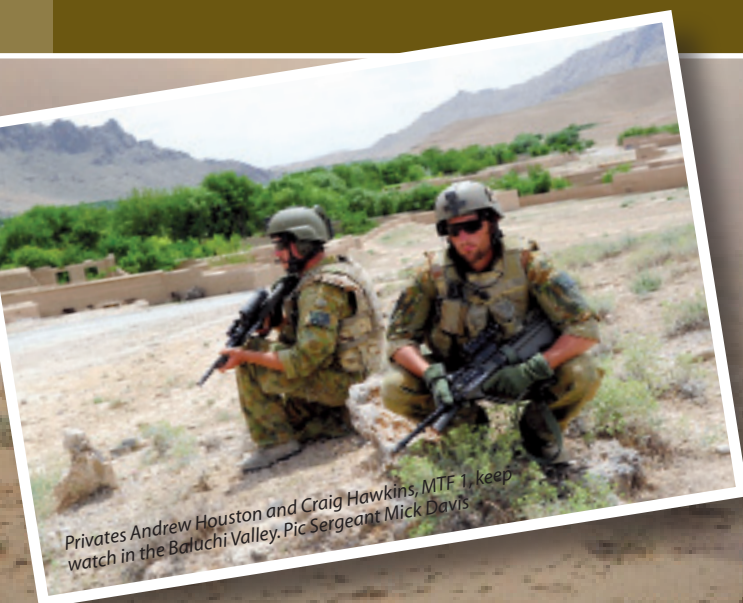


We have lost many soldiers in June and they will not be the last. But the Allies know that the cost of walking away before the job is done would be far higher. We must – and will – complete the job we have started.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen

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Privates Andrew Houston and Craig Hawkins, MTF 1, keep watch in the Baluchi Valley. Pic Sergeant Mick Davis



An SOTG soldier takes aim in Gizab. Pic Lieutenant Aaron Oldaker



SOTG soldiers hitch a ride after mission near Sha Wali Kot. Pic Corporal Raymond Vance

Staying the
COURSE

Afghanistan tests international resolve



SOTG soldiers on watch near Shah Wali Kot.

AFGHANISTAN



A Shura at Shah Wali Kot. Pic Corporal Raymond Vance

Extract from a letter by incoming commander International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) General David Petraeus to the soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and civilians of NATO's ISAF:

This has been a hard fight. As you have soldiered together with our Afghan partners to reverse the Taliban momentum and to take away Taliban safe havens, the enemy has fought back. ISAF and Afghan Forces sustained particularly tough losses last month. Nonetheless, in the face of an enemy willing to carry out the most barbaric attacks, progress has been achieved in some critical areas, and we are poised to realize more.

This effort is a contest of wills. Our enemies will do all they can to shake our confidence and the confidence of the Afghan people. In turn, we must continue to demonstrate our resolve to the enemy. We will do so through our relentless pursuit of the Taliban and others who mean Afghanistan harm, through our compassion for the Afghan people, and through our example and the values that we live.

Together with our Afghan partners, we must secure and serve the people of Afghanistan. We must help Afghan leaders develop their security forces and build their capacity to govern, so that they can increasingly take on the tasks of securing their country and seeing to the needs of the Afghan people.

This endeavor has to be a team effort. We must strive to contribute to the 'Team of Teams' at work in Afghanistan and to achieve unity of effort with our diplomatic, international civilian, and Afghan partners as we carry out a comprehensive, civil-military counterinsurgency campaign. We must also continue our emphasis on reducing the loss of innocent civilian life to an absolute minimum. We must never forget that the decisive terrain in Afghanistan is the human terrain.

Protecting those we are here to help nonetheless does require killing, capturing, or turning the insurgents. We will not shrink from that; indeed, you have been taking the fight to the enemy and we will continue to do so. Beyond that, as you and our Afghan partners on the ground get into tough situations, we must employ all assets to ensure your safety, keeping in mind, again, the importance of avoiding civilian casualties.

I appreciate your sacrifices and those of your families as we serve in a mission of vital importance to the people of Afghanistan, to our nations, and to the world. And I pledge my total commitment to our missions as we work together to help achieve a brighter future for a new country in an ancient land.

Private Abdul on patrol in the Baluchi Valley. Pic Sergeant Mick Davis



Private Chris Rushby on patrol in a Chora Valley village. Pic Leading Seaman Paul Berry



Redacted and edited statement by Defence Minister John Faulkner to the Senate on 23 June 2010.

Australia remains committed to our mission in Afghanistan. We remain committed to denying sanctuary to terrorists; to working to stabilise the country; and to our alliance with the United States.

The past fortnight has been an exceptionally tough one for our troops in Afghanistan. On Monday, Private Tim Aplin, Private Ben Chuck, and Private Scott Palmer were killed, and a further seven soldiers injured, in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan. This closely follows the loss of Sapper Darren Smith and Sapper Jacob Moerland earlier this month [plus the loss of Private Nathan Bewes since].

As we struggle to come to terms with these losses, we acknowledge, with profound gratitude, the sacrifice these fine young soldiers have made and acknowledge, too, the willing commitment of their comrades at arms.

The terrible loss of our soldiers has quite understandably heightened the debate around Australia's mission in Afghanistan. It is important that Australians understand this conflict, understand why we are there, and understand why it is important for us to continue to play our part.

Our fundamental objective in Afghanistan is to combat a clear threat from international

terrorism to both international security and our own national security. Australia cannot afford to let Afghanistan again become a safe haven and training ground for terrorist organisations with a global reach.

Progress is being made towards that goal of making sure Afghanistan is not a safe haven for terrorists. It is steady, it is incremental, but it is progress nevertheless.

Six months ago, in Marjah, provincial governance was in disarray. There were no children in school and health care was almost non-existent. Today there are district governors, 81 school teachers and new clinics being built. Small steps, perhaps, but important ones.

In Uruzgan, the ADF continues security operations throughout the province to provide safe, secure spaces for development work. Working with AusAID, ADF personnel have been building schools, government infrastructure has been installed and living standards are improving in one of the poorest regions of Afghanistan.

The ADF in Uruzgan continues to play an important and invaluable role in stabilising the province.

Of course, there have been setbacks, and the fight is not yet over. A recent report by the United Nations says that the security situation has not improved. I acknowledge that there has been a recent increase in violence, but we need to understand that we will see more violence as ISAF begins to

contest areas held by the Taliban. As we bring the fight to the Taliban in more parts of the country, this will lead to more incidents.

But we are making headway, and the military build-up first announced by President Obama last year is not yet complete. So the full benefit of the additional forces is yet to play out.

The United Nations' report also acknowledges that there have been significant positive developments, and underlines the need for the international community to continue to support Afghanistan.

When the Netherlands starts drawing down its forces in Uruzgan after 1 August, a new multinational ISAF structure will take command. The United States will lead a multi-national Combined Team Uruzgan (CTU) under an ISAF flag. Given the commitments that have been made to contribute to the new CTU, we are satisfied that it will more than adequately replace the current capabilities of the Dutch in the province. Slovakia and Singapore will continue to play valuable roles in this new multi-national arrangement.

Australia will play a larger part in the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), vital to the entire Coalition's efforts in Uruzgan – in fact, it is the heart of our counter-insurgency effort.

PRTs are teams of civilians and military personnel working together to facilitate

the delivery of tribal outreach, governance and development activities at the provincial and district level. They are key to delivering the 'build' part of ISAF's counterinsurgency strategy of 'shape, clear, hold and build'.

By mentoring and assisting local officials, and by supporting economic and infrastructure development, the PRT helps extend the reach of the Afghan Government in Uruzgan, and win the hearts and minds of the people. The PRT is fundamental to the stabilisation efforts across the province and the eventual transition of responsibility to Afghan authorities.

Australia's main focus in Afghanistan will continue to be training, with Australia taking over the training for the entire 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army.

There is growing evidence that the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade is maturing towards its goal of independent operations. Afghan soldiers show great courage under fire and in facing the threat of IEDs. Recently, on Operation Thor Ghar, soldiers of the 4th Brigade planned and conducted their own resupply operation to Kandahar – a significant step forward for the brigade. In re-supply operations since late last year, the 4th Brigade has moved from observing and participating, to planning and leading these activities.

On the basis of solid progress in our training efforts to date, CDF has recently advised me that within two to four years we

should be able to transition the main security responsibility for the province to the Afghan National Army, allowing the ADF to move into an overwatch role.

While we are seeing some operational successes, building an Army takes time and patience. It is measured in years, not weeks or months.

The Afghan National Army currently stands at around 125,000 strong, and is on track to meet its November target of 134,000 troops, several months ahead of schedule. Overall, the Army will grow to around 172,000 by October 2011.

The ADF continues to support broader ISAF and Afghan efforts to fight the insurgency and strengthen the Afghan National Security Forces. ANSF and ISAF have pushed into Marjah in central Helmand to protect the population, reverse the Taliban's momentum, and create the space to develop Afghan security and governance capacity. Militarily, operations in Marjah are proceeding well.

The next challenge for ISAF and the Afghan Government is the area around the southern city of Kandahar in another province bordering Uruzgan. The Coalition is approaching this region in a very careful and considered manner, with shuras bringing government officials together with local leaders and representatives to find ways to marginalise the insurgents and stabilise communities.

President Karzai has advised local leaders to prepare themselves for sustained operations to rid the area of the Taliban. ISAF will create a 'rising tide' of security to displace insurgent influence. By year's end, approximately 20,000 Coalition and Afghan troops will be securing this population centre from insurgent influence – up from just 7500 now.

Kandahar is crucial to stability in southern Afghanistan. It was the capital of Afghanistan under Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001, and remains critically important to the Taliban to this day. The province's porous border with Pakistan accentuates the difficulties Afghan and ISAF forces face in containing and reducing the insurgency. The border region is difficult terrain and often serves as a temporary sanctuary for the Taliban, despite increasing efforts by Pakistani authorities against insurgents in this area.

As a neighbouring province, security in Kandahar is especially critical to security in Uruzgan. The ADF has conducted and will continue to conduct operations in northern Kandahar from time to time in support of our efforts in Uruzgan. We stand ready to contribute further as Coalition efforts are boosted there over coming months.

In Uruzgan, the tempo of ADF operations remains high. With the Afghan National Army, the ADF is supporting ISAF's strategy of securing the key population districts, food producing areas and key transport corridors.

The terrible loss of our soldiers has quite understandably heightened the debate around Australia's mission in Afghanistan.

There is growing evidence that the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade is maturing towards its goal of independent operations.



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SOTG soldiers mentor Afghan police at Tarin Kowt. Pic Sergeant Brent Tero

SOTG soldiers mentor police at Tarin Kowt. Pic Corporal Raymond Vance

That translates into safer villages, a better food supply and more economic activity – all crucial aspects of defeating the insurgency.

The Special Operations Task Group continues its dangerous work in and around Uruzgan, to disrupt insurgent networks, restrict insurgent mobility and supply routes, and stem the flow of IEDs. These efforts, conducted alongside the Afghan Provincial Police Reserve, help protect the population and provide an environment in which Afghan citizens can live and work safely. They also directly contribute to the safety and security of other Australian, Afghan and coalition security forces in the area.

In April, the SOTG supported a community-led push to expel Taliban insurgents from the town of Gizab. This was a clear indication that the insurgents are not welcome by the population at large. Fighting side-by-side, the people of Gizab, the Afghan National Security Forces, and Australian Special Forces pushed the insurgents out of the town.

And this month, Afghan security troops and Australian Special Forces have been conducting offensive operations in an area in northern Kandahar that has served as a staging point for insurgents' entry into Uruzgan province. This was a large-scale disruption operation that successfully targeted Taliban networks in an insurgent stronghold.

Similarly, the Mentoring Task Force has conducted operations throughout Uruzgan

to counter the threat of insurgents and their use of weapons, such as IEDs. Together with its partnered forces in the Afghan National Army's 4th Brigade, the MTF has helped conduct several shuras throughout the province; established and occupied a new patrol base in the Mirabad Valley; continued to deny insurgents access to weapons caches; and further prepared building sites for development works. In the first weeks of May, 4th Brigade kandaks, partnered with Australian troops, found 55 caches of weapons – a great indicator of the increasing skill and capability of Afghan soldiers.

We can be confident that progress is being made in Uruzgan and each day the ADF is making a difference, making the province a safer, better place.

Since my last statement, there have been a number of notable achievements in the development sector. For example, on 11 May, the Tarin Kowt Boys' Primary School was officially opened. It has 35 new classrooms able to accommodate hundreds of students. This \$1.2 million dollar project has been a culmination of hard work by successive ADF contingents and AusAID, in coordination with local officials. More than 42,000 children now attend school in Uruzgan.

The ADF continues to achieve its mission within an annual average of around 1550 personnel deployed. Sometimes the number drops, as seasonal elements such as the Chinook helicopter detachment are

withdrawn. At other times, the number is slightly higher, as major combat units hand over to their replacements.

I want to recognise the impact of this conflict on our serving men and women. In addition to the recent tragic deaths, this year more than 35 of our soldiers have been wounded or injured – some very seriously. I acknowledge the sacrifices of these brave soldiers and I wish them all the best for a full and speedy recovery.

Each time I visit our servicemen and women in Afghanistan, or meet with a soldier who has come home after being wounded, I am impressed by their resilience, professionalism, determination and courage. Their commitment to the task at hand is something that all Australians can be proud of.

These men and women understand the importance of their work. They know that it is making a difference to the future of Afghanistan and its people. They deserve our respect, and our very strong support.

Our coalition partners have also suffered losses in recent operations. Since the beginning of the year, ISAF forces have lost more than 2800 personnel, and Afghan security forces have suffered even greater losses. I extend my condolences to the families, friends and colleagues of all the fallen.

Of the 35 Australian soldiers so far wounded this year, 25 were wounded in improvised explosive device attacks.



Sergeant Abdul Wahidi explains a mission plan, watched by his mentor, Corporal Daniel Luxford. Pic Sergeant Mick Davis



An SOTG soldier takes a break in Gizab. Pic Lieutenant Aaron Oldaker



Sergeant Abdul Wahidi keeps watch while his mentor Corporal Daniel Luxford checks navigation. Pic Sergeant Mick Davis



An ANA soldier stands guard in the Baluchi Valley. Pic Leading Seaman Paul Berry



An Aussie Bushmaster meets Afghan 'jingle trucks'. Pic Sergeant Mick Davis



Private Justin Ward stands guard in Tarin Kowt. Pic Sergeant Mick Davis

The ADF continues to achieve its mission within an annual average of around 1550 personnel deployed.

SOTG soldiers disembark from a US Black Hawk at Tarin Kowt, after an operation. Pic Corporal Raymond Vance



AFGHANISTAN

IEDs remain the primary weapon of the insurgents, who constantly change and vary the methods by which they are employed. IEDs are a lethal and indiscriminate weapon, killing soldiers and civilians alike. Their use is deplorable, and serves to remind us of the callousness of the Taliban and their disregard for innocent Afghans.

To help counter the IED threat, the government recently announced an extra \$1.1 billion investment in force-protection capabilities for Australian personnel. This investment takes into account the evolving nature of the risk from IEDs and includes measures for better intelligence on IED makers, greater protection and firepower for ADF vehicles, and upgraded body armour.

Our force protection initiatives also support the acquisition of an improved counter rocket, artillery and mortar attack capability, to warn of incoming rocket attacks, so personnel can seek protection.

Tarin Kowt base suffered four rocket attacks during April and May, and this system should give our troops valuable additional time to take shelter.

ISAF now has in place a clear strategy endorsed by the 46 nations that comprise the Coalition. That strategy is working. Some aspects of our progress are tangible and measurable – clinics are built, children are learning, elections are held. Other parts are not as visible – young men decide to leave the insurgency and return to their homes and communities' faith in their local government improves.

Real progress is being made. NATO recently reported that in 2002, 9 per cent of Afghans had access to healthcare. Today that figure is 65 per cent. Afghan women hold almost a quarter of the seats in parliament, in contrast to being barely visible under Taliban rule. The number of teachers has almost doubled since 2002. The Afghan National Army has expanded to almost 125,000 and continues to improve in capability and expand in size.

Australia is but one of 46 countries contributing to the effort in Afghanistan. We are there under a United Nations mandate and at the invitation of the Afghan Government. Our aims are clear. For our own protection, we need to secure Afghanistan and ensure terrorist groups no longer find safe havens there. We need to support the Afghan people as they begin to take responsibility for security and stability of their nation. And we need to stand with our friends and partners in this endeavour.

It is in Australia's interests that we play our part in this international effort. It has not been, and will not be, without challenges and I am painfully aware that it has not been without loss – and there could be more losses ahead.

But we must stay the course in Uruzgan. We must deliver on our commitment to train the Afghan forces there to take over their own security. It will not be easy.

Seventeen Australian families have already paid a very heavy price. But the cost of failure would be much higher.

We must deliver on our commitment to train the Afghan forces there to take over their own security.

A large weapon cache uncovered in Shah Wali Kot.



A large weapon cache uncovered in Shah Wali Kot.

*SOTG reinforcements arrive at Gizab.
Pic Lieutenant Aaron Oldaker*

*Left: Lieutenant Farhad Habib, OC of
an ANA platoon in the Baluchi Valley.
Pic Sergeant Mick Davis*

