

Steadfast

COMMITTED TO A WINNING BATTLE

Following are extracts from a paper and statement on Afghanistan presented by Defence Minister Stephen Smith, 23 March 2011.

As I said during last year's parliamentary debate on Afghanistan, "there can be no more serious endeavour for any country or government than to send its military forces into conflict".

That is why it is appropriate that Australia's commitment to Afghanistan is the subject of ongoing parliamentary and public scrutiny.

As part of this, the government and I are committed to providing regular reports and updates on Afghanistan, including to the parliament.

My report on this occasion includes the recent NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Defence Ministers' meeting in Brussels.



Why are we there

It is worth reminding ourselves why we are in Afghanistan and what our goal is.

The government's strong view is that it is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan, not just with our Alliance partner the United States, but also with 46 other members of the international community acting under a United Nations mandate.

Australia has a responsibility to help stare down international terrorism and ensure stability in Afghanistan.

Our fundamental goal is to prevent Afghanistan from again being used by terrorists to plan and train for attacks on innocent civilians, including Australians in our own region and beyond.

To achieve that goal we must help prepare the Afghan Government to take lead responsibility for providing security for the Afghan people.

We must stabilise the security situation and mentor and train the Afghan security forces.

Progress

There are signs that the international community's recent troop surge, combined now with a strong military and political strategy, has reversed the Taliban's momentum. This progress is incremental and hard-won, but it is apparent.

As International Security Assistance Force Commander General Petraeus told the US Congress on 15 March, districts west of Kandahar city – the birthplace of the Taliban – have recently been cleared by ISAF and Afghan troops.



In recent months, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of weapons and explosive caches turned in and found. Around 700 former Taliban have now officially reintegrated with Afghan authorities, with some 2000 more in various stages of the reintegration process.

But I do urge caution.

United States Defense Intelligence Agency head General Ron Burgess has cautioned that "the security situation remains fragile and heavily dependent on ISAF support" and that the Taliban "remain resilient and will be able to threaten US and international goals in Afghanistan through 2011".

We must expect pushback from the Taliban, particularly in areas recently claimed by ISAF and Afghan troops, when this year's fighting season commences in April or May.

We do need to steel ourselves for a tough fighting season.

United States Secretary of Defense Gates was correct when he said that the coming spring and summer fighting seasons would present an 'acid test' of whether our gains could hold.

As well, the international community must continue to press President Karzai and his government to deliver on his undertakings at the London Conference in January 2010 to improve governance, pursue electoral reform, take effective anti-corruption and anti-narcotics measures and create social and economic opportunities for all the Afghan people, including Afghan women and girls.

As United States National Intelligence Director Jim Clapper advised the United States Congress recently, there remains concern about the ability of the Afghan government to deliver on governance. Without progress on governance, security gains will remain fragile.

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