



Corporal Nathan Searle, MTF-3, looks through the scope of his Steyr rifle in the town of Saghaytu, Uruzgan province. Pic Petty Officer Damian Pawlenko

Burden of War

OUR TOUGHEST YEAR YET

As stated many times before, the Australian government's view is that it is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan to prevent Afghanistan from again being used by terrorists to plan and train for attacks in our own region and beyond.

In a regular report to parliament in November last year, Minister for Defence Stephen Smith gave the Australian public an update on the progress made in their name by our Defence forces in a far-off land.

And, while delivering a big-picture overview of Australia's wider commitment, Prime Minister Julia Gillard also touched on the raw nerve of the sacrifices made during our costliest year yet.

Transition and commitment

Since commencing operations in Uruzgan, ISAF members have assisted Afghan forces to expand their security footprint across the province, evidenced in the establishment of more than 30 patrol bases and check points.

Successive Australian Task Forces have continued to support this expansion through the construction of 18 new patrol bases and check points. Of these, Australian forces have handed over control of six patrol bases and check points to the Afghan National Police and, of 12 bases provided to the Afghan National Army, they are now fully responsible for seven. Australian and Afghan forces jointly man the remaining five.

By the first half of this year, Australian mentoring forces should be in a position to reduce their footprint to as few as four main locations in Uruzgan, with mobile mentoring teams able to assist Afghan partners at their own operating bases for short periods when required.

The process of transition to Afghan security control continues at a steady pace.

In July, Afghanistan and the international community welcomed the formal start of the transition process in the first tranche of provinces and districts handed over across Afghanistan.

When the second tranche of districts and provinces transitions over the course of this year, Afghan security forces will be providing lead security for up to 50 per cent of the Afghan population.

This marks an important step towards meeting President Karzai's objective that Afghan authorities assume lead security responsibility across Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

However, the Taliban will continue to test the transition process through more high-profile attacks and assassination attempts.

Future commitments

Mr Smith said that Australia was confident the ANSF would continue to demonstrate their resolve and growing capability by standing up to and against such violence.

As the international community looks ahead, ISAF must maintain its Lisbon Summit commitment to transition to Afghan-led security by 2014.

NATO and the United States confirmed their commitments to a long-term, enduring strategic partnership with Afghanistan at a meeting of NATO and ISAF Defence Ministers in Brussels in October.

Mr Smith said this continuing long-term commitment and continued investment in Afghanistan's future was key to ensuring that Afghanistan and its neighbours – including Pakistan – also invest in a peaceful future for Afghanistan.

"It is important to begin work on the post-2014 period now. Not to set this out soon will undermine what we have achieved, jeopardise Afghan confidence in the international community's long-term commitment and send the wrong message to regional neighbours – in particular, Pakistan," he said.

"Important into the future will be continued international community support for the ANSF. The international community must ensure the ANSF is provided with the resources it needs to maintain security."

He said Australia had also commenced planning for its post-transition contribution to Afghanistan.

After 2014, Australia will maintain links with Uruzgan province, but our role will have a more national focus. We expect to maintain a presence beyond 2014, potentially through institutional training, a special-forces presence, military advisers, capacity building and development assistance.

Australia is already involved in institutional training through the Afghan National Army Artillery Training School. In addition to this training, the UK has proposed Australian involvement in a UK-led Afghan National Army Officer Academy. Such an Academy is essential in developing a professional officer corps within the Afghan National Army.

Australia has indicated its interest in supporting this initiative and Defence is exploring options for an Australian contribution to the delivery of training at such an academy.

Resumption of detainee transfers

In his previous update, Mr Smith noted that Australia had suspended the transfer of detainees to the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Uruzgan in early July 2011, in response to concerns raised by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) about the treatment of detainees in southern Afghanistan.

Since the decision to suspend transfers was made, Australia undertook extensive consultations with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), ISAF partners and the Afghan government.

During this process, no basis for concerns with the treatment of detainees by the NDS in Uruzgan were raised.

As a result, the Australian government has now determined that the transfer of ADF-apprehended detainees to the NDS in Uruzgan will resume.

In the period 1 August 2010 to 18 November 2011, Australian forces apprehended 1074 detainees. Of these, 154 were transferred to Afghan authorities, namely the NDS in Uruzgan, or United States authorities.

The remainder were released following initial screening, 11 of whom were subsequently recaptured. Six of those



Gunner Cameron Smith, MTF-3, follows an Afghan National Police officer during a clearing patrol of a village in Uruzgan province. Pic Leading Seaman Andrew Dakin

recaptured were released again as there was insufficient evidence to warrant their continued detention.

In the same period, 58 allegations of detainee mistreatment have been made against the ADF personnel. To date, 36 of these allegations have been fully investigated and were found to have no substance. The remainder are still under review.

Deployment of interrogators

Ongoing careful consideration of all aspects of the detainee management framework and preparation for the possible introduction of an interrogation capability has resulted in a government decision and announcement that a team of Australian military interrogators will be deployed to Afghanistan in preparation for the next northern fighting season.

Interrogation has proven valuable in detecting and preventing insurgent activity and Australian soldiers have a strong interest in being able to contribute to building this intelligence picture.

Afghan National Security Force members conduct a search of a compound of interest during a mission to disrupt insurgent networks in Kandahar province. Pic SOTG

