



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**The UK deployment to
Afghanistan:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Fifth Report of Session
2005–06**

Sixth Special Report of Session 2005–06

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 13 June 2006*

HC 1211
Published on 15 June 2006
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

The Defence Committee

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The UK deployment to Afghanistan

The Defence Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2005–06 on the UK deployment to Afghanistan on 6 April 2006, as House of Commons paper HC 558. The Government's response to this report was received on 8 June 2006. This is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the Committee's report on the UK deployment to Afghanistan.
2. The UK's further deployments to Afghanistan are now in progress. On 4 May the Headquarters Group of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (HQ ARRC) assumed command of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for nine months. On 1 May the UK assumed control of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province. The Helmand Task Force (HTF) will be fully operational by July 2006.
3. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) would like to address the conclusions and recommendations made by the Committee. In particular, we do not believe that there is a "fundamental tension" between our objectives in supporting the Afghan Government's Counter-Narcotics campaign, and our broader aim to help spread security and stability.
4. We would also like to reiterate that the force package the UK is sending has been fully endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff as the right mix of capabilities to enable our troops to carry out their mission. Furthermore, we will be operating in a multinational environment. This means that UK troops will have access, where necessary, to air assets, including helicopters provided by a number of other nations (among them the US). We do, however, keep the size and composition of the force package under constant review and will alter our plans if deemed necessary.

Response

It is vital for the future of Afghanistan that the ISAF mission is a success. Political and economic development in Afghanistan is dependent on stability and security. (Paragraph 25)

5. The MOD is pleased that the Committee has offered such a full endorsement of the UK's and the NATO-led ISAF's objectives in Afghanistan. It is essential that the UN-authorized and NATO-led ISAF, working in support of the sovereign Afghan Government, helps to create security and stability so that democratic government can take firm root across the country, and the legitimate economy is given a chance to grow.

The successful completion of ISAF stage 3 expansion under the leadership of the ARRC will demonstrate NATO's value as a force for international stability beyond the geographical confines of its original Cold War remit. (Paragraph 26)

6. The UK is playing a key role in enabling Stage 3 expansion by providing a PRT and Task Force for Helmand Province. Our deployment of the HQ ARRC is further evidence of our commitment.

We recognise that some countries have historical and constitutional reasons for not participating in certain aspects of military operations. It is important for the success of

the stage 3 expansion that ISAF is able to present an effective and united front to those who seek to undermine it. Despite the Minister's assurances, we remain concerned that national caveats risk impairing the effectiveness of the ISAF mission in the Southern provinces where conditions are likely to be most challenging. (Paragraph 31)

7. Upon the transition to HQ ARRC's command of ISAF on 04 May 2006, the revised NATO Operational Plan (OPLAN) and associated Rules of Engagement (ROE) for ISAF expansion came into effect. In recognition of the more hostile operating environment in the South, these revised ROE are more robust than NATO has previously worked to in Afghanistan. As a matter of Government policy we do not comment on the detail of ROE and it would not be appropriate to comment on the national caveats that may have been imposed by other nations. The UK is, however, content that we, along with our coalition partners operating in Southern Afghanistan, have ROE suitable for our mission.

We note the Minister's assurances that national caveats would be less of a constraint in Afghanistan than they had been during the deployment to the Balkans. We recommend that MOD continue to work with NATO partners to develop robust rules of engagement with the minimum of national caveats so that further progress is made before the ISAF stage 4 expansion. (Paragraph 32)

8. There has been significant reduction in the national caveats applied by nations participating in ISAF. We will continue to work with our ISAF partners to ensure that national caveats are kept to a minimum and do not impinge upon ISAF's operational effectiveness.

We are concerned that, should the security situation in the South prove worse than anticipated, the UK will be called on to provide additional forces. The UK has already committed significant numbers of troops and assets to ISAF stage 3. NATO should call on the military assets of other countries before approaching the UK for further contributions. (Paragraph 34)

9. The UK has made a substantial commitment to Afghanistan, and we believe the force package we are sending is sufficient to match the threat as currently assessed. We keep the size and make-up of our commitment under constant review, and will adapt our planning if necessary.

10. Should a need for additional troops or equipment for the South arise, the UK will work with NATO and other Allies to identify the most effective and appropriate solution. We aim to ensure that NATO and other troop contributing nations take on their share of the burden, and work to encourage appropriate force contributions from our Allies through the NATO Force Generation process.

We welcome the creation of a single HQ to command ISAF and OEF as a logical consequence of the increased "synergy" of the missions. On paper the command, control and communication arrangements between ISAF and OEF seem clear, but the success of the arrangements will be tested when operational decisions have to be made. We will scrutinise closely the operational effectiveness of these arrangements particularly in regard to the allocation of air assets. (Paragraph 38)

11. The Department welcomes the Committee's support to greater synergy between ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). This arrangement will make the best use of available military resources; will facilitate coordination and deconfliction of ISAF and OEF missions across the whole of Afghanistan; and will provide a single international military authority for the Afghan Government to deal with.

12. The MOD notes the Committee's intention to scrutinise the operational effectiveness of these arrangements, particularly with regard to the allocation of air assets. The Department may provide further briefing once these arrangements are in place, if the Committee feels this would be helpful.

We welcome the Minister's assurances that UK Forces would be permitted to take offensive action against forces that are threatening them and, if necessary, pursue and destroy such forces. In the more dangerous South, it is essential that UK commanders are empowered to act proactively against known threats. (Paragraph 40)

13. UK forces will have the ROE they need to accomplish their mission. They will adopt a robust posture for their security mission, in support of the Afghan Government and international community's reconstruction efforts. They will defend themselves and be prepared to respond to challenges posed, and where necessary they will take pre-emptive action to reduce the threat posed by insurgents.

MOD anticipates that ISAF stage 4 expansion will happen under the leadership of the ARRC and that OEF Forces in the East will be re-badged under ISAF command. It is important that command and control arrangements are finalised and shown to be effective before the two missions are merged. (Paragraph 42)

14. It is the UK's expectation that OEF forces operating in the East will come under ISAF command following transition of Stage 4 (East), which we hope will be later this year. This is an assumption of responsibility by ISAF rather than a merger, and those elements of OEF involved in the counter terrorist mission will remain under OEF rather than ISAF.

We support the objectives of the UK deployment to Helmand. UK Forces working with the Government of Afghanistan in building the capability of Afghan security institutions can bring greater security to the people of Helmand and help create the conditions for political and economic development. To achieve greater security and stability, the deployment will have to overcome significant vested interests. These threats are significant and the success of the UK deployment is by no means certain. (Paragraph 47)

15. We welcome the Committee's endorsement of our objectives. These objectives will be achieved primarily through reconstruction in Helmand, led by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development, and supported by military forces. The MOD has therefore worked intensively with other Government Departments (OGDs) to draw up a cross-governmental comprehensive strategic plan for Afghanistan, including, political, judicial, economic, developmental and security support.

While we note the Minister's assurances that there are no security threats which pose a strategic threat to Afghanistan, recent events suggest that the security situation in Helmand is becoming increasingly fragile. (Paragraph 51)

16. We have always maintained that the security situation in southern Afghanistan is fragile, and certainly less benign than in the North. We recognise that there has been a rise in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings by insurgents in recent months, and continue to monitor these and all other known threats to our troops.

We note MOD’s estimate that the Taliban in Helmand might number “over a thousand” and that allegiances were determined by “who is paying them”. It is imperative that UK Forces work quickly and closely with Afghan security forces to develop a reliable intelligence picture of threats in Helmand. (Paragraph 52)

17. The MOD works closely with OGDs and with the Afghan security forces to monitor and assess the security situation in Afghanistan. Our preliminary operations team, which prepared the ground for the UK’s deployment to Helmand Province, was particularly useful in helping us to ascertain the nature of the threat we face in the South. We continue to work with OGDs to refine our intelligence picture in Helmand, including by developing a clearer understanding of the tribal dynamics in the region.

It is essential that the legal status of embedded trainers is made clear and that all operational practices with regard to prisoners, and the rules of engagement under which the trainers will operate, are properly clarified before they are deployed. We intend to monitor these arrangements closely. (Paragraph 54)

18. The MOD is content that the legal status of UK Embedded Training Teams (ETTs) is clear. Their legal status will be no different from other UK troops deployed under the ISAF and they will operate in line with UK ROE. Should they need to detain individuals, they would follow the ISAF policy of handing over to the Afghan authorities or releasing within 96 hours. We retain the right to withdraw UK embedded trainers should the Afghan National Army (ANA) decide to engage in an action that was outside our operational boundaries and/or ROE.

Building security will take time, and is dependent on developing the capability of Afghan Forces. We welcome MOD’s plans to work closely with Afghans to develop the capability of the Afghan National Army. A well-trained army is key to bringing long-term stability to Helmand. (Paragraph 55)

19. Strong progress has been made in training the ANA and other security forces. As the Committee notes, the Afghan Defence Minister recently stated the ANA had reached a total strength of 34,000. The UK-supported Officer Candidate School began training cadets on 4 April, and will begin a second course later this year. UK ETTs will also shortly begin operating with ANA Kandaks (Battalions) in Helmand.

Given the importance to the Helmand mission of airlift capability, we note with concern the small number of UK helicopters dedicated to the deployment. We welcome the commitment made by the US and Dutch air forces to supplement the UK airlift. We remain deeply concerned about the ability of the UK’s ten dedicated helicopters to perform the extensive range of roles that will be asked of them, particularly given the demanding environment in which they will operate and the likely attrition rates that will result. (Paragraph 59)

20. As announced by the Secretary of State on 26 January, the HTF will be supported by a total of 18 helicopters: 6 Chinook support helicopters, 4 Lynx light utility helicopters, and 8 Apache attack helicopters.

21. The number of support helicopters deployed on this mission is based on recommendations made by the relevant military planning staffs and was agreed by Chiefs of Staff earlier this year. The planning figure takes into account the expected flying hours for each aircraft and attrition rates. These planning assumptions will be kept under review.

22. In addition, a substantial number of helicopters will be made available by other nations participating in ISAF Stage 3 expansion in the South, including an impressive package of support and attack helicopters that the US has committed to maintain in the South for 12 months.

23. The UK has also deployed 4 C-130 air transport planes to assist in the UK deployment, all of which operate from both Kabul and Kandahar, and a number of other nations have also made transport aircraft available to ISAF.

We note MOD's assurance that the total close air support package is robust and that the US commitment of close air support will remain following the withdrawal of US Forces from the Southern provinces. We will continue to monitor closely whether experience bears out MOD's confidence about the continued availability of air assets to the UK deployment. (Paragraph 62)

24. We believe that sufficient close air support is available to ISAF forces in the South, including the six Harrier GR7 aircraft based at Kandahar. We note the Committee's intention to monitor this situation.

The availability of close air support providing sufficient mobility and fire power will be absolutely essential to the success of the Helmand deployment. We recommend, if no equivalent force can be provided by the NATO force generation process, that the Harrier GR7 squadron based at Kandahar should remain beyond June 2006 and for as long as necessary. (Paragraph 64)

25. As the Committee will be aware, the Government decided, following requests from NATO and other Allies, to extend the Harrier GR7 detachment until March 2007. This is in addition to the eight F16s offered by the Netherlands, although these latter will continue to be based in Kabul while repair work at Kandahar Airfield continues.

We note that concerns have been raised about the appropriateness of the defensive aid suite (DAS) fitted to C130 Hercules used in Afghanistan. We also note MOD's assurances that the Hercules DAS is appropriate to conditions in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 67)

26. Only Hercules C130 aircraft fitted with appropriate defensive systems are deployed to operational theatres.

We accept that the scope for investment in equipment is infinite, but the suggestion that aircraft are not being properly protected for resource reasons is a serious one and we call on MOD to provide evidence to demonstrate that this is not the case. (Paragraph 68)

27. The Minister of State for the Armed Forces (Min(AF)) has previously written to the Committee on this subject, and we regret it was not possible to incorporate his response in the report.

28. The MOD takes force protection extremely seriously. We constantly review the threat and consider appropriate mitigation measures. Over recent years, several significant defensive upgrades have been embodied into Hercules aircraft. Emphasis has been on modification designed to counter the greatest perceived threats, whilst also evolving tactics and improving force protection on the ground.

29. Following the Board of Inquiry into the Hercules C130 crash, MOD decided to fit Explosion Suppressant Foam (ESF) to some of our Hercules aircraft. The first aircraft fitted with ESF are expected to be available for operations in the next few months.

30. Decisions on fitting protective systems to our aircraft must reflect a balance of investment judgement taking into account: the time it would take to fit the fleet's remaining service life; the impact on operations (by taking aircraft out of service); the likely effectiveness of the system; and the impact on other priorities.

We note MOD's assurances that the force package to Helmand is fit for purpose. The threat from improvised explosive devices will need to be kept under constant review. (Paragraph 71)

31. The force package the UK is sending to Southern Afghanistan was based on recommendations made by the relevant military planning staffs, and was fully endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff. We will keep our planning assumptions under review and will adjust the force package if deemed necessary. All known threats to British troops, including from IEDs, are kept under constant review.

We note the Minister's commitment that commanders in theatre will be listened to and given what they need to ensure the protection of troops. We shall monitor this closely. (Paragraph 72)

32. The MOD takes its duty of care towards the UK Armed Forces very seriously. The force package we are sending is, as already noted, based on relevant military planning staffs' recommendations and has been fully endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff. We believe it is sufficient to match the current assessed threat but is kept under review. Requests for further equipment or personnel will be passed up the command chain as appropriate, where the request will be scrutinised before adjusting the force package if necessary.

We call on MOD to provide greater clarity about the UK Forces' responsibilities to detainees in the period before they are handed over to Afghan security forces. It is unsatisfactory that these matters are not yet concluded. (Paragraph 77)

33. The responsibilities of UK forces to detainees have always been clear. United Kingdom procedures governing the handling of detainees are consistent with the principles of the Geneva Conventions, whether detaining as part of an ISAF operation or OEF. Joint Warfare Publication 1-10 "Prisoners of War Handling" covers the principles, responsibilities, practices and procedures for the UK Armed Forces in handling prisoners

of war. The publication is currently being updated; a copy will be placed on the Ministry of Defence website in the near future.

34. In addition the UK has now concluded a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on detention with the Afghan Government, which sets out, inter alia, the responsibilities of UK Armed Forces towards detainees in the period prior to their handover to Afghan security forces or release.

We recommend that pre-deployment training should emphasise the responsibilities of UK soldiers to detainees under their care before they hand over responsibility to the Afghan authorities. (Paragraph 78)

35. As Min(AF) stated in response to a question in the House of Commons on 20 January (Official Record, 20 January, Column 1648W), all personnel receive appropriate pre-deployment training in advance of commencing operations. For those to whom it is relevant, this includes specific training on the rules and principles involved in handling prisoners of war, internees and detainees; this can also include briefing by institutions such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The MOD Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Afghanistan must establish clearly the rights of detainees so that they are treated justly and fairly. We urge MOD to recognise that, whilst its legal responsibilities may have been discharged, its duty of care to detainees does not end once they have been handed over to the Afghan authorities, and we look to see this fully reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding. (Paragraph 79)

36. Under the terms of the MOU agreed between the UK and the Afghan Government, representatives of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and International Committee of the Red Cross will have full access to any persons transferred by the UK Armed Forces to Afghan authorities whilst such persons are in custody, as will the UK. Records of these detainees will be kept by Afghan authorities and will be available to the UK for inspection if required.

The UK deployment to Afghanistan is likely to result in a breach of harmony guidelines in some key areas in the short term. MOD has plans to address these potential breaches by encouraging contributions from NATO partners in those trades under most pressure. Overall, we accept MOD's assurance that the impact of the Afghanistan mission on our Armed Forces is manageable. We will continue to monitor the situation. (Paragraph 84)

37. The UK's Armed Forces are heavily committed. That said, the numbers of regular Armed Forces deployed on operations now stands at just under 18% overall. We believe this is sustainable.

38. Harmony guidelines are measured by average Tour Intervals for units and personnel, and are based both on unit deployments and single separated service. Having taken into account the planned increase in deployments in Afghanistan in 2006, on average the Infantry, Royal Armoured Corps, Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and Royal Signals will be approximately 20% deployed. An average of 20% deployed results in an average tour interval of 24 months, which is of course the 'Harmony' target. However, these unit-level

figures are distinct from individual deployment levels, since there is a requirement to backfill undermanned units, and to fill a range of key individual staff positions. As the Committee notes, we are likely to continue to breach Harmony levels in a range of specialised capability areas such as medical, intelligence, helicopter crews, logistic, provost and engineers.

39. We are keenly aware of the burden which operations place on our forces and we are always looking for ways in which they can be reduced. Harmony breaches are managed in a number of ways, including through tailoring of force packages to achieve objectives in the most efficient way possible, and sensitive posting and deployment of personnel. As the Committee notes, pressure is further alleviated through contributions made by other Allies, which we continue to encourage through the NATO force generation process, and through eventual reductions in UK force commitments elsewhere. Over the longer-term, programmes such as the Future Army Structure will help to bring Tour Intervals in line with Harmony guidelines.

40. Individual separated service and breaches of harmony are currently managed under single-Service arrangements using several information systems. The Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) change programme is introducing a harmonised personnel administration system for all military personnel. This system will make it possible to work out the separated service of every individual in the Armed Services using a single IT system. Most importantly, this will measure separated service against a set of criteria that are common across Defence. After JPA roll out, which started with the RAF in the Spring, a Unit Separated Service Report will be available giving a breakdown for each individual covering a rolling period (3 years for the RN and Army, and 2 years for the RAF). Individuals will be able to check their own Separated Service records, and reports will be also available for Formation HQs and MOD use.

There is a fundamental tension between the UK's objective of promoting stability and security and its aim of implementing an effective counter-narcotics strategy. It is likely the more successful the deployment is at impeding the drugs trade, the more it will come under attack from those involved in it. In the short term at least, the security situation is likely to deteriorate. (Paragraph 90)

41. We do not believe that there is a fundamental tension between our objectives in this mission. There can be no long-term stability if the opium trade is not tackled: President Karzai has said that terrorism and narcotics represent the two gravest threats to Afghanistan's future, and the drugs trade feeds on and contributes to insecurity in Afghanistan and the region. Ending the opium industry is essential for Afghanistan's long-term future.

42. Although overall the decrease in opium cultivation seen in 2005 is unlikely to be sustained this year, and in Helmand cultivation is likely to rise, this year's eradication programme in Helmand has been more effective than in previous years and has not led to a significant deterioration in the security situation.

We were concerned to hear that the Taliban is becoming more involved with the narcotics trade in Helmand. This development is likely to increase the exposure of UK Forces to attack as it seeks to limit the opium trade in Helmand. (Paragraph 91)

43. There is no conclusive evidence of a direct link between drug trafficking and the insurgency in Afghanistan. We are aware of recent suggestions that insurgents (possibly the Taliban) are encouraging Afghan farmers to grow opium poppy, and this is an issue we will be paying close attention to.

We remain uncertain of the exact role which UK Forces will be asked to play in support of the counter-narcotics strategy and call on MOD to provide clarification. (Paragraph 92)

44. The UK is working to help develop the Afghan's ability to bring about a sustainable reduction in cultivation, production and trafficking of opium. These are not primarily military tasks. Instead, the relevant OGDs, supported by the military, will provide an environment in which Counter-Narcotics (CN) activities can have the greatest impact, the rule of law can be applied and reconstruction can take place.

45. In addition, ISAF can provide support to Afghan-led CN efforts in a number of ways as set out in an Annex to NATO's operational plan for the mission in Afghanistan. These include training of Afghan security forces, gathering and sharing of information, assistance with the Afghan CN information campaign, and provision of logistical and enabling support to Afghan CN operations. If discovered in the course of routine operations, ISAF troops may also seize and secure drugs, associated equipment and traffickers before handing them over to the appropriate Afghan authorities. ISAF forces are not, however, permitted to take direct, pre-planned action against the drugs trade, including eradication of opium poppy.

We note the proposals of the Senlis Council for the licensing of opium production but we accept, in the absence of a well developed legal and security system, ADIDU's conclusion that the Senlis Council's proposals would be inappropriate at this time. (Paragraph 95)

46. We support the Committee's conclusion. The Afghan Minister of CN has said: "The poor security situation in country means that there can simply be no guarantee that opium will not be smuggled out of country for the illicit narcotics trade abroad. Without an effective control mechanism, a lot of opium will still be refined into heroin for illicit markets in the West and elsewhere". The UK supports and agrees with the Government of Afghanistan's position on licit cultivation. As partner nation for counter narcotics and as part of the international community committed to supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction, it would be irresponsible for us to do otherwise.

We support ADIDU's focus on developing Afghan security institutions capable of targeting drug growers and traffickers, and on encouraging farmers to pursue alternative livelihoods. However, we believe the task of controlling and reducing the amount of opium produced in Helmand, requires a long-term strategy lasting well after a secure environment has been established. (Paragraph 96)

47. Sustainable drug elimination strategies take time, particularly when the challenges are as severe as those in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the drugs trade is not an isolated problem; tackling it will require substantial progress across the broader reconstruction (security, economic development and governance) effort. The UK fully supports the Afghan Government's National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS), which represents a more

sophisticated approach to CN than we have seen to date, focussing on four key priorities: targeting the trafficker, strengthening livelihoods, reducing demand and developing effective institutions. The inclusion of CN as a cross-cutting theme in the Afghanistan Compact and the Afghan Government's interim National Development Strategy, further recognises the need for a broad based approach to the problem.

48. There are a number of encouraging signs of progress already. Last year saw the passage of vital CN legislation, the conviction of over 90 traffickers, an increase in drugs related seizures and a 21% reduction in land under opium poppy cultivation. Recent UK research into cultivation trends for 2006 shows that, for the first time since the Taliban-enforced ban, reductions in cultivation may be sustained in some areas, particularly those close to provincial centres where there is better security, governance and resources. Nevertheless the challenge ahead is huge and the international community must increase support for the CN campaign to help the Afghan Government build on these successes and deliver its long-term CN goals.

We note the UK's commitment of £38 million for sustainable development in the Helmand PRT's first year. We welcome the intention to commit resources through the Government of Afghanistan and provincial bodies, but call on the UK Government to put in place safeguards to ensure that those resources fully reach their intended recipients. We argue that only by involving Afghans in key decisions will reconstruction work prove to be sustainable. (Paragraph 101)

49. Reconstruction is the primary responsibility of the Afghan Government, with support from the international community. PRTs are only one of a range of mechanisms for providing this support at the provincial level.

50. DfID plan to put funds through the Afghan Government's existing National Priority Programmes, which are rigorously appraised by the World Bank before they can receive Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) funding. The new Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board recently created to oversee implementation of the Afghanistan Compact will also help to coordinate international assistance in accordance with Afghan Government priorities; this will help ensure that resources are appropriately targeted so as to have an impact at the Provincial level.

51. Furthermore, it is not true that the UK PRT will have significantly lower levels of funding available for Quick Impact Projects than the US PRT did. There will be a £3 million pound fund provided by the Global Conflict Prevention Pool, the Afghan Drugs Interdepartmental Unit (ADIDU) and DfID per year as well as an additional sum of around £500,000 provided by the MOD. This means that the funds are roughly equal to the \$6 million formerly available to the US PRT.

We do not believe it will prove possible to complete the reform of the security and justice institutions in Helmand within the three-year commitment so far made. (Paragraph 104)

52. We have always said that achieving sustainable reform and reconstruction in Afghanistan would be a long-term process, and we have made clear that we do not expect to achieve all the UK's objectives for Helmand within the three year deployment announced on 26 January.

53. That said, the UK's plans for Helmand are ambitious. They set out a range of desired outcomes, in the broad fields of governance, security, economic and social development, and CN. Several key factors will determine the pace of progress towards achieving these outcomes. These include the prevailing security situation and the impact this will have on the ability of UK personnel to operate in the province; on the absorptive capacity of the local institutions and people; on the political will exercised by President Karzai and his government; the ability to ensure that funds contributed to central programmes benefit the provinces; and the pace of reform of central institutions. It is clear that capacity-building activity will be needed in both Kabul and Helmand.

54. We are therefore realistic about the challenges we are likely to face in our efforts to support stabilisation and reconstruction in Helmand. We may, after three years, have made uneven progress and, in some areas, have established only the initial building blocks. But we are right to set ourselves an ambitious and demanding programme, and remain confident that by the end of the three-year commitment irreversible progress will have been made.

The Minister's reluctance to discuss an exit strategy from Helmand is understandable but we believe that MOD should be more forthcoming about how it will measure the success of the deployment. We recommend that MOD make public the targets by which they intend to measure the success of the Helmand deployment. (Paragraph 105)

55. Our exit strategy is clear. It is to build the capacity of the Afghan Government and National Security Forces to enable them to maintain security in Helmand without international support.

56. The assumptions upon which more detailed UK plans for Helmand are based are now being scrutinised by UK personnel (military and civilian) as the HTF deployment becomes established. At the same time, programmes to implement the plan will be developed, and both the plan and the programmes contain means of measuring progress. The Strategic Delivery Unit, based in the Embassy in Kabul, will play an important role in bringing together the complex strands of our plan, and in monitoring and advising on its progress.

57. However, measuring the development of local capacity is not easy. We will seek to use a mixture of broad targets (such as the effectiveness of local offices of central Government Ministries and the number of security incidents/insurgent attacks) alongside more precise indicators of economic and social development (such as the number of children attending school).

58. Should the Committee find it useful, a briefing focussing on UK targets and progress may be arranged later in 2006. It would not, however, be appropriate to make public the detail of UK Government plans.