

AFGHANISTAN
MONTHLY PROGRESS REPORT
March 2012

The UK is engaged in Afghanistan as part of a 50-nation coalition to prevent international terrorists, including Al Qaeda, from again using Afghanistan as a base from which to operate, threatening our security and that of the region.

The Government has committed itself to keeping Parliament informed about developments in Afghanistan on a monthly basis. This sixteenth report covers progress in March 2012. It reflects the combined assessment of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development.

The Rt Hon. William Hague MP
Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs

Overview

March has been a sobering month for British forces operating in Afghanistan. Nine members of our Armed Forces paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country and more than 400 have died since operations began in 2001. Such moments of tragedy remind us of the high cost of the campaign, the difficulty of the mission and the bravery of our soldiers, sailors and airmen.

As the campaign progresses we can expect to face further challenges. However, we must not allow these to cloud the real and tangible progress being made. Reported year-on-year violence levels are down, the Afghans are increasingly taking the lead on security operations and the insurgency remains under pressure.

We remain committed to Afghanistan both now and in the long term and we look forward to the international community further articulating its commitment at the forthcoming Chicago and Tokyo Summits. The Prime Minister discussed progress in Afghanistan with President Obama during his visit to the US in March. They reaffirmed their commitment to the Lisbon timetable for transition of security to Afghan control. This process is on track, is realistic and is achievable.

UK aid continued to help the Afghan Government improve its own capacity to deliver better public services for its people, particularly at the local level. Latest figures suggest that with UK assistance the Afghan Government is better able to spend funding in line with its own development budgets, which ultimately means better and more comprehensive public services for Afghan people.

Political

On 5 March the Afghan Parliament approved the nine nominees whose names had been proposed by the Afghan Government as Ministerial candidates. President Karzai had first presented the names in January 2010 to the previous Parliament, which rejected the nominations three times. MPs approved the names without the lengthy hearings that had characterised previous attempts. It is too early to tell if this marks a shift in the relationship between the legislature and the executive.

At the beginning of March the Ulema Council of Afghanistan issued a wide-ranging statement which set out the Council's views on women's rights in Afghanistan. It reiterated a strict code of conduct for women. Some Afghan and international civil society organisations expressed their concerns regarding the statement, whilst others preferred not to draw attention to the statement. We are working with Afghan civil society and the international community to build support for full application of the Afghan Constitution, which upholds equal rights for both men and women. In addition, our Ambassador in Kabul issued a statement on 8 March to mark International Women's Day. This reiterated the UK's commitment to supporting women's rights.

The Prime Minister discussed progress in Afghanistan with President Obama during his visit to the US in March. They reaffirmed their commitment to the Lisbon timetable for transition.

Reconciliation

On 15 March the Taliban announced a suspension of talks over the proposed political office in Qatar. The statement does not alter our support for reconciliation and the UK continues to support all Afghan-led efforts to achieve an inclusive and sustainable political settlement.

Regional

On 26-27 March, the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference was held in Tajikistan. Seventeen priority projects were identified in infrastructure, trade, transit and border management. Participating countries and multilateral organisations expressed their support for regional cooperation and Afghanistan's economic development. Officials from the FCO and DfID represented the UK.

Strengthening the Afghan State

Rule of Law

National

The Criminal Justice Task Force (CJTF) is an Afghan-led facility which provides a national detention, investigation, prosecution and judicial capability for the most serious narcotics cases. In March it achieved 92 convictions (including prison sentences of up to 20 years), seized over 14.5 tonnes of heroin, opium and morphine and about 14 tonnes of chemical precursors.

Over 400 Afghan National Police (ANP) participated in training at the Police Staff College, bringing the total number of ANP officers trained there to over 2,500.

Helmand

The annual Community Based Dispute Resolution workshop was held in March. It attracted over 100 Afghans from ten districts. The workshop included topics such as the Afghan Constitution, Family Law, Human Rights and Women and Children's rights. This was entirely Afghan-led and facilitated without internationals present, thus demonstrating the progress that has been made on transition.

Governance

A review completed in March of UK assistance to the Independent Directorate of Local Government (IDLG) and Provincial Governors' Offices confirmed that we are helping the Afghan Government to implement policies and programmes that are making local government much more effective. Our support is helping local government institutions deliver public services for the Afghan people, reducing the Afghan Government's dependence on international assistance in the run-up to security transition and beyond.

Economic and Social Development

The Afghan Government's ability to spend development budget funds is expected to show an increase from 39% in 2010/11 to 53% in 2011/12. This shows that, with DFID support, the Afghan Government is increasingly capable of planning and delivering budgets for its public services. Government spending on its own development is expected to have risen by 30% in 2011/12, suggesting that more public services are being delivered directly by the Government for the people.

UK support for infrastructure improvements in Helmand province continued to progress well. Emergency repairs to three major roads in Helmand were completed and contracts for the rehabilitation of the Gereshk Hydro Power Plant were finalised. UK support for the Gereshk project will help to provide 50,000 people with electricity and support the economic regeneration of the district.

An opening ceremony for a new maternity hospital in Helmand took place at the beginning of March. The UK Conflict Pool funded 25 motorcycles for the provincial hospital to help improve patient transfers and support health outreach activities.

Counter Narcotics

Afghan Counter Narcotics Minister Zarar Osmani visited the UK in March. His visit provided a good opportunity to re-state the UK's continued support for the Afghan Government in developing and implementing realistic and targeted counter narcotics policies.

Eradication of opium poppy began in the south of Afghanistan on 5 March, including in Helmand province where Governor Mangal is overseeing an active and effective campaign. Around 1,400 hectares of opium poppy were eradicated in Helmand in March. The current campaign is expected to continue until the first week of May.

Security

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) Growth and Capability

The ANSF continued to demonstrate their increasing capability and we remain on track to complete the transition process by the end of 2014, as agreed at the NATO Lisbon Summit in 2010. Nationally the ANSF now lead 40% of conventional operations and carry out 85% of their training.

In March the ANSF and ISAF completed and approved their joint Operational Plan: *Operation Naweed* (“Good News”) 1391. This is the plan to synchronise ANSF and ISAF efforts over the course of the Afghan Year 1391¹ and involves all elements of the Afghan security forces. *Naweed 1391* is the first time that the ANSF have taken the leading role in campaign planning. The plan includes a detailed concept of operations for each geographic region, including local integration of Army, Police, National Directorate of Security and ISAF activities. *Naweed 1391* represents a further evolution in transition and the ANSF’s capability to manage the campaign in an increasingly independent manner.

In Helmand Province *Operation Now Roz* (“New Year”) was planned and led by the Afghan National Army. Over 1,000 members of the ANSF were joined by British forces to clear insurgents from a key heartland within the Helmand river valley. Afghan forces cleared more than 200 compounds, made safe 44 IEDs, found seven bomb-making factories and discovered over 145 kilograms of homemade explosives. This is the fourth major ANA operation in four months and the largest and most complex so far. The success of the operation is further proof of the ANSF’s increasing professionalism and capability.

The Lashkar Gah police training centre graduated its 5,000th student. 95% of police skills lessons at the centre are now delivered by Afghan instructors, compared with only 5% six months ago, the results of ISAF efforts to ‘train the trainer’.

An initiative to improve IED awareness among Helmand schoolchildren has been established. Developed with the Ministry of Education, British forces have trained members of the Afghan Uniformed Police to conduct the education programme. Designed to be self sustaining some 6,000 school children (boys and girls) have already been taught the dangers of playing with IEDs and the correct action to follow if one is found. In coming weeks the programme will expand into more rural regions to extend further the reach of this life saving education.

Table One: ANSF Growth to 31 March 2012

	Objective (30 November 2012)	Target Strength (31 March 2012)	Actual Strength (31 March 2012)	March Target Met
ANA:	195,000	179,386	194,466	Yes
ANP:	157,000	147,943	149,642	Yes
ANA Officers:	29,644	28,086	24,934	No
ANA NCOs:	72,123	64,379	53,784	No

¹ March 2012 to March 2013.

Table Two: ANSF Attrition Rates

	Target Monthly Attrition	Actual Monthly Attrition	March Target Met
ANA:	1.4%	1.3%	Yes
ANP:	1.4%	0.60%	Yes
Uniformed Police	1.4%	0.50%	Yes
Border Police	1.4%	1.3%	Yes
National Civil Order Police	1.4%	0.50%	Yes

Violence Levels

We have started to see an anticipated increase in violence levels with the onset of spring and the return of warmer weather. This trend is consistent with previous years and we expect to see a gradual increase in violent incidents until the usual peak in the summer months, albeit with a slight reduction for Ramadan which this year falls in July.

Although insurgent activity increased in March, year-to-date violence levels across Afghanistan remain lower than in 2011. Every month since May 2011 has seen fewer enemy initiated attacks than the corresponding month in the previous year. This is the longest sustained downward trend recorded by ISAF.

As we look towards the start of this year's fighting season there are distinct signs from several key parts of the country that the insurgency is under some pressure. Reporting has indicated that they are currently experiencing shortages of weapons, equipment and money. This has followed a concerted campaign by the Afghans and international forces to maintain a high operational tempo over the winter. Violence figures over the coming months will confirm whether these reported shortages will have any lasting effect on their ability to conduct their campaign.

UK Fatalities

March was a sombre month for British forces operating in Afghanistan. Nine members of our Armed Forces were killed in action - six when their Warrior vehicle was caught in a powerful explosion on 6 March. They were killed while conducting a routine security patrol close to one of the major roads in the Task Force Helmand area of operations. Though the Warrior is well-protected and has been progressively upgraded to withstand new explosive devices, no vehicle can ever be invulnerable – especially when there is a trade off to be achieved between the weight of armour and manoeuvrability. A joint UK/Afghan investigation into the incident is ongoing. However, this is a complex and sensitive area and the investigations will take time to complete.

On 26 March a Lieutenant in the Afghan National Army shot and killed two British military personnel at the entrance to the Main Operating Base in Lashkar Gah. A third member of the British Armed Forces was wounded. The gunman was shot and killed by a sentry. He did not gain entry into the base itself. Despite Taliban claims to the contrary, we believe that personal grievance rather than insurgent influence prompted the attack. A full investigation is

underway and a number of steps have already been taken to learn lessons from this incident and further improve our security measures.

In addition to these deaths a British soldier was killed by an IED blast on 21 March. As at the end of March a total of 407 British forces personnel have died while serving in Afghanistan. Their sacrifice and their heroism always be remembered.

Kandahar Shootings

On 11 March a US soldier left his base in Panjwai District, Kandahar Province. He broke into several homes in two local villages and killed the occupants. The soldier then returned to his base. US Army Staff Sgt Robert Bales is now in custody charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder and six counts of attempted murder.

This was an abhorrent act carried out, as far as we are aware, by a single individual. As General Allen, Commander of ISAF said, this incident *“in no way represents the values of ISAF and coalition troops or the abiding respect we feel for the Afghan people”*.

Green on Blue Attacks

In recent weeks there has been an increase in the number of “Green on Blue” attacks (incidents when members of the Afghan National Security Forces attack their ISAF partners). Two British soldiers were killed in the most recent attack on 26 March. These incidents involve only isolated rogue elements within the ANSF, the vast majority of whom continue to demonstrate strong commitment to their partnership with ISAF. Nevertheless a range of security measures have been taken to reduce the threat. These include steps to improve the vetting of recruits and more assiduous monitoring of those returning from leave, especially in areas where there is greater insurgent influence. The Afghan National Army has committed to making substantial improvements to their counter intelligence capabilities.

The majority of attacks from within the ANSF are directed at Afghan personnel. While we take the motivation behind any attack extremely seriously, we assess that overall motivation for this type of incident originates from primarily personal grievances as opposed to insurgent infiltration. This is unchanged from previous analysis.

Table Three: Security Incidents

Type of incident	Definition	Change from February 2012	Comparison with March 2011
Security incidents	Enemy action and explosive hazards, both executed attacks and ‘potential’ attacks (e.g. an IED found and cleared)	↑ Rise in attacks	↓ Fall in incidents
Enemy initiated attacks	Attacks executed by insurgents (This does not include ‘potential’ attacks)	↑ Rise in attacks	↓ Fall in attacks
Complex attacks	Attacks conducted by multiple hostile elements employing at least two distinct classes of weapon	↔ No significant change	↓ Fall in attacks

Table Four: International Contributions to ISAF

Country	Contribution	% of Total
US	90,000	69%
UK	9,500	7.3%
Germany	4,818	3.7%
Italy	3,952	3.0%
France	3,916	3.0%
Poland	2,475	1.9%
Romania	1,876	1.4%
Turkey	1,845	1.4%
Australia	1,550	1.2%
Spain	1,488	1.2%
Others (38 nations)	8,966	6.9%
Current Total	130,386	100.00%
<i>Above numbers are indicative of troop contributions as at 6 January 2012, actual numbers fluctuate daily. Source: ISAF</i>		

**Foreign and Commonwealth Office
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