

By Nick Watts, Great North News Services Correspondent

Recent events in Libya have served to distract from the UK's main defence effort at the moment, Afghanistan. This morning at RUSI General David Petraeus commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) gave a presentation which served to remind the audience of the scale and complexity of the enduring Afghan campaign. In October 2009 Petraeus' predecessor Gen McChrystal gave a stellar exposition of the situation as he found it. At the time ISAF was struggling to understand the nature of the insurgency and the means necessary to deal with it. McChrystal had at least started asking the right questions.

Now the situation has moved on. The talk is of the end game and transfer of responsibility for the security of Afghanistan to its own army the ANA. To some extent Petraeus is a lucky general, just as his forebear was unlucky. He has inherited a situation which he summarised as "only recently have we got the inputs right". Only in 2010 was ISAF able to reverse the momentum of the insurgency, which Petraeus characterized as gaining momentum from 2005 onwards. He is referring not only to the uplift in troop numbers, but also to the way ISAF does business in terms of building up the governance of the country, and "getting the big ideas right". Up until then there were too many competing organizations working in silos without talking to each other. So part of the governance piece has been getting the NGOs and contractors as well as the UN and EU working together.

The NATO Lisbon summit committed ISAF to hand over responsibility for security to the Afghan government by the end of 2014. In addition President Obama has committed to the beginning of a draw-down of US forces, beginning in July this year. In answer to some questions on this aspect Petraeus made the point that both NATO and some troop contributing nations, including the UK, were discussing with the Afghan government arrangements for post 2014. He would not be drawn on specifics but mentioned that one key element of the Afghan security forces was still being developed, namely "enablers". These are the vital support functions such as artillery, medical and logistic services, as well as air lift and command and control functions. This might be taken to imply that some elements of NATO's on-going support after 2014 could involve surveillance and special operations forces.

One of Petraeus' earlier appointments had seen him re-writing the US Army's counter insurgency manual, so here was the man who wrote the book explaining how it works on the ground. He was at pains to stress that the military element was only one piece in the jigsaw of COIN. He has also previously been quoted as saying that Afghanistan "is all hard, all of the time"; so he does not see that progress is yet irreversible. He also stressed how important it is to keep our own public opinion supportive of the costly nature of the campaign.

An intriguing piece of the COIN jigsaw is what is called "reintegration" by which is meant the various strands being used to encourage members of the insurgency to lay down their arms altogether or to change sides. On this matter Petraeus was matter of fact, but opaque. There are efforts in hand to encourage both the lower echelon fighters to stop fighting, as well as the higher echelons. More emphasis is being put into tackling local corruption, which is often one of

the grievances which cause people to join the insurgency.

There is also recognition by the Karzai government that the culture of patronage has to be dealt with, including his own family. On their own none of these things is a winner; but added to the improvements in ISAF's tactical situation, they all add up to reasons for wavering insurgents to remain at home, or to change sides. A British officer, Maj Gen Phil Jones is in charge of the force reintegration effort, to get ex-Taliban insurgents into the ANA.

Petraeus' presentation was much more assured than the one given by McChrystal in 2009. Back then ISAF was striving for credibility in the capitals of the NATO nations, never mind how it was doing in the campaign against the insurgents. Petraeus has managed his tenure well and things seem to be going reasonably well, although he didn't want to sound complacent. He said that there was still hard fighting ahead. It is to be hoped that should there be setbacks, as there may well be, Petraeus will not also find himself carpeted by his President, but given the top cover he needs to finish the job.