

By Nigel Green, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

The UK Government has come under fire for the stresses facing soldiers due to commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. The criticism follows the Ministry of Defence's launch of a Command Paper last July, which aimed to alleviate some of the pressures on the private lives of service personnel.

The Minister for the Armed Forces Bob Ainsworth faced hostile questioning from Opposition Members in a recent debate in the House of Commons. In particular, he confirmed there had been breaches of the so-called "harmony guidelines" in which servicemen and women are not supposed to serve more than 13 months overseas in a three year period.

Bernard Jenkin, the Conservative MP for North Essex, said: "Would it not have been easier to achieve the harmony guidelines if the Government had not cut four battalions from the infantry in 2004? In hindsight, was not that a bad decision? When will the Government address the under-recruitment and lack of retention that leads to the Royal Marines, for example, being 9.8 per cent under-strength?"

"Seven battalions in the infantry are 20 per cent undermanned: the Scots Guards, 4 Scots, 2 Fusiliers, 2 and 3 Yorks, 1 Mercian and 40 Commando. If the Government addressed those problems, the pressure on individual infantry servicemen who, due to that pressure, the Government now say are in a pinch-point trade, would not be so great."

Mr Ainsworth replied: "I have spoken to the Chief of the General Staff about the exact point that the honorable gentleman makes. He does not want additional battalions, but he wants the thickness of his existing force to be recovered, because moving people around to fill gaps and mitigate the imposition on individuals causes additional stretch. His main priority is recruiting to get back the strength of the individual battalions, not the three additional battalions about which the Opposition talk, which is not something that he would want as head of the Army."

Shailesh Vara, the Conservative MP for North West Cambridgeshire, said: "Our military personnel are spending far more time now than even a few years ago in theatres of war. With that goes additional pressure on their families, their wives, husbands, partners and loved ones back in Britain. Of course, that has caused enormous difficulty in relationships."

"What is the Ministry of Defence doing to help family members cope with the stress and strain of having loved ones who are now far more likely to be in theatres of war than before?"

Mr Ainsworth replied: "The honorable gentleman is absolutely right that we have been asking a lot of our armed forces, that they have been operating above the planning assumptions for some time now and no matter how people try to mitigate them, those stresses come out

somewhere. They come out in breaches of harmony guidelines and therefore create additional pressures on service life."

"There are plenty of support mechanisms. People in post are constantly monitored to try to assist, both at local unit level, regimental level and more widely, at Army level or Royal Marine level or Navy level, to try to mitigate those effects."

Dr Andrew Murrison, the Conservative MP for Westbury, quoted a recent report from the British Medical Journal linking long deployments with mental illness. Dr Murrison added: "The Royal Logistics Corps tour interval is just 15 months and the last tour interval of the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards was just eight months before it went from Iraq to Afghanistan. In the meantime, we are faced with a charismatic US President who is, no doubt, conducting a charm offensive with the Prime Minister aimed at securing a UK contribution to his post-election surge in Afghanistan."

"There has been no statement to date from ministers, simply the suggestion from the Ministry of Defence that between 1,500 and 2,000 additional troops will be forthcoming. "As ever in the planning of campaigns by this Government, it seems that a solution is offered before the problem is defined. I hope that Ministers will demand a rigorous business case before any additional UK troops are deployed and firm matching commitments from our allies."

Patrick Mercer, the Conservative MP for Newark told how 35 per cent of infantry recruits now drop out of training. He also raised the problem of illness, claiming 22 per cent of personnel serving with the Royal Horse Artillery could not be deployed due to sickness.

Mr. Ainsworth replied: "Nobody wants a 35 per cent. drop-out rate in the infantry, but people want hard, tough training that turns out recruits who are capable of surviving in the kind of environments in which we expect them to operate. It would do nobody any favours to soften that training in order to lower the drop-out rate. The result may well be personnel who are not properly equipped, and therefore casualties in theatre that could be avoided. Getting that balance right is enormously difficult."

The debate also included upgrading accommodation for service personnel, as well as improving education for their children.

Mr Ainsworth said: "To ensure that all the measures in the Command Paper are implemented, we have an external reference group, which includes representation from academia, the service families' federations and key service charities. The group has a clear remit to hold the Government to account for their progress on implementing the commitments of the Command Paper. In line with this, 10 departments and two devolved administrations have appointed senior armed forces advocates to ensure that the needs of service personnel are fully reflected in developing and implementing policies."

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