

By Simon Roberts, Research Associate, UK Defence Forum

On 10th August Quentin Davies, Minister for Defence Equipment and Support, spoke with BBC Radio from Helmand Province, Afghanistan where he was visiting troops on operations. Predictably the questions all focused on the recent media reports of a lack of equipment for troops on the front line and whether this was a cause for the increased loss of lives over the past few months.

The impression given by Mr Davies, following conversations he's had with troops, is that the equipment is the best they've ever had and that any equipment that's needed is either "already in the pipeline" or if its something that's been requested, it will be looked at and if required, then put in the pipeline. For Mr. Davies (and the MoD) equipment and support procurement is a constant process, always needing to be improved and upgraded.

"..we're improving some very important area of equipment like armoured vehicles and helicopters roughly on a two year basis, so that every two years there's some new system coming in to service"

The problem (according to Radio 5 Live's presenter, who had spoken with troops in Afghanistan) is not necessarily lack a lack of equipment, but a lack of troops:

"The big complaint we're hearing is that they're [British troops] taking land and then losing it again and having to reclaim the same bit six months later on their next tour of duty"

In answer to this, Mr. Davies pointed out the success of Operation Panther's Claw (a concentrated effort to break the back of the Taliban resistance in Helmand Province, in order to secure secure the region between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk). The apparent success of Operation Panther's Claw should hopefully be seen in more than just the obvious clearing the Taliban from the area, but also in securing a bit more of the country so that it can come under full control of the Afghan government, allowing for the development of infrastructure, which will in turn encourage the beginning of economic progress. Mr Davies makes the point of mentioning plans for a new road, which is important in terms of employing people , but also "bringing farmers closer to their markets"

In light of the revelations from a News of the World article on Sunday about numerous armoured vehicles "lying idle" at an army depot in Gloucestershire and also reports last week of similar vehicles being "stranded" in Dubai, the question of why they weren't in theatre was also predictable.

In response to the vehicles in Gloucestershire, Mr Davies made his answer simple. They were needed for training purposes. This seemed like a rather straightforward answer, but perhaps an

all together accurate one, especially when you consider that 19 Light Brigade (who are currently on deployment in Afghanistan) are not trained to use such vehicles. In fact, the army didn't even receive the first of the new Ridgeback vehicles until May, a month after 19 Brigade had deployed to Afghanistan. So instead of shipping out all these vehicles into theatre where no one can use them, the MoD decided to keep them in the UK in order to train 11 Light Brigade on them so that when they replace 19 Brigade in October, they will be fully trained and capable of using them.

When we look at the response to the 9 Ridgeback vehicles which had been "stranded" in Dubai since July 16th, Mr Davies' response was again fairly straight forward - it takes time to get vehicles from the UK to Afghanistan. However, with this answer, context may also play a part. Fair enough, these vehicles must first be shipped from the UK to Dubai, but it is flying them from Dubai to Afghanistan where the real delay comes. A transport aircraft is only capable of carrying "2 Mastiffs and 2 Ridgebacks per flight". The UK currently only has 6 C-17 transport aircraft in total and so one can understand why it took a few weeks to transport these vehicles especially with the other materiel they have to move.

However, when you then consider that the UK has been leasing a number of Anotov AN-225 transport aircraft from the Ukraine, which are capable of flying these armoured vehicles to Afghanistan, you have to ask why there have been delays. Perhaps it has something to do with ITAR controlled technology being flown in a Ukrainian plane and the requirement to keep it secret? In which case, talk about "adequate operational sovereignty" in future procurement has a rather hollow ring.

UPDATE:

Taken from Defence Management -

A spokeswoman from the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency, who is responsible for the shipping of equipment like armoured vehicles, told Defencemanagement.com that some vehicles are always required to be in the UK for "training, maintenance and critical upgrades". It is also "completely unsustainable" to have all armoured vehicles in theatre at once.

But she added that nearly 100 vehicles left for Afghanistan last week and there were only 10 remaining as of the weekend of 9th August.