

By Nick watts, Great North News Services

This week has seen the announcement of a reduction in the number of British troops committed to operations in Helmand by the end of the year. The reduction by 500 personnel will be "conditions based", which seems to be giving a hostage to fortune. Also this week the Foreign Secretary released the 10th monthly progress report on developments in Afghanistan. Taken together the two events enable us to see how Britain's involvement in Afghanistan looks up to and beyond 2014.

The last month has seen 9 fatalities among British forces, including the 6 members of the Yorkshire regiment killed in a single explosion. In a joint briefing today at the Foreign Office FCO and military leaders gave a commentary on developments and a sense of how matters will develop up to 2014. The effort underlying the military campaign is to get Afghanistan to a state where it looks like any other developing country. The recent operational awards which saw 90 members of the armed forces decorated for gallantry, including 9 MCs shows that this has not yet been achieved. And yet the picture painted by FCO officials just returned from Helmand is one of increasing normality.

There is no doubt that progress is being made. The level of violence is declining in Helmand, despite recent attacks in Kabul. MOD and other government figures have been expecting spectaculars in Kabul, as the Taliban lose momentum tactically across the country. Increasingly Afghan government officials are able to travel openly by road around the region, which would have been impossible a few years ago. The regional governor has mandated that all members of the local government will now travel by road, rather than by helicopter. This enables locals to see their representatives and officials which helps to reinforce both good governance and a sense of increasing normality.

Another indicator of normality is the level of demand for education. The Afghan people understand enough to realize the importance of local schools. To the extent that where the Taliban have been trying to shut schools down by intimidation, they have been rebuffed by locals. This has a knock on effect on the local polity, where the Taliban recognize that they will lose support if they oppose this development. One Taliban commander contacted ISAF to say that the local school did not have enough books! The picture varies from province to province, but the effect created by the surge into Helmand is beginning to take hold.

On the security side the amount of effort being generated by the Afghan National Army (ANA) is also increasing. In Regional Command South West, the number of operations being initiated and led by ANA forces is increasing. Similarly the ANA is developing its own approach to addressing the shortage of enablers which a western military brings with it. Support and supplies are obtained locally at reduced cost. The more the ANA can secure the local population centres, the more the Afghan National Police (ANP) can step up and undertake

routine police duties. It is acknowledged that the ANP remains a problem area, but this is being addressed alongside the effort by ISAF to enable the ANA to create the conditions on the ground, which were referred to in Phillip Hammond's statement earlier this week.

In the run up to 2014 it is hoped that the development effort will begin to resemble other areas where DFID is involved. Working in partnership with NGOs and UN agencies the effort to move Afghanistan towards normality will continue. This will mean effort on poppy eradication, an increasingly empowered ANP and local government which the populace trusts. Already many local development projects are managed and run by Afghans, and vocational training is producing increasing numbers of teachers. Some big decisions remain to be taken by NATO and the UN concerning the post 2014 period. NATO will be judged on what sort of Afghanistan is left behind once ISAF concludes its mandate. It seems that the lessons of Iraq are being applied; time will tell.