

By Nick Watts, Defence Correspondent, Great North News Services

British military sources are confident that the Afghan National Army will be ready to take over operations from ISAF by 2014. At the Lisbon summit NATO committed itself to hand over counter insurgency operations to the Afghan National Army (ANA) by the end of 2014. Recently the British prime minister spoke of beginning to withdraw personnel as early as next year. British experience of partnering with 3215 Brigade ANA, which was raised in February this year, is cited as a good example of how this ambition is progressing. Much depends on this process succeeding.

NATO leaders recognize that the way to ensure that ISAF can hand over by 2014 is to step up the tempo of training of the ANA. The target for recruited and trained strength of the ANA is 171,600 by November 2011. Currently there are 144,000 trained soldiers in 28 Kandaks (Battalions). Following the transition of ISAF forces from Mentoring to partnering the emphasis has shifted to putting ANA forces in the lead on operations, with British and other ISAF forces in support. This has meant that the quality of soldiers needs to be raised.

The priority of the ANA is to concentrate on counter IED training (CIED), which Afghan soldiers take pride in doing well. Another priority is to improve medical training. In parallel with this is the need to improve absenteeism, which is addressed through better pay, and illiteracy which is being addressed by putting 34,000 soldiers through literacy training.

Putting the ANA into the front line more has had the effect of raising their self esteem, according to MOD commanders. The NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTMA) estimates that as of November 2010, of 28 ANA Kandaks, seven are capable of undertaking operations with minimal advice; ten remain reliant on ISAF for direct assistance; nine are at an early stage of development and a further two are still being assessed. British officers admit that the ANA is being fashioned from the bottom up and that future senior leaders will emerge from the current cadres of middle ranking officers. Technical training is increasing alongside tactical training, but this will take time.

British experience with 3215 ANA Brigade has been positive. A small operation OMID DO was undertaken earlier this year, which the ANA planned and lead. There were no major tactical engagements with insurgents but the new partnering system proved itself. A subsequent larger scale operation OMID CHAR was launched in support of the governor of Garesh district, again with ANA elements taking a leading role. British commanders are upbeat about progress, but admit that General Petraeus's ambition to increase the tempo of operations against the insurgents will require a close eye to be kept on how the ANA progresses.