

Update on operations over recent weeks by Major General Gordon Messenger

Before Christmas I stressed the importance of the hold and build phase, the importance of demonstrating permanent improvement, the importance of reassuring the population that you're not going to be transient and that has a proven effect and that's linked to force densities because the more forces you have available the better able you are to do that and over a wider area.

The relationship between governance and security is a sequential thing. The first thing one has to do is to deliver enough security to allow Afghan governance that is very much the next step, the first step and the most important step. Once that level of security has been delivered it is to provide enough Afghan governance to provide a channel and a conduit for the people. Then and beyond then and sequential to that R and D can follow and that, by which I mean reconstruction and development would flow through that and those early stages of Afghan government and I hope that was clear.

The importance of cultural intelligence is something that we have recognised for a while, and is something where we have made considerable improvements of late because of our recognition of its importance. It is a very hard thing to do, it is something that we are getting better and better at but I would say there is still room for improvement in that area

There's been signs of real progress in the last few months in Musa Qala within the secure area, the area of the district centre and the area of the town itself and much of the insurgent activity has been limited to the northern patrol base line and the southern patrol base line which has generated a broadly secure space inside Musa Qala of about five kilometres from north to south. Having that space where Afghans feel secure enough to go about their business makes a big difference and means that they do come from afar for commerce, in order to talk to the local government.

The other good piece that's coming out of Musa Qala, and this has been bubbling for a while, that's starting to come to fruition is the performance of the ANP and the ANA and the ANP in Musa Qala are as good as anywhere else in Helmand and it's largely due to good leadership, they've got a very good commander there called Commander Coque [?] who's got a real grip over his people and actually the police in Musa Qala reverse the trend of what you see elsewhere and are quite a potent force.

As an example there was a bomb in a café in the centre about a week to ten days ago which was as a result of a blood feud rather than insurgent activity and the reports we've had from theatre are that the follow up by the ANSF in terms of the police and the army working well together and the subsequent investigation which is still ongoing by the NDS which is the internal security organisation, actually has been very promising and positive. So yes there is insurgent activity to the north and the south of the town, no-one's saying that the centre is utterly secure and not prone to an occasional attack but by and large the feeling there is one of reassurance and progress.

Nad Ali is the next area and is the domain of battle group centre-south, which is the Grenadier Guards. In the last two weeks they've been conducting a security surge into the area to the northeast of that area which is in this vicinity here. Operation Tor Chapar conducted by the Grenadier Guards but with the company of the Royal Welsh attached to them, if you recall the Royal Welsh are the surge that went out recently. The local ANA commander plus Governor Habba Bulla [?], who I know well and is a good guy, went into that area in advance, discussed their intentions with the local village elders and the like and stated that the area that they were in was about to be the subject of a security operation and that the Afghan National Army would be arriving in due course.

That was followed by a military operation, the first phase of which was an aviation assault by a partnered Afghan unit, i.e. a British and Afghan aviation assault to secure some key junctions. The key junctions are on this area here which is a canal system which separates Chah-e-Anjir from Nad Ali. The following day and in a deliberate and overt fashion the occupation of that area happened to very little insurgent resistance and the feeling is that warning of the local village elders was important in ensuring that.

Let's not pretend that that means it's all very swimmingly from here on in, what tends to happen when they do that is that the insurgent tends to melt away, they tend to then sit back, see where you are putting your fixed places, they tend to look to see how you are configuring yourself and then they tend to come back at you. So no-one's suggesting for a second that that means that this is now not going to be subject to pressure from the insurgency, largely from this area here, but I think it was a positive model and should be seen in the light of shaping operations which are going to occur in this area here within the first quarter of this year.

The other point to note on Nad Ali, in the last fortnight was a bicycle suicide IED in the bazaar near to patrol base Shawqat, which is the district centre of Nad Ali. It was targeting a parked ANA vehicle, the bomb detonated and killed one ANA and 11 locals who were in the vicinity and that has generated a wave of anti-Taliban feeling and anger in that area and is indicative of a pattern which is across Helmand. The people who suffer the most in all this are very often the local nationals who are caught up in the cross fire.

Battle Group centre, the Danish Battalion. are focussed on the town of Gereshk. It continues to be probably the most thriving commercial area within Helmand. The security inside the town itself is largely delivered through Afghans and the predominant ISAF responsibility is in providing a patrol base ring of security to the south in Spin Majid and into the upper Gereshk

valley into patrol bases Keenan, Sandford and Armadillo.

Those have been quite successful with a number of counter IED operations and a number of finds, and by finds I don't just mean that they find these things and tuck them away, when you find an IED then that gives you the opportunity to exploit the IED and you start building your intelligence and target the networks, which of course are at the very heart of what we're trying to do in that area.

The only other point is the importance of freedom of movement along Highway One that has been given to the US Stryker Force with its mobile and highly technical capabilities. That alleviates the task of the Battle Group Centre and allows them to focus on providing the security for Gereshk town, which is its main effort.

Babaji is a result of operation Panthers Claw. After quite a difficult start the permanence of the bases that the Coldstream Guards are establishing there is starting to have an effect on the people, and you're starting to see more support for the Afghan/ISAF patrol bases than previously. People are starting to return to normality in quite an obvious way. There are less incidents in the Babaji AO than any other AO in Taskforce Helmand.

The other thing of note there is a road build which is happening between Gereshk and straight through the green zone of Babaji, about a nine kilometre route. That is being done by a local contractor with Royal Engineers support. There's about 40 locals being employed on it, they're hoping to get it up to about 200 locals employed on it. It's making about 800 metres a week and is estimated to take up about three months to complete. And that's something which is again important in the freedom of movement piece, because if you live in Gereshk and you're trying to get to Lashkar Gah you often have to go all the way down Highway One and all the way down 601 to get there. So, that will actually improve the sort of connectivity within central Helmand which is key to freedom of movement.

President Karzai visited on the 2nd of January into Lashkar Gah. He was due to go when the Prime Minister visited a couple of weeks before that, but was unable to make it to Lashkar Gah because of weather, much to the disappointment of the provincial government. That visit was the first time he's been there for two years, and is viewed as a considerable success by the provincial government which is good news. Also, the security for that was coordinated by the OCCP which is a joint coordination base, part of Police Headquarters just outside of the Lashkar Gah base. And that is a combined ANP, ANA, ISAF commander control facility who actually conducted all the security for it, and the only security scare was some sort of very sporadic and ineffective firing some way out because of the success of that security operation.

The Helmand plan went live on the 1st of January. It's a much more theatre provincial driven thing. It's been signed off by Governor Mangal as the principal signatory, but also the two security – ISAF security, i.e. Larry Nicholson, the one star USMC, James Cowan, the one star Brit and the head of the PRT have jointly signed that. And that charts the progress and the plan and the priorities for the governance of reconstruction and development piece for the next year, and I think it's a real move forward because of the in theatre ownership, because frankly that's where it needs to be.

The ANP Training Centre is going well. The first 150 graduates are there and they graduate on the 28th of January and will be sent out to bolster the ANP effort across Helmand. The Royal Welsh, i.e. the surge force, are now complete, have been for some time, and were involved at company level in Operation Tor Chapar. The remainder of them are involved in partnering the three additional ANA companies that have arrived in the last three weeks in Tushu Rabat, which is the ANA base in this area here, in anticipation of partnered security operations in the future.

Sangin, as we know, has been the most difficult and the most challenging place in Helmand. Why is that so? Firstly, it is absolutely contested by the Taliban and the direction that comes from Taliban senior leadership has targeted Sangin as a place where they want to take on ISAF forces. It is an important population centre. There are the tribal enmities which are absolutely key, and without the Alizai/Alakozai/Ishaqzai frictions, frankly you can't get under the skin of the problem in Sangin. To put this politely: they're quite a simple, rural, rudimentary peasantry up there. The population in central Helmand, which have been touched by international aid for some time through the irrigation projects, have seen a lot more. In the Sangin valley, they're as deeply traditional tribal and rural as you can get. And that means that they've got quite a low start point in terms of capacity.

It's a narcotics area. In 2005, it was the principal narcotics bazaar in Northern Helmand. To the north is a lot of poppy and narcotic production facility. And it's a key transit area, it's a very important crossroads. It's been used by insurgents and drug traffickers for a long time, and therefore it's contested.

What are we trying to achieve there? Supporting the Afghan government to go about their business in the best way they can, so they can touch as many of their people, and influence as many of their people, as they can, so that locals look to the secure area of the district centre and its immediate environs, they go to there for their governance, for their authority, for wheat distribution, to listen to the provincial governor, to register their vote. All these things that we want to see them looking to legitimate Afghan authorities, rather than the illegitimate ones.

And that is important because that becomes the hub for the district. What you find is that there are two zones, and they're not definite, but they exist. The first is the area of security, highly ringed by checkpoints and patrol bases, which are either manned solely by ANP, these two here are solely ANP, or they are manned by jointly, primarily ANA, Pylae and Nabi are predominantly ANA, with ISAF involvement, or they're partnered bases. Now those partnered bases generally sit in the outer ring of security. So Nalay is a partnered base at company level in Sangin. Inkerman is a partnered company base in the Sangin AO. And Wishtan is a partnered company-sized base. And what they do is they provide the sort of outside-in support of that secure area there, by both distracting and tackling known insurgent areas that are outside of that secure area, and also disrupting the flow of insurgent movements into that centre. So they're out with that immediate secured area.

What you see beyond that is an area of influence, and that's where people recognise that as a secure area, and are prepared to move to it to get the sorts of things that I've discussed before. And that happens, and all you need to do is turn up to a Shura where the provincial governor is

coming and talking, and seeing the many people who go there to know how far afield they are reaching.

In terms of what's happening for tactical initiatives, there are three main initiatives. The first is improving freedom of movement along Highway 601, which has led to the establishment of three additional patrol bases along 501, to ensure that people can use the 601 more freely than they had hitherto. That operation happened within the last month, and led to considerable insurgent interference. In fact, we lost a guy in a shooting incident in Barioli as part of that. The other thing they're doing is expanding into the green zone, which is notoriously difficult to operate in, and patrol bases Almas and Mahboob here are new bases, designed to try and improve the ANA and ISAF influence in this area here. They have been resisted quite heavily, initially with some very intensive fire-fights when they first went in. Just before Christmas there was a potential friendly-fire incident in the Almas area, which is still under investigation.

The third thing, and it's more generic and across the board in Sangin, is we all know that IEDs are our biggest killer. That's certainly true in Sangin, where there is more IEDs there than anywhere, and it is the counter-IED effort for ISAF. So from Kabul, it is the principal effort, and the ISAF resources are devoted frequent, very frequent, counter-IED surges, which are designed to both identify those that are laid, and then exploit those that are found, and then target the networks of those that are laid. And those are three distinct tactical initiatives.

Despite those sort of challenges, genuine progress is being made. It's slower progress in Sangin than it is anywhere else, but there is progress being made, and more and more people are coming to the bazaar. And the bazaar is extending and expanding, week by week and month by month. Derelict buildings are being taken over and converted into shops. More people are prepared to come there.

More people turn up to Shuras than has previously happened. We're now in the business. I was at one two and a half years ago, 16 people turned up. We're now in the region of thousands coming, when the provincial governor is able to make it there. So there is more freedom of movement and there's more willingness to move, and that is a good thing. The redistribution happened here, and more effectively than it had done in previous years, last year. Schools are opening up: schools are subject to intimidation by Afghans, and we're looking at ways of countering that so the teachers feel safe about going about their business. And there is better freedom of movement.

So there is genuine progress. There is enduring challenges, and there will always be challenges in Sangin. The Taliban will always see it as a contested area. Tribal frictions will not go away. They'll be there forever, and it's something that we have to live with. There is a low level of capacity in Sangin that means that you're starting from a lower point in building capacity and of governance and officialdom and the progress you make is slower. The ANP are a problem in Sangin, have been for a long time. It is a very, very unpopular place for the ANP to go, and the desertion rate in Sangin is high. There are 60 policemen in Sangin at the moment. It needs a lot more, and those that are coming out of the ANP training centre at the end of the month, many of them will be given to this area. But I won't pretend that there isn't a long way to go on the ANA and ANP, and that's a long way behind other areas in Sangin.

This is as thick, dense and challenging green zone as you will find anywhere in the Helmand River Valley, and it is extremely challenging terrain to operate in, and leads to greater vulnerabilities in arcs of fire, levels of visibility and the like, and makes the job of the IED operative rather too easy for our liking, because of the close nature of the terrain; perhaps a real skip-through.

This is an edited version of a briefing by Major General Gordon Messenger given on 7th January 2010