

By Nick Watts, Great North News Services

The latest briefing on progress in Afghanistan was given by senior ISAF commanders yesterday (Thursday 9th June). Lt. Gen David Rodriguez, Commander ISAF Joint Command and his British deputy Maj Gen Tim Evans gave their views on how operations were progressing. The overall tenor of the brief was that matters are proceeding according to plan. Ever mindful of Gen Petraeus' mantra that progress is not yet irreversible, there was a note of caution. The view from ISAF is that Taliban inspired violence may even increase during the coming summer season.

The ISAF plan is to continue developing three strands of activity. These are based on the overarching need to destroy the Taliban and to build up the Afghan National Army (ANA). The three strands are: holding key population and commerce centres and keeping main commerce routes open; building a sense of security and enabling development work to proceed, finally to ensure that good local governance is established, bearing down on corruption to ensure the support of the local populace.

Operations are conducted under the banner of the Afghan word OMID meaning hope. The areas of Helmand and Kandahar are seen as being decisive; meaning ISAF must succeed in its aims here to be able to hand over the management of security to the local Afghan forces. The ISAF commanders reminded the audience that the draw down of NATO forces was conditions based. While seven areas are being "handed over" to Afghan control in July, this does not mean that ISAF would be going away.

Increasingly Afghan forces from the ANA and the police forces (ANP) were taking the lead in planning and executing operations. The cumulative effect of the Omid operations has been an increasing level of support from the Afghan populace. This has resulted in weapons and explosives caches being revealed to ISAF and Afghan forces. The local populace does not support the Taliban and takes the chance to inform on their movements. The other side of this coin is the Taliban fighters who just quietly put their weapons away and go back to their earlier lives, because the economic situation has improved locally.

It is too early to tell if the death of Osama Bin Laden has had any effect on the morale of the Taliban senior commanders, but it is understood that there are negotiations going on with various groupings around the country, with a view to either re-integrating fighters or encouraging them to lay down their weapons. ISAF has 2,000 people in a re-integration programme with a similar number waiting. Meanwhile efforts are increasing to degrade the level of traffic in narcotics. There may eventually be a manageable level of narcotics traffic, but ISAF does not see the end of the poppy trade just yet.

In the meantime the priority for the British in Helmand is to maintain the momentum of operations begun by 16 Brigade. Operations under the banner of OMID Haf (hope seven) have seen British forces coming up against Taliban fighters and sustaining 4 fatalities recently. It may well be that Helmand is the last place that ISAF declares to be ready for handover to the ANA, so there is work still to do for the British task force there.