

Today there will be a Parliamentary Welcome Home for 3 Commando Brigade. A contingent representing all the main units who have been serving in Afghanistan will march through Westminster to the Houses of Parliament.

A review of developments in the Helmand area over the last 6 months gives an idea of how counter insurgency operations need to adapt to match evolving circumstances. In a recent briefing given at the MOD in London, senior officers from 3 Commando Brigade who have returned from Ob Herrick 14 gave their impressions.

The military effort in Helmand is beginning to pay dividends when measured in terms of the numbers of incidents, or of improvements in co-operation with the local populace. 3 Commando brigade were conscious that they were building on the efforts of their predecessors 16 Air Assault Brigade. The summer months are usually characterized as the fighting season, combining good weather and the poppy harvest. It was the intention of Task Force Helmand to ensure that this year's summer season was not conducted on the insurgents' terms, but on ISAF's terms. This meant a reduced level of hostile activity.

During the summer months there was a 45% reduction in insurgent attacks. 45 Commando who had the job of controlling the area around Nad-e-Ali managed this by mounting more foot patrols and generally having a higher level of presence in their area. This activity fitted in with the ISAF plans to hand over security responsibility for Lashkar Ghar , which was achieved on 20th July. Alongside the manoeuvre element of the Taskforce was the Brigade Advisory Group, whose role was to mentor and support the Afghan National Army's (ANA) 3 Brigade. This task was undertaken by 3 Mercian (the Staffords). 3 Brigade of the ANA were able to plan and execute an operation with minimal external support from ISAF.

The purpose of the military activity is to instill confidence into the local people. The effort of the international community in establishing good governance and trust in local agencies remains at the heart of what will secure a successful transition to Afghan responsibility for security. If the population believes that the Afghan government, either in Kabul or locally, is on their side the attractiveness of the insurgency is lessened. Moreover if the operations conducted by ISAF and the ANA are successful, the insurgency will find it increasingly difficult to intimidate people.

In this regard the way ISAF conducts counter insurgency has had to adapt. Brigadier Ed Davis who led 3 Commando brigade characterized the approach as "people first, insurgents second."

Giving the people of Helmand a better life will dissuade them from joining the insurgency, which thrives on the grievances which arise from bad governance. A more benign atmosphere enables the development effort to deliver the changes which will persuade the local population that their government is, after all, on their side.

There remains a question mark about how matters are progressing on the national level. Recent remarks by General Stanley McChrystal about the lack of direction in the allied campaign must be of concern. The effort to re-integrate the Taliban into the mainstream of political life must be a priority for the international community if the efforts in Helmand are not to be wasted.