

US Marine Corps Major General Richard Mills and his Deputy Commander, Brigadier George Norton, held a media briefing last Tuesday at the Ministry of Defence to report on security conditions over the past year in Helmand province, the region once referred to by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates as 'perhaps the most dangerous place on earth'. Speaking via satellite link from Camp Leatherneck, the commanders noted 'sustained', 'continuous' and 'unrelenting' progress since the US troop surge last year.

'The insurgent leadership has fled the province', said General Mills. 'We believe that he suffers from a lack of money and a lack of recruits. His leadership has been decimated by our special forces.'

Reflecting on the 'very dark place' that Sangin district was a year ago when he took command of Britain's 8,000 troops and 20,000 US Marines in Helmand province, Mills said there was 'a powerful insurgency that controlled the bulk of the population and the majority of the terrain... that controlled the roads... and ran a very well organised and surprisingly sufficient supply chain... Today we see quite a different province'.

Over the last year, coalition forces successfully expanded and connected 'security bubbles' that have eliminated large encounters and lengthy engagements with the Taliban. Commanders now see a broken enemy supply line, a robust Afghan security force, repaired roads, new infrastructure, a 'flourishing' and even 'aggressive' free media and competent district governors. A national election also came off 'fairly and virtually incident free'.

Brigadier Norton emphasized the 'significantly reduced' numbers of enemy fighters on the ground, a trend he explained as the 'local' nature of the insurgency. Fighters are drawn from local villages and 'simply drift away' from the insurgency when faced with steady resistance.

Major General John Lorimer chaired the 15 March media briefing and discussed the recent successes of the 1st battalion Royal Irish Regiment in Helmand. 500 Royal Irish soldiers took part in a massive air assault codenamed Operation 'Black Winter' in Helmand's Nad-e Ali district, the biggest operation for 1st Battalion since the crossing of the Rhine in 1945. Previously one of the most dangerous insurgent strongholds in Nad-e Ali, Zaborabad is now safely under coalition control. Last month, 1st battalion also recovered a huge stash of deadly Taliban weapons and ammunition in Nad-e Ali, a find that Lorimer says is a testament to the improved level of trust between security forces and the local population. Everyday citizens often provide the most valuable intelligence on the whereabouts of Taliban fighters and their stored weapons.

Successes have come at a price, noted the commanders. The U.S., U.K., Denmark, Georgia and other coalition partners lost a combined 179 soldiers from enemy fire in Helmand over this period.

'There is still much work to be done', admitted Mills. 'The areas north of Sangin remain an insurgent controlled area.' Forces must link up with Kandahar and 'we have to address the

Pakistani border at some point in the future', he added.

Commanders are expecting a renewed offensive by the Taliban-led insurgents in the spring and summer that will test the readiness of Afghan forces and could undermine some of the year's achievements. Efforts must coordinate with the gradual transition of security from NATO forces to the Afghan army, which begins this July and ends with the withdrawal of all foreign combat troops from the country by the end of 2014.

Today, Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced details about the first transitional phase. Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, is among the seven areas to take part.

'We hold the initiative', Norton reassured. 'The challenge of it is to develop it and sustain it over time.'