The International Security Assistance Force's strategy for defeating the improvised explosive device threat in Afghanistan can be characterised by three main elements - attacking the system, defeating the device and preparing the force.

Major General Gordon Messenger, the Chief of the Defence Staff's Strategic Communications Officer, and Colonel Peter Smith, Assistant Director of Counter-IED at Land Forces Headquarters, reiterated that the IED menace is being countered through intelligence, training and equipment at a briefing to the media in MOD's Main Building on Thursday 1 July 2010.

Reminding the audience that while improvised explosive devices are far from a new phenomenon and that around 300 are found every month outside Iraq and Afghanistan, Major General Messenger said that it was in Afghanistan that their use had become 'unprecedented'.

Major General Messenger said that the fight against the IED threat was far more than the lone bomb disposal expert on the ground and the 'long walk' to disarming the device. He said it was a pan-defence and pan-government effort taking in expertise and resources not only from the military but from the Foreign Office, Home Office and police, as well as many others in the UK and abroad.

It is these other departments and agencies that, along with Defence, are working on the first pillar of the strategy - 'attacking the system'.
Major General Messenger explained:

"Whilst we are absolutely continuing to pay utmost attention to 'defeat the device' and continue to plough enormous amounts of energy, investment and technology into improving that, it will never be the sole card that plays the trick and we are putting a lot more into 'attacking the system'.

"This is about preventing the IED being laid in the first place and here it is about understanding the organisations and the networks that are responsible for placing these in the ground.

"Here we have to view the people that do this as nothing more than criminals, part of criminal networks, and therefore tackled in the same way that anyone would tackle a criminal network.

"That requires us to understand that network and it requires an enormous intelligence-gathering effort, the span of which would be difficult to describe."

He went on to say that at the low-tech end of the market UK forces in Afghanistan are increasingly understanding this network for themselves and providing essential information: "The guys on the ground are learning more and more about the threat that they face and therefore developing their means of tackling it," Major General Messenger said.

He added that there is also a very substantial high-tech approach to the problem, not only in deployment of cross-government agencies from this country and from other nations, but also through things like airborne surveillance and other means of collecting intelligence which require a very high level of technology:

"We are improving all the time our ability in what we call 'permanent wide area surveillance' so that we can identify nefarious activity as it is being conducted and work it back to attacking the network.

"That is not a panacea and never will be a panacea - it has to be seen as an overall approach. But the bottom line is every single member of the task force is part of that intelligence-gathering effort.

"Part of that is gathering forensics, analysing the forensics and knowing what constitutes something of intelligence value and what doesn't. That is something that is much more instinctive in the minds of every soldier."
Major General Messenger stressed that there is an international dimension to this intelligence-gathering effort, and it's not simply the Brits doing it alone:

"We are also looking beyond Afghanistan in terms of the provision of some of the more sophisticated components and in the provision of finance that supports these networks.

"We are also working hard with the Afghan Government in this regard and there have been a number of legislative changes which support this.

"An example would be the recent banning of ammonium nitrate by the Afghan Government, ammonium nitrate being a fertiliser that can be very quickly used to generate homemade explosives.

"But at the heart of attacking the system is good, honest counter-insurgency. It is about separating the population from the insurgent so that insurgents cannot feel comfortable and cannot operate with impunity.

"We are quite often seeing villages with a lot of IEDs in their area coming to us and saying we can't go about our business, and clearance operations are being targeted to clear these areas to allow entire villages to go about their business with a degree of normality."
Moving to the second pillar of the strategy, Major General Messenger explained that 'defeating the device' is about finding these devices once they have been placed and neutralising and destroying them once they have been found:

"In terms of our ability to find and detect the devices we are at the cutting-edge of science in providing technology to people on the ground to find these devices before they go off," Major General Messenger said.

"There is much more sharing of information internationally on the technology but the UK capability is as good and if not better than anything else that is out there, and is recognised as

such by those in the field in Afghanistan.

"But it isn't just about technology, it is about understanding the terrain that you are operating in and it is about fairly low level ability to detect change and detect ground signs. It is here that we find that operating alongside the Afghans in a partnering approach is paying real dividends.

"We are also seeing much more in hand-ins and indications from the local population which is a sign that a) they feel highly threatened by this threat but also b) that they feel sufficiently comfortable to do so.

"What we are therefore achieving is a significantly higher rate of find, and the ratio of find to explode is good and getting better.

"On protected mobility, the level of protection that is afforded our people, both individual protection and when in-vehicle, is as good if not better than anyone else. And again this is at the very cutting-edge of technology.
"But the problem is in a population-focused campaign you have to get out of those vehicles and the bottom line is you can't out-armour your way out of this problem."

Finally, Major General Messenger explained that the third element of the strategy was about 'preparing the force' and that this issue is now in the 'bloodstream' of everyone in uniform, and the counter-IED awareness goes right back to basic training:

"This is not simply about pre-deployment training, this is something that everyone is acutely aware of.

"We are not simply training the UK troops, we are also training the Afghan security forces in this regard, and we are also improving the awareness of the Afghan population through a series of shuras and meetings to make sure they understand what they can do about it.

"We are training people not just to be defensive, we are training people to attack the system, and that involves the instinct for intelligence-gathering and an instinct for forensic awareness." He said that there has been heavy investment in the training estate in this country and many bases now have training lanes to allow troops to develop not only the technical skills to find and neutralise devices but also the situational awareness to spot the tell-tale signs.