The Secretary of State for Defence (The Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP): The significant increase in the number of international troops in southern Afghanistan is enabling commanders to make improvements in the laydown and command arrangements of coalition forces in the region. The first of these was the handover of security responsibility for Musa Qaleh district in Helmand province from UK to US troops on 27 March. This transfer allowed UK troops in Musa Qaleh to be redeployed to the population centres of central Helmand where they have increased ISAF's capacity to protect the Afghan civilian population from the threat posed by the insurgency, and to train and partner with the Afghan National Security Forces.

On 21 May, ISAF announced that Regional Command (South), the ISAF command responsible for overseeing the operational activity of international forces in southern Afghanistan, will be divided into two separate commands: Regional Command (South West), headquartered in Helmand and consisting of Helmand and Nimruz provinces; and, Regional Command (South), headquartered in Kandahar and consisting of Kandahar, Dai Kundi, Uruzgan and Zabol provinces. The division of responsibility for ISAF troops in southern Afghanistan into two regional commands will ensure that ISAF can continue to provide the optimal level of command and control over its forces as they increase in size from around 35,000 in October last year to over 50,000 troops this summer. Furthermore, the separation of the commands along regional boundaries will align the ISAF military structure in the south with the structure of the Afghan National Army, enabling a greater partnering capacity between ISAF and Afghan forces.

ISAF intends for Regional Command (South West) to become fully operational over the course of the summer. The first commander will be Major General Richard Mills of the US Marine Corps, and the US 1 Marine Expeditionary Force, (Forward) which is already based in Helmand, will provide the framework for Regional Command (South West)'s headquarters component. The UK-led Task Force Helmand will come under Major General Mills' command from 1 June. Subject to final confirmation in due course, the UK and US have agreed in principle that command of Regional Command (South West) will be shared on a rotational basis.

As a further element of ISAF reorganisation in Helmand, and as announced by ISAF last week, the British battlegroup based in Sangin and Kajaki, which comprises in the order of 1,100 troops, will transfer from the UK-led Task Force Helmand to the US-led Regimental Combat Team that is taking on responsibility for the north of the province. Under this arrangement, the battlegroup will not be relocated but for operational purposes it will come under the command of the US. In common with the other changes to ISAF's command structures, the transfer of command in Sangin is intended to optimise the command support available to the troops on the ground in the light of the increase in the number of ISAF troops and other operational assets. The transfer will occur on 1 June.

The UK has been consulted throughout ISAF's decision making process and we welcome the

changes to the command arrangements that will enable ISAF to make optimal use of the increased forces now deploying in southern Afghanistan.