International Security Assistance Force - Afghanistan have recently released the following statement:

Three months after the launch of Operation Moshtarak, clear signs of progress are evident throughout central Helmand.

"There are many positive indicators, especially in the areas of development and economic growth," said Major General Nick Carter, commander of ISAF Regional Command (South). "We have roads being built, district centres being reconstructed, and a lot of minor infrastructure projects underway."

Governance and education

Freedom of movement is key to delivering governance – in the form of traditional shuras as well as in other ways such as health services, education and the judiciary. Since the first day of the operation, shuras called by provincial and district leaders have been instrumental in gaining the people's confidence. These gatherings bring local elders together with government and combined force representatives, and they provide participants with an opportunity to raise concerns and discuss local matters.

Election shuras were held in Chah Anjir, the Nad' Ali district centre and the Bolan "T" junction between April 26 and 28, 2010. Attendance at the shuras was approximately 1,200, 400 and 1,200 plus, respectively, indicating local nationals felt secure enough to begin to engage with their government in large numbers. Of note is the strong showing of nearly 500 squatters from the Bolan "T," who turned out to ensure they have a seat at the GIRoA table.

On May 11, 2010, an election shura was held in Nad' Ali to choose new members for the district community council. More than 600 elders came together and elected 45 members to represent the district. It was a positive event, and the elders were happy with the district's new representation.

Governance is taking root throughout the region. A growing number of key government positions are being filled in the districts of Marjeh and Nad' Ali. Additional administrative offices are being built and enhanced services are being offered to residents, including new health care clinics and schools.

Vast improvements in education have been seen in central Helmand with the opening of new schools and the hiring of new teachers. The first schools, held under tents or in the open air, were established within a week of the commencement of Operation Moshtarak. There are now 13 schools in Nad-e Ali and nine in Marjah with 150 GIRoA-licensed teachers providing instruction to an estimated 3105 students. Approximately 425 of these students are girls.

Economic growth

One of the most visible signs of economic growth is the re-opening of local markets. Many of them had been closed for years, especially during the time of Taliban rule. Early on, with the addition of a modest amount of security and freedom of movement, activity at bazaars quickly increased as well as the quality and quantity of goods, and more than 20 markets are now open for business, attracting more vendors and shoppers than ever before. To date, nearly $400,000 has been spent refurbishing bazaars in Nad' Ali and Marjah. There is a $1 million project getting underway to rehabilitate the Loy Chareh Bazaar, which will employ more than 100 labourers and benefit thousands of local and regional Afghans by improving the variety and amount of goods traded within the southeast Marjah area.

"The basic point is that you're seeing stability and prosperity begin to flourish in central Helmand and what you see is a consumer culture beginning to happen," said Carter.

Programs such as the Governor's Food Zone Program, AVIPA plus and the Marjah Accelerated Agricultural Transition Program (MAAT-P) help Helmand farmers move from growing poppy to cultivating legal crops. Without these alternatives, farmers find it difficult, if not impossible, to make this important change. At the end of the first week of May, the economic stimulus phase of MAAT-P came to a close, and 7,000 hectares of farm land were registered and verified, representing nearly half of the farmland that USDA estimated could be used for poppy.

The provincial government's seed distribution program has proven extremely successful. Seeds have been provided to 20,000 farmers in the area, most of whom were previously dependent on poppy cultivation for their livelihood. These programs have created the required combination of farm preparation and inputs for the next season that gives the farmer a chance to break the cycle of poppy.

"Cash-for-work" programs are employing approximately 4,000 local residents per day, and nearly 80,000 "man-labour" days have been paid out for initiatives. Road construction and irrigation improvements, in particular, will enable farmers to get their products to market and help the Helmand valley reclaim its title as the "breadbasket of Afghanistan".

Security and freedom of movement

Despite notable successes in development and economic growth, there are still challenges to be faced in the region. Insurgents continue to be active in the area, particularly in Marjah. Their weapon of choice – the improvised explosive device (IED) – remains a lethal threat to local residents, government officials and combined forces.

Fortunately, the number of IED strikes in central Helmand is declining, while the number of IED finds is rising. This positive trend is attributed to effective partnering of combined forces and the growing number of local residents volunteering information to combined forces about the location of IEDs.

While the decrease in IED strikes is a very positive development, it has been accompanied by a troubling spike in small arms engagements in Marjah. Using hit-and-run tactics that endanger both civilians and combined forces, insurgents have mounted an aggressive intimidation campaign.

"We have been in large parts of Nad' Ali for at least 15 months at the point at which we launched the Operation Moshtarak, " said Carter, "so the project is at least a year further on than Marjah. The point is that by being a year further on and by adopting the approach and the amount of resources that have been applied to it, one will see what will happen in Marjah in due course."

Freedom of movement in central Helmand continues to improve. A recent analysis revealed a dramatic increase in vehicle movements along the main traffic artery, Route 608, that runs from Nad' Ali down through Marjah. Weekly vehicle flow numbers for local residents travelling this road increased by 440 percent between March 20 and May 8. The latest reports show nearly 40,000 vehicle trips along Route 608 in a one-week period. This is a very encouraging sign that people are more confident in the security situation.

"There is still work to be done in both Marjah and Nad' Ali," said Carter. "But the trends are positive, and my bet is that we're in a good place in terms of the resources available on the ground and in the way in which the campaign is progressing."

Operation Moshtarak is an Afghan-led initiative to assert government authority in the centre of Helmand province. Afghan and ISAF partners are engaging in this counter-insurgency operation at the request of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Helmand provincial government.