In an immediate reaction to UK casualties in Afghanistan (8 dead in 24 hours, no news on wounded, as usual with MoD announcements) British Foreign Secretary David Miliband spoke to the BBC Radio 4 "Today" programme about the situation in Afghanistan on 11 July 2009.

This transcript was published and publicised by the Foreign Office:

John Humphrys (JH): Eight British Servicemen have been killed in Afghanistan in twenty four hours. That fact, hideous though it may be, does nothing to change the intellectual argument for the British presence there. But emotionally and politically it may well change everything.

Look at the big black headlines on the front pages this morning, the bloodiest day, this bloody war, our darkest day.

The pressure on the Government will inevitably increase. How many more, how much longer, why?

The Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, joins me now. Good morning to you.

David Miliband (DM): Good morning.

JH: We've been given a number of reasons for our presence in Afghanistan. We have heard talk about nation building, building democracy, getting children to go to school, defeating the Taliban, shoring up the Government. What is the reason?

DM: The reason is to ensure that Afghanistan can not again become an incubator for international terrorism and a launching pad for attacks on us. That applies in Afghanistan and it applies in Pakistan and that mission is very, very clear.

Can I just say that while you're right that the emotional and the political sides in some ways in your phrase intellectually can be separated, for any of us I think in this country they can't because all of our thoughts, our first thoughts, are going to be that, with those who have lost loved ones. It's been a grievously difficult few days for them, for the Army and for the country.

And while the professionalism and bravery of those we send to Afghanistan is absolutely second to none and does deserve thanks and admiration, we know that they're engaged in a very, very difficult mission and we have a responsibility to engage the country in understanding that mission and supporting it.

JH: Let me quote to you what was said to Richard Pendlebury, who is a reporter for the Daily Mail as it happens. He's been producing some pretty powerful dispatches. You may have seen them over the past few days. This is what a soldier there in Helmand told him:

We don't care about the future of Afghanistan, we don't care about democracy, clean water, schools for girls or the political overview. All we care about now is each other and making sure that our mates get out of this alive.

An awful lot of people will sympathise with those words won't they?

DM: And I do too, because ...

JH: Do you?

DM: ... this is about the future of Britain. This is about the future of Britain, because we know that the badlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan, that border area, have been used to launch terrible attacks, not just on the United States but on Britain as well. And we know that until we can ensure that there is a modicum of stability and security provided by Afghan forces for their own people we're not going to be able to be secure in our land. And there are key elements to that mission in terms of building up the Afghan Security Forces so that they can take care of their own country, building up Afghan governance so that their own political leaders, national and local, can provide a framework for their own citizens and ...

JH: So we are nation building.

DM: ... well ...

JH: I thought you said, told me a moment ago that that wasn't our purpose ...

DM: ... our ...

JH: ... we are clearly nation building then.

DM: ... our, well our mission is to protect ourselves. Our strategy is to build up Afghan capacity to look after themselves.

JH: So in other words can not succeed unless we produce one way or the other a democratic nation in Afghanistan. That is by any standards a pretty tall order ...

DM: Well ...

JH: ... many would say verging on the impossible, looking at the history of the nation ... and the way the nation operates, if you can call it a nation in any meaningful sense.

DM: ... we've never, we've never, well it certainly is, it certainly is a nation. The first priority is to Afghan ...

JH: It is a feudal nation Mr Miliband ...

DM: ... well, but it ...

JH: ... isn't it by any sensible standards.

DM: ... it's a, it's, it's certainly it's a nation nonetheless which is never going to be in our life times a democratic country on British, on the British model. But I do say this, it can be a country that builds up its own security forces. It can be a country where ordinary decent ...

JH: We've spent ten billion pounds and eight years ...

DM: ... hang on, well ...

JH: ... training them and what have we got as a result of it?

DM: ... well ...

JH: We've got what we're seeing today?

DM: ... well no, what we have is Afghan Security Forces now sixty five thousand strong that are fighting alongside our people. We have Afghans' first national, democratic election in 2005 and a further one this ...

JH: A democratic election in that country ...

DM: ... well hang on, not, not ...

JH: ... across the country? You really believe that ...

DM: ... well, well ...

JH: ... you believe the writ of, of Kabul extends outside Kabul do you?

DM: Eleven million, well, eleven million Afghans bravely came out to vote and in a BBC poll recently ninety three per cent of them said we don't want to go back to the bad days of the Taliban. They know that. I was in Pakistan this week, on the other side of the border. The Taliban there have shown themselves to be people who do stop, not just stop girls going to school, but actually kill them and say that democracy is unislamic.

JH: But, but you told me ...

DM: I don't buy that.

JH: ... at the beginning of this interview that the purpose of this activity, of this action in Afghanistan is to stop the Taliban threatening us, in effect, is to protect people on the streets of Britain. The reality is that the Taliban, the Taliban I emphasise, has never threatened us. We toppled the Taliban regime ...

DM: Well ...

JH: ... in 2001 ...

DM: ... yeah.

JH: ... we thought we had thrown them out. It didn't stop Al Qaeda ...

DM: Well this is why ...

JH: ... not the Talib, let me just finish the question if I may, it did not stop Al Qaeda bombing this city where I and you are sitting at the moment in 2005 and killing fifty two British people.

DM: Well I chose, I explained it very clearly and that's why these conversations are important. I said that Afghanistan and its neighbour Pakistan must not become incubators for global terrorism. The Taliban did provide that incubator for Al Qaeda ...

JH: And they went elsewhere.

DM: ... well no, I'm sorry ...

JH: And now the Taliban have come back again ...

DM: ... I, well I'm ...

JH: ... and they will be able to continue to operate under the Taliban's protection.

DM: The, Al Qaeda ...

JH: Or are we going to destroy the Taliban?

DM: ... Al Qaeda is a, is a global movement, but its, its place of choice is the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Everybody agrees on that. So the mission is absolutely clear, it's to provide, it's to back our own security.

The, the strategy to deliver that is first to build up the Afghan Security Forces so that they're able to defend their own country rather than being rolled over by the Taliban. Second, to build up Afghan governance which is a critical element to that. That is the way in which we will ensure that Afghanistan is not used as the launching pad that I described. And you're right to draw out the distinction because it's, the Taliban and Al Qaeda are not the same, but we do know of very strong links between them, not least in the 1990s and so we know the dangers that can exist to us.

JH: And how long does this go on? At what point do we declare victory if this is a war?

DM: Well we, we declare it when the Afghan forces are able to defend their own country. That's why I drew attention to the sixty five thousand members now of the Afghan National Security Forces, some of whom I've seen in Afghanistan in operation. And the plan is that by 2012 they'll

be a hundred and twenty thousand members of the Afghan National Security Forces. That's a major step forward. And as the Afghan forces are able to step up, then we are able to move in to a different supportive role.

JH: Well you see we're being told this all the time. We were told that Sangin for instance was now peaceful because we had had an operation there, things had changed. We saw five British soldiers blown to bits there a couple of days ago.

DM: And, and, and that shows that the terrorists' ability remains, but it ...

JH: Quite.

DM: ... but it also draws absolutely important attention ...

JH: Sorry, sorry, you, you said the terrorist there, you said the terrorists' ability remains.

DM: Yeah.

JH: Some people might argue might they not that if you are Afghan and see yourself as defending, we of course would take a different view of this, but see yourself as defending your country against foreign invaders, in what sense are they terrorists?

DM: Well, no, the very large number of Afghans reject that point of view. That's the point I was making earlier which is so ...

JH: How do you know that?

DM: ... well because the BBC reported very, very clearly a poll that it gave huge prominence to which said that ninety three per cent of Afghans don't want to go back to the Taliban despite all ...

JH: That's a completely different point.

DM: No it's not it's a very relevant point because what you have is a struggle within that country where a small minority want to take Afghanistan backwards and provide the sort of shelter for Al Qaeda that is so dangerous to us. The vast majority of Afghans actually want a decent society in which they can run their own affairs, tribal, according to their own tribal ...

JH: All right.

DM: ... history as well. So I think it's very, very important that despite all the complexity we're absolutely clear that the mission is one of Afghans providing their own security in order ...

JH: If, if just to go back to your original point in the closing seconds of this interview, to go back to your original point, if what is happening now in Afghanistan is crucial to the security of this nation, why have we deprived our soldiers and fighting men and women there of the equipment,

specifically helicopters, that they need to do the job? And why have we denied the Head of the Army the couple of thousand extra soldiers that he has told Gordon Brown is needed?

DM: I don't, I don't ...

JH: If it is as crucial as you describe it.

DM: ... I don't, well I don't accept that. We're, we have spent ...

JH: Don't you? You think they have enough helicopters ...

DM: ... we, we ...

JH: ... I think you'll find yourself laughed at in Afghanistan if you tell them that.

DM: ... well we, we, well I think it would be helpful if you can ask the questions and then you can let me try and give at least more than three words of an answer.

We've spent ten billion pounds on new equipment for force protection in the last three years. There's been a lot of focus on the importance of new vehicles and that's why twelve hundred new vehicles have been provided over the last two years at significant and right cost because you were right to say that the protection of our own people there is of the highest priority. And it's the highest priority for the Government as well.

And I think it's interesting that you've got from the Today Programme a reporter in with our troops, Ian Pannell. He was interviewed precisely on this point by Sarah Montague on Thursday morning, precisely to be asked about the equipment and he said I have to be honest Sarah, you don't really hear much about that equipment point. Those were his words.

Now there's my word, there's his words and there's a continuing need to make sure that our equipment is upgraded because the check, the threat develops, it responds to our tactics. We've got to make sure that our commitment to our soldiers in Afghanistan is appropriate to their level of commitment they are giving there. That is a very high level of commitment and it's one that we take very seriously indeed.

JH: David Miliband, many thanks.

DM: Thank you.