By Brigadier Tim Radford, Commander, Task Force Helmand

(a speech delivered on 9th July 2009)

Task Force Helmand is one half of the ISAF force in this province, comprising some six thousand troops from the United Kingdom, Denmark and Estonia. As many of you know, three weeks ago my Task Force launched Operation PANCHAI PALANG, and even as I speak to you today, we are continuing our deliberate advance to clear anti-Afghan forces from key towns and villages in central Helmand.

Yesterday I was on the ground in the Green Zone with my own soldiers and their brothers from the Afghan National Army. As ever I was humbled by the experience: they are fighting hard out there, with quite extraordinary skill and courage. Their morale and dedication are high, and that is because, hour by hour and day by day, they can feel they are winning.

And so on their behalf, I would like to take a few minutes now to explain to you what we are doing, how we are doing it – and why we are succeeding.

This is a complex military operation, planned and practised over many months...but our aim is very simple: we want to bring lasting security to hundreds of thousands of Afghan citizens, who would otherwise suffer in the grim shadow of the enemies of peace.

It is not for their own benefit that my soldiers have been working so hard and sacrificing so much. What we are fighting for is to protect the population in Helmand from fear and oppression - not just for today, or tomorrow or next month, but for the long term. That is the prize we seek, and the promise we make. And in the days and weeks to come, alongside the brave men of Afghanistan's own Army and Police, we will continue with our mission.

Friends and enemies alike should listen and have no doubt: we will endure, and we will prevail.

But winning this struggle will require clear heads as well as strong hearts, and the success of this operation is firmly built on lessons we have drawn from previous experience.

We understand that, unless a man feels safe to raise his family, to live according to his faith, to follow the traditions of his people and to go about his business, then all else counts for nothing. And promises do not by themselves create security. The good Afghan people want to know that we will do what we say. That we will stay among them; that we will not abandon them.

I accept that we must earn their trust by our actions. That is a challenge that this Task Force will meet, no matter how long it takes. We will build confidence, not just through better security, but by returning education, healthcare and economic opportunity to communities that for too long

have known only tyranny and poverty.

With the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, we will move swiftly to give Helmandis a stake in their own future. In Governor Mangal we have a leader of vision and integrity. We have been working closely with him during the past year, and we will continue to do so to deliver peace and progress for the people of this province.

As part of Operation PANCHAI PALANG (Panther,s Claw), plans are now under way to restore schools in villages outside Lashkar Gah. The people of these areas are hungry for their children to read and write, to acquire the knowledge and skills, which will ensure prosperity and happiness in years to come. In a nation with such a rich literary tradition, that pays respect to its poets, writers and philosophers, how can anyone make war on education, and still call himself a true Afghan? These parents have rejected the evil men who wish to keep their children in ignorance. We admire their courage, and we will stand by them and support them as they take back their freedom.

I know that helping the children of Afghanistan is a cause very dear to the soldiers of my Task Force, so this small victory gives me particular pleasure.

To improve the lives of the people of Helmand, we must make our good intentions match their needs. Wherever we go, therefore, we - and the Afghan Government - will listen. We want to consult with community elders and leaders, and to hear from them where investment is most badly needed, and indeed, we have already started to do this.

Because of Operation PANCHAI PALANG, in the last few days it has been possible for Governor Mangal to conduct a shura in NAD ALI. Up to 200 people came from surrounding villages.

And since then the District Governor has held his own shura, in Chah-E-Anjir, which many local people attended. This will be followed by projects to repair and build where necessary and to provide schooling and clinics. Current operations will also result in greater freedom of movement between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk to the north, reviving markets and the agricultural and economic life of the region generally.

This is what we are fighting for. I am confident that many people across Helmand will soon see real benefits in their day-to-day existence.

Of course, it is not just my Task Force, which is working to defend the population of Helmand. In a moment you will hear from my close colleague Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, who will tell you what Task Force Leatherneck is doing. I would like to take this opportunity to say publicly, on behalf of everyone in my Task Force Helmand, how delighted we are to have his United States Marines alongside us in this battle. Our partnership has been close, and has now been forged in combat.

Defeating an enemy who hides amongst the people calls for great skill, patience and discipline – and, most importantly, a readiness to place the safety of innocent Afghans above all other

things. In the last few weeks, the United States Marines Corps has demonstrated all of these qualities at the very highest level. Tough, utterly professional and always faithful, they have impressed us from the start. We could ask for no better ally, and we are proud to call them our friends.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let me look ahead to the next important stage in Afghanistan's journey towards peace. Our operations will allow the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan greater freedom to register voters and to carry out their responsibilities in advance of next month's Presidential and Provincial Council Elections. Therefore I think it would be appropriate if I finish by saying something about those elections.

No Afghan will need reminding that 19 August is Independence Day. This year it will mark the date, nine decades ago, when Afghanistan won the right to govern its own affairs, and to take its place in the world as a fully sovereign nation. With all my heart I hope that everyone in this great land will celebrate this famous anniversary. But I believe that by far the best way Afghans can recognise their country's independence is by going out the next day and exercising their rights as citizens in a democratic society.

Those rights did not come free of charge. They were purchased by the suffering and struggle of many great men and women in Afghanistan's history. Most recently, my own soldiers (and their families) have paid for them again with their blood and sweat. I ask Helmandis to remember this debt, and to honour the sacrifice of all of those who have made their freedom possible, by casting their votes in the elections on 20 August.