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SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP

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Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (5.27 pm)—Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Minister for Defence. The minister should know that he enjoys bipartisan support from the coalition as the government seeks to prosecute their agenda with our fighting men and women within Afghanistan.

I thank the minister for his commitment to provide regular updates to the parliament as to what is happening in Afghanistan and I note the minister has indeed been true to his word in keeping his commitment to provide these updates.

It is important, as we seek to understand where we are going in Afghanistan and what the future holds, that we also look back to truly understand how the fight started and why it is important that the government is indeed supported at a bipartisan level to continue the fight in Afghanistan. I think we all agree that the world changed on September 11. Australia invoked the ANZUS alliance, standing shoulder to shoulder with our friend and ally the United States of America as they launched Operation Enduring Freedom.

On 20 December 2001, the UN approved resolution 1386, a resolution which has been approved annually since that date. There are 48 ISAF nations working within Afghanistan. It is a difficult but just and justified fight in response to an unmitigated act of barbarity. I do not need to remind the House or indeed the entire nation that over 100 Australians have perished at the hands of terrorists, whose support, whose training, whose financing and whose indoctrination can in one way or another be linked back to the insurgents, the Taliban and the other extremist groups operating within Afghanistan.

The minister noted that recent progress in Afghanistan has for the most part been positive, especially following the US troop surge that commenced in mid-2009. There is no doubt that recent ISAF operations have made ground, particularly in southern Afghanistan. In Kandahar we currently have 14 or so artillerymen fighting with British artillery commanded by the CO of the 7th Parachute Battalion, the Royal Horse Artillery. There is a group fighting in Kandahar down in south, where in previous battles they had trained their guns over open sights so close were the enemy, where now there is greater control over the area and greater engagement through shuras with local leaders, and our men are reporting that

there is greater trade and commerce between disparate groups within the area. Indeed, the degree of fighting, in their experience, has lessened. A new patrol base has been put outside the main operating area in Kandahar, a testimony to the degree of stability that is being achieved in the southern province.

But let us not lose focus. As the new fighting season approaches, the Taliban will look to reclaim ground it has lost. They are a resilient and hard-fighting foe. In the coming months, as the winter snow melts, the Taliban will push back. It is fair to assume that we are fighting a resilient enemy. The question the nation needs to ask is a simple one: can we or can we not hold our gains? I agree with the minister on the capacity, the capability and the courage of our fighting men and women to hold our gains and, more importantly, to gain even more.

I note the recent report from Major General Mike Kraus, Deputy Chief of Staff Plans at ISAF's Joint Command Headquarters, where he said:

We believe that we have momentum. We believe we now have the initiative.

However Major General Kraus also noted the fragility of these gains. I know General Kraus. He is not a man loose with his words—a serious war-fighting general who understands the serious nature of our commitments in Afghanistan.

The message here, I believe, is that progress is rarely easy and it is rarely quick. It is incremental. It comes at a cost. Enduring progress is dependent upon coalition forces holding their nerve and, as the minister quite rightly stated, standing firm on their commitment to Afghanistan. In short, if I can quote the previous commander of our deployed forces, Major General Cantwell, not only to the Prime Minister but also to the Leader of the Opposition, and indeed to the parliament, this is 'not the time to get the wobbles'.

Progress made by Australian forces should not be underestimated. Australian forces are doing an amazing job in incredibly difficult, dangerous and arduous circumstances. General Petraeus, the commander in Afghanistan, has consistently commended the work of Australia's fighting men and women. In terms of military progress, it is undeniable that the southern provinces, including Uruzgan where the bulk of Australia's fighting forces are based,

is a comparatively safer place than it once was. In Uruzgan, Australia, along with other members of Combined Team-Uruzgan, have made significant progress both in training Afghan 4th Brigade soldiers and in the reconstruction work through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. I recognise that the Afghan 4th Brigade's capacity to operate independently of assistance is increasing—slowly, but it is certainly increasing. Having been to Afghanistan twice last year and having seen for myself the progress they are making, I can provide testimony to that fact.

I note that with the next rotation of Australian forces they will also be taking responsibility for the 6th Khandaq of the 4th Afghan Brigade. Australia will therefore be responsible for training the entirety of the brigade. It was also pleasing to see the brigade's heavy weapon support Khandaq actually fire their D-30 artillery pieces, bringing on line another capability they have got to engage with to seek to destroy the insurgency within Afghanistan.

I also note that we continue to supply a surface vessel operating in the Gulf and the Red Sea region, which does an excellent job in enforcing the restriction zones there, doing counterpiracy and other support activities. I note our substantial aviation assets are flying out of both Afghanistan and, indeed, the wider Middle East, continuing to provide a range of significant resources and platforms desperately needed for the fight to continue. We can as a nation be proud of our some 2,350 men and women currently deployed in the wider Gulf region. As I have said consistently in this place, and I say again to the minister: the only thing I would ask is that currently there is a cap of 1,550 men and women in Afghanistan and it is our contention that that cap would be better placed on the 2,350 in the wider Middle East area of operations to allow the greater force commander to surge men and women troops as he sees fit. I certainly reiterate that to the minister.

In terms of transition, the minister has said consistently that a transition of Australian forces out of Afghanistan will take place over what is now three years, sometime between 2012 and 2014. This has the support of the coalition. The PM has also stated, during her address on this issue leading the debate in the parliament, that Australia will maintain a capability after the training role of the 4th Afghan Brigade has ceased with an overwatch capability, a training capability, and perhaps a civilian capacity-building and development assistance capability. The coalition again supports this. We do, however, ask the minister to provide an update as soon as that would be available as to what the overwatch capability or that training role or civilian capability would look like in terms of personnel, equipment and the length of time it would be envisaged that they would be in Afghanistan beyond

2014. We appreciate that it may take some time for the minister to work through the details of what that overwatch or training capability may look like.

In terms of the transition arrangements, we understand that progress has taken place since the London Conference on Afghanistan in January 2010, especially with respect to improving the governance within the Karzai regime. Whilst many steps have been made with respect to improvement within the regime, the world understands that there still needs to be improvement with respect to the legitimacy and the standards of governance and the fight on corruption that the Karzai government brings to its administration in Afghanistan. Certainly taking those issues of governance beyond the major cities and into the regional areas where the Taliban still have considerable influence remains a priority as the Karzai government moves through the London conference initiatives to seek to improve the governance within the area. In terms of endorsing the NATO report and the transition for wider Afghanistan and especially the ISAF Transition Implementation Principles, they are indeed welcome news and are supported as they emphasised a shared, long-term commitment.

I note the minister said that the transition will be conditions based, irreversible and sustainable, with ISAF intending to complete the handover by the end of 2014. I also note the announcement by President Karzai on 22 March of the first provinces to transition. They are Bamian, all districts; Panjshir, all districts; Kabul, all districts except Surobi; and the districts of Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Laskargah in the Helmand province, and Mehterlam. In the transition section, though, it has constantly been said—and the minister has made these statements—that the transition would be one based on metrics and command, where data and commanders' judgment drive the transition. The coalition support that. We support the view that transition may well take place in Uruzgan district by district, valley by valley, village by village, re-entrant by re-entrant. As I said, the government has the support of the coalition for a metrics and commander judgment based transition that adequately ensures that the Afghan National Army's 4th Brigade has the training, resources and equipment to do the job, and that in ensuring the transition occurs Australian soldiers' lives are not put at any greater risk than they normally are.

As we move towards that transition, it is instructive to look at the toll in Afghanistan. In this year alone, two of our great soldiers have been killed in action: Corporal Richard Atkinson on 2 February, from an IED blast; and Sapper Jamie Larcombe on 19 February, from gunshot wounds he sustained. Our thoughts are with their families, and I join with the minister in thanking those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

I cannot begin to understand the pain that their families are going through. We have now lost 23 brave Australians in combat in Afghanistan. Four more have been wounded in action this year, bringing the total number of wounded, since 2002, to 168. The coalition join the government in their commitment to care for these soldiers and their families. We must, and we will, do everything possible to support them.

I note with interest that the Army has recently embarked on a campaign to better educate and care for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder upon their return from the battlefield. I note the great DVD they have made, called *Dents in the Soul*, and I commend the Army, particularly the Chief of Army, General Gillespie, for their work in tackling this difficult issue and their efforts in embarking on what amounts to a significant cultural change program within the Army and, more widely, within the ADF.

We on this side of the House continue to expect the government to continue to look after our troops' welfare, and their families' welfare, not only in the short term but also in the longer term. We expect them to deliver on their promise to support our returned troops, particularly those who have sustained physical injuries or mental conditions.

I call on the wider nation to remember that our fighting men and women fight for us; they fight for you. They fight for the safety and freedom that we enjoy. I call on the nation to remember them and perhaps, if the opportunity arises, to show your appreciation in a tangible way by writing to them. Australia Post will send a two-kilogram parcel free of charge—send them some decent coffee, send them some Tim Tams, send them a letter. The joy your family will get from receiving a letter back from one of our fighting men and women is truly something to behold. Our soldiers have a great sense of humour. A digger from Cairns writes back and says he is used to the tropics but he is now in minus 15 degrees in the mountains at Chora and he is freezing. I encourage Australians to remember our fighting men and women—send them a care package—not just in Afghanistan but right across the theatres of influence where our men and women serve.

The Minister for Defence also provided an update on the new C-RAM, the counter-rocket artillery and mortar early warning system installed to help protect Australian soldiers from attacks in Afghanistan. It is a critical system. It was called for by the coalition, and I thank the previous Minister for Defence for heeding that call and bringing the system forward. Certainly, it is better late than never. It performs a vital role, providing precious seconds warning for our troops.

I also thank the minister for providing an update on the court martial proceedings relating to three ADF

personnel. It is no secret that the coalition remain concerned about the length of time it has taken to bring these charges, noting from the minister's comments that only two court martials have been arranged, with the third pending. We will continue to monitor closely the amount and quality of representation these soldiers are afforded. I note the minister and CDF have promised the finest advice and representation that can possibly be provided, and that is indeed welcome.

I note the minister's comments with regard to detainee management. I am in lockstep with the minister insofar as we agree that the first priority of the detainee management framework must be to ensure insurgents are removed from the battlefield. Naturally, we will continue to monitor very closely the whole range of issues currently before the ADF regarding detainee management. I also note, though, that ADF troops, most notably our special forces, are becoming frustrated with Australia's limited current framework. My understanding is that ADF troops can still only hold suspected insurgents for a maximum of four days, whereas our ISAF partners can hold them for 14 days. I would argue that that length of time does not allow for the extraction of valuable information by Australian troops. It is difficult to assess the intelligence value of information extracted within just four days. I believe it is having an impact on troop morale, especially when insurgents are caught, released and then caught again. It is my understanding that the minister is reviewing these arrangements, to his credit. I therefore ask the minister in good faith: can he provide a firm time line for that decision and update; and will any recommendations be made public?

In conclusion, I thank the Minister for Defence for providing the House with this update. He has been true to his word and provided an update, as he said he would. I sincerely hope that he will consider the points that I have raised today on behalf of the coalition. We join the government in thanking our professional military commanders, who have assured the government and the opposition that our fighting men and women are doing everything they need to do to ensure success in the campaign in Afghanistan. We must steel ourselves against the future as we enter the fighting season. We remain in lockstep with the government, as there is bipartisan support for the mission and for our troops.