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Page 7971
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Speaker Mr ROBERT

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(Fadden) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (09:22): I rise to respond to the statement on Afghanistan by the Minister for Defence. Once again I thank the minister for keeping his word on providing regular updates to this parliament on the war in Afghanistan. To his credit, this is the minister's third update to the House this year, building on his previous reports from 23 March and 12 May. It is important to restate that the opposition continues to strongly offer bipartisan support to the government for the prosecution of combat and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan and for wider security operations in the Middle East Area of Operations. This bipartisan support, while strong and vocal, is not a blank cheque, however. We continue to reserve our right as an opposition to constructively keep the government accountable in any and all areas of the prosecution of these operations. It is also noted that we respect the role of the Chief of the Defence Force as the principal military adviser and commander of Australian forces and have the utmost faith in General David Hurley's abilities and capacity to provide the best advice to the government on the prosecution of these operations.

I thank the minister for this constructive approach to the bipartisan support the coalition offers, especially through the provision of information and advice when required and facilitating regular visits into the Middle East Area of Operations for the coalition to ascertain events firsthand on the ground. Consequently, this report to parliament from the coalition is provided with the backdrop of my recent return from Afghanistan after an extensive week's visit in mid-May which included Al Minhad Air Base, Tarin Kowt and going out into the badlands to the patrol base at Musaza'i, to Kandahar and to Kabul, including the green zone, and meeting with representatives of the Afghan parliament. This was my third visit into theatre in the past 24 months as part of our commitment to a fully informed bipartisan support to the government for combat operations. It is our expectation that the coalition will continue to have semiregular access into the Middle East Area of Operations as part of our constructive approach to bipartisan support, and I thank the minister for his work in making this happen.

I also join the minister in his condolences for and reflection on the five soldiers killed in action and wounded in Afghanistan since the last ministerial

statement on 12 May and the 28 soldiers killed in action and the 182 soldiers wounded in action since the start of combat operations at the end of 2001. Theirs is a terrible loss, borne especially by family and friends but certainly felt by our nation. Freedom has a price; it is not free. It is borne by so few for the benefit of so many of us. As I expressed yesterday with the Minister for Defence, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition as we lamented and eulogised the loss of Commando Sergeant Todd Langley, this parliament will ensure families left behind and those suffering will not be forgotten and will be cared for.

The minister rightly states that the loss of every soldier raises questions within the community as to the legitimacy of our ongoing combat operations in the theatre of Afghanistan. We went into Afghanistan with parliamentary bipartisan support at the end of 2001 to ensure that Afghanistan could never again be used as a training, financing, supporting, indoctrinating and operational ground for terrorism that would impact on Australia and its interests at home and abroad. To this end, we stay in Afghanistan to ensure that is achieved. The death of Osama bin Laden has prompted some to question the continued need for Australia's involvement in the Afghan war, many arguing that we went to Afghanistan only to destroy al-Qaeda and bin Laden and that that appears to be done. The reality of course is that the strategy in Afghanistan is much bigger than simply destroying one man or one terrorist organisation. The strategy is to ensure that the insurgency across Afghanistan, which is made up of at least 10 separate organisations, including the Afghan Taliban, does not once again control Afghanistan, thereby allowing that country to be used for training, resourcing, financing, equipping, indoctrinating and assisting terrorists.

Whilst it is true that some of the so-called Taliban moderates reconciled with the Afghan government long ago, the remaining Taliban, particular the southern Taliban, have splintered into several antagonistic groups, ironically each more extreme than the other. Other insurgency forces, like the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani network, at times are little more than opportunistic criminal families or factions, though they are organised, ruthless and brutal, as evidenced by the recent attack on the Hotel Inter-Continental in Kabul.

In war, perceptions tend to lag behind reality by a considerable distance. That was the case in the early years, up to 2005, when the West re-engaged in Afghanistan and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, I believe it is also the case now. This can go some way to explaining President Obama's announcement of the withdrawal of 33,000 troops by summer 2012, tempered by the fact that this is also the number of extra surge troops that were committed in 2009 and that were always going to be removed at some point in the future. As the minister said, at the end of the surge withdrawal by summer 2012 the US will still have some 68,000 combat troops in theatre.

The message is that the counterinsurgency strategy is working, and I agree with the minister that there is a degree of cautious optimism. The strategy is more than just hearts and minds and includes a range of commonsense precepts about applying well-calibrated kinetic activity with building up economic activity. The Pashto-speaking Major Jim Gant's treatise, entitled *One Tribe at a Time*, describes part of the approach that is working. Furthermore, while provincial reconstruction still has a long way to go, the level of economic activity, and thus some degree of legitimacy of the government over that of the Taliban, is slowly improving. The International Council on Security and Development, an organisation long critical of US policy in Afghanistan, is echoing the US sentiment that, as a result of the surge and refined strategy, many of the Taliban's long-time safe havens in Helmand and Kandahar have been destroyed. Mid-level Taliban commanders and their networks have been disrupted, dismantled or destroyed by special forces, with General Petraeus telling the US armed services committee in March 2011 that, in a typical three-month period, 360 insurgent leaders were killed or captured. According to observers, the average age of Taliban has dropped from 35 to 25 in the past year, with most senior commanders now choosing to live in Pakistan in relative safety and issuing orders to those beneath them to take up the fight.

We all recognise within the realm of strategic operations that we cannot kill our way to victory in Afghanistan. Whilst judicious and lawful use of kinetic activity is certainly required to disrupt, dismantle and destroy insurgent networks, there is a greater need to protect civilian populations for the provincial reconstruction to occur and the economic life of that community to continue unabated. This is certainly part of the key to the effective withdrawal of combat forces by 2014. The standing up of the Afghan National Army is taking time, but I agree with the minister that it is working. Whilst Tajiks are overrepresented in the officer corps and Pashtuns from the south are grossly underrepresented amongst the rank and file, the overall

composition of the Afghan National Army remains reasonably ethnically well-balanced.

The ANA have also assumed security responsibility in Bamyán province, the first of the 48 provinces, and over half of our patrol bases within Oruzgan province are manned solely by ANA soldiers. As the minister has reported, by month's end the Afghan government is looking for transition in up to a further seven provinces. Retention rates within the ANA are slowly rising, albeit from a low base. Pay rates have gone up US\$140 a month for a raw recruit; and of course the average wage in Afghanistan is only \$40 a month. The ANA is on track to reach its November 2011 goal of 171,000 personnel, which will increase to 260,000 by 2014. There have been similar increases in Afghan police over the past year, to an expected 134,000 by the end of 2011. There will be 303,000 personnel in the ANA and ANP by the end of 2011.

By way of reflection, in 2001, 10 years ago, Kabul was a ghost town and home to 500,000 repressed, cold—because no heating worked—and oppressed people. There was no music, no dancing in the streets, no cinemas and little entertainment. It is now a thriving city of some three million people—cafés, shops, cinemas, music, girls and boys at school. In fact, two months ago when I was there, driving through the main street of Kabul it was refreshing to see little boys and girls skipping to school, playing with tyres, playing with dodgy toys, chatting on the sidewalk. It was great to see people milling around in their thousands, to the point that it reminded me more of a somewhat busy and crowded Asian city.

In 2001, 9 per cent of Afghans had access to basic medical care—just 9 per cent. Today it is 85 per cent. In 2001, less than 1 million boys went to school; today, seven million young Afghans go to school, one-third of whom are girls. In 2001, you struggled to find a phone. Today, one in three Afghans have a mobile phone. That is staggering. In 2001, only the Taliban's Voice of Sharia hit the airwaves; today there are over 100 active press outlets in Afghanistan. Afghan GDP growth today is 22 per cent, with almost \$1 trillion of mineral wealth believed to be in the dirt, including rare metals such as lithium. By way of comparison, and this is for comparison only, each year, currently, more people are killed in Russia and Mexico because of political and criminal violence than are killed in Afghanistan from military, criminal and political violence, notwithstanding the size of those communities. This reflection is simply to point out that the change in 10 years in Afghanistan has been significant—significant for the lives of the Afghan people; significant for the destruction of criminal and insurgent networks that would seek to do us harm.

We must not forget that Afghan politics continues to be, in our view, corrupt, although in a federalised system the provinces simply look to the President for security and the odd gift, otherwise the strongly independent provinces ask to be left alone. There is substantial work going into governance issues within the Afghan government, and that needs to be encouraged and further developed. Previous moves to strike a deal with the Taliban have proved fruitless and the intensity of attacks has certainly increased, with the 8,000 insurgent incidents—IED, small-arms fire and rocket, mortar and suicide attacks—in 2008 doubling to more than 17,000 in 2010. This is, more than anything else, representative of the intensity of the ISAF and the Operation Enduring Freedom activity and the need for the Taliban to try to hold their own against inevitable defeat. Despite this, negotiations with the Taliban continue in the hope of brokering a way forward with a deal, and to that end I remain cautiously hopeful.

I join the minister in expressing careful optimism, having been in theatre three times in the past 24 months and having seen substantial improvement on each of those occasions. Most notably, to share an example with the House, I was in Tarin Kowt in October last year with the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott. Around seven kilometres from Tarin Kowt, as Tony and I stood there in theatre, a massive military operation was underway with efforts by the MTF to put a patrol base in the Mirabad Valley, a mere seven kilometres from the fire support base at Tarin Kowt. So vicious was the fighting that it went over many hours and days. Fast jets were called in, and a section 2IC seeking to resupply the MTF, fighting on a small mound above where the patrol base was taking such a degree of direct aimed fire, had to lie doggo to show the enemy that he was dead so fire would be lifted and he could resume his resupply run—a vicious, brutal fight on a peninsula off from the valley base.

A patrol base at Musaza'i now stands where that battle took place. Two months ago I flew in there with Colonel Creighton, the commander of Combined Team Uruzgan, the CTU. The helicopter landed and we walked across the low-lying hill down to the patrol base, crossing the scene of that battle with thousands of expended ammunition shells across the ground. We walked down to the patrol base, met with the men who were manning the patrol base at the that time, 5 Battalion MTF2, and we then spent the next 90 minutes with the local shura, a meeting of the local elders. For those 90 minutes we were sitting down with 20 or 30 Afghan elders from the Mirabad Valley, not once was it suggested that we needed to do something about security in the area. Questions were asked: 'When is the road coming? Thank you for the mosque but can we have some access? When is health care coming?

Thanks for some education; can we have more?' Not once was the question of national security asked. The difference between October last year and May this year in the lower parts of the Mirabad Valley speaks louder than any words possibly could. I note that Australia, in the minister's words, is committed to a metrics based, command judged drawdown; valley by valley, patrol base by patrol base. For this it has the overwhelming support of the coalition.

As so many nations flocked to withdraw forces and announce forced withdrawals on the back of the US announcement, I applaud the minister for holding his nerve and not making a political announcement, but sticking to the very sensible approach of a metrics based, command judged drawdown. He has overwhelming coalition support on a sensible approach to the withdrawal of troops as we move towards 2014. I note that of the over 25 patrol bases—forward operating bases out there in the valley—that at least half are manned solely by the Afghan National Army, proving the minister's point that we are already beginning a drawdown in terms of valley by valley, patrol base by patrol base, with some oversight by MTF forces. It is our expectation, Minister, that as we move to actual withdrawal of combat troops from the theatre the coalition will be informed of the metrics based, command judged approach to that withdrawal as it happens.

I take on face value the minister's statement that our drawdown is on track towards 2014. I also acknowledge the minister's statement that post drawdown we will continue to have a degree of overwatch forces in place that may include elements such as special forces, training components and reconstruction components. I thank the minister for his update on the mentoring task force where Lieutenant Colonel Darren Huxley, a classmate of mine, has withdrawn the 5th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment to be replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Smith with the 2nd Battalion. I note the great work of the 5th Battalion—over 2½ thousand patrols, 100 contacts by elements of the MTF, over 100 IEDs found, and 380 weapon and cache locations discovered. It was one of the most successful winter operations ever conducted by Australian forces within the combat area. I thank and give praise to Lieutenant Colonel Darren Huxley for the great work he and his battalion did in trying and difficult circumstances.

I welcome the rotation of the 2nd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Smith with the MTF 3. Lieutenant Colonel Smith, you are going into a hard fight. The fighting season is well and truly upon you, as the SOTG and other elements have warned so harshly over the last few months.

It is necessary that we continue the hard work with the mentoring of Afghan national forces in support of the kinetic disrupting and dismantling work of special operations to drive home the peace that we currently hold on to.

The provincial reconstruction team has now grown to over 189 staff, ably led by a great Australian. With funding increased to over \$30 million this financial year, on top of the over \$100 million from the Australian budget for the wider Afghanistan, it is already making a significant difference. When I landed in Musazai base, Colonel Crichton the head of the PRT, who was also on the same helicopter as me, jumped off to travel with some local Afghans to look at a bridge that needed to be fixed in the area. It just goes to show the provincial reconstruction, civilian and military teams working together.

I continue to praise the work of the Special Operations Task Group, commanded by another colonel colleague of mine who took over my platoon, the 3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment. He is doing tremendous work in leading his men incredibly well. They are the third largest special forces group and their work with training the provincial response company of the ANP is proving of enormous benefit.

I reiterate to the minister that a political cap of 1,550 people should be able to be flexible and that the commander should be able to use judgment to use wider forces within the MEAO to affect command and judgment and effects on the ground. As we head into a difficult fighting season, I wish all the men and women who fight within the Middle East area of operations the best of luck. They enjoy our thoughts and our prayers.

As the 2nd Battalion takes over the Mentoring Task Force, and the bulk of the Special Operations Task Group is comprised of the 2nd Commando Regiment based on 4RAR, we now ostensibly have the old 2nd/4th Battalion back in operation again—this time in separate MTF and the SOTG forces. The coalition wishes them the very best. We will monitor their progress with great interest. We will support them to the hilt and we will continue to offer bipartisan support to the government to ensure our fighting men and women have everything they need to effect victory within Afghanistan.