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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, I call the meeting to order.

There are two items of business to deal with today. The second item will be dealt with in camera.

The first item, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), is the motion adopted on November 20, 2007, that we be briefed on Canada's involvement in Afghanistan on a regular basis.

We're certainly pleased today have with us Brigadier General Atkinson, Director General Operations, Strategic Joint Staff.

Sir, the usual process here is for you to give your presentation, then I go around the table once to each party for one question. We try to keep it as pointed as we can, realizing what your obligations are to come forward and present this. We haven't seen anybody since the end of May, so we have a period of time to get caught up on. We'll give you the opportunity to do that for us right now, sir.

The floor is yours.

Brigadier General P. Atkinson (Director General Operations, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you very much, Chair.

I'm very glad to be here. As I said when I first walked in, I think this regular update is very important to this committee so that you have a sense of the things that are happening on the ground. It's only by seeing this on a regular basis that you can actually get a sense for the improvement in the things that are going on, and I'm very pleased to be here.

My primary responsibility on the Strategic Joint Staff is to provide timely and effective military analysis and decision support to the Chief of the Defence Staff, and it's in that context that I'm able to speak here today.

My presentation is primarily on the reportable security issues from July to November inclusive, and I'm prepared, obviously, following the presentation to provide clarification on any of those issues.

I'd like to start with a short explanation about operational security and its relation to our mission in Afghanistan. Our operations there have generated a growing public interest for information. This appetite for information about Government of Canada operations serves positive and lawful objectives required of a parliamentary democracy. Unfortunately, a significant amount of the information requested is operationally sensitive, and its release could prejudice

the success of Canadian Forces operations and potentially endanger the lives of our soldiers, members of the whole government team, and the Afghans with whom we work.

Canadians expect the department and the Canadian Forces to protect the security of Canadian troops who are in harm's way, and to mitigate the risks they face as much as possible. We recognize the importance of providing information to the public, and work hard to meet those obligations within the limits of the law. There must, however, be a balance between our response to make information available to the public and our responsibility to protect the lives of the men and women in uniform.

The safeguarding of some information specific to the mission in Afghanistan is fundamental to the safety of all Canadians working in Afghanistan and the coalition of personnel, including the Afghans with whom we work, side by side, every day.

In August we witnessed the relief in place between joint Task Force 0107, which is what we call it, and that's comprised mainly of the battle group 3 RCR, Royal Canadian Regiment, from Petawawa, and Task Force 0307, which is the 3 Van Doo battle group out of Valcartier.

Benefiting from the improving security environment created by the preceding rotations and the continuous efforts by that 3 RCR battle group, the current Joint Task Force Afghanistan, under the leadership of Brigadier General Laroche and the commanding officer of the 3 Van Doo battle group, Lieutenant Colonel Alain Gauthier, has maintained the pressure on ensuring leadership and activities, improving the security in the Mazar-e, Panjwai, and Arghandab districts. Their contribution to the whole of government approach is measured by the Afghan national security force's capacity building successes, resulting in a small demonstration of Afghan National Army self sustainment and a progressively better Afghan National Police. I'll talk more about that later.

A significant improvement in governance is the establishment of a joint district at all levels of government in the Kandahar province, leading to Afghan solutions.

I would caution in these introductory remarks that despite the fact that we are achieving success, Afghans still need our support and presence before they have achieved the required level of self sustainment.

In the next 30 minutes, these are the subjects that I intend to cover, and they are up on the slide.

[Translation]

On February 4, 2007, the United States, under the direction of General Dan McNeil, assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters.

An overview of the countries participating in the International Security Assistance Force mission enables us to put international efforts in context.

The International Security Assistance Force is made up of more than 40,000 soldiers from 38 different countries. The 25 Provincial Reconstruction Teams are the main vehicle for reconstruction in Afghanistan. The civil-military elements of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams are an integral part of the international community's commitment to Afghanistan. They assist Afghan authorities with security and stability, governance, the rule of law, human rights, as well as economic and social development.

As you can see on the slide, Afghanistan is divided into five sectors including the Kabul Regional Command Centre. There are some 4,800 soldiers in the Kabul region.

Regional Command South is British-led and has some 11,600 soldiers, including four Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Regional Command West is Italian-led and has some 2,500 soldiers, including four Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Regional Command North is German-led and has some 3,300 soldiers, including five Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Lastly, Regional Command East is U.S.-led and has some 13,900 soldiers, including 12 Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Canada and Afghanistan, as well as our international allies are signatories of the Afghanistan Compact, an integrated plan outlining the objectives set for the next five years. The benchmarks enable us to measure our progress in meeting these objectives. The goals contained in the document will contribute to stability and peace in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Compact will remain in force until the end of 2011.

•(1110)

[English]

In Regional Command South, the main effort is the provision of security in that region by disrupting the insurgents and thus setting the conditions for further development, particularly in Kandahar City and the Kandahar Afghan development zone. This slide shows you Regional Command South and it depicts the lead nation in each of those provinces. In the top left-hand corner, Task Force Uruzgan is led by the Netherlands. Their main effort is to maintain security in the areas of Task Force Dihrawud and Tirin Kot. In the top right corner, Task Force Zabul is led by the Romanians. Their main effort is focused on security operations along Highway 1 and the conduct of Afghan development zone security and disrupting operations in the Mizan district. In the bottom left corner, Task Force Helmand is led by the United Kingdom. Their concentration of effort is centred on the Afghan development zone of Lashkar Gah and the area south of Highway 1 to provide security and allow reconstruction and development projects to continue. The task force also maintains security of the Kajaki Dam near Sangin in the north. And in the bottom right corner, Task Force Kandahar is led by the Canadian Forces under the leadership of Brigadier General Laroche, who I

mentioned earlier. Our main effort is security, governance, and development in the Panjwai-Zhari area of operations, to continue setting those conditions for success for the Afghan development zone.

Operations are also ongoing near the border region of Spin Buldak—Spin Buldak is right on the border with Pakistan—in an effort to set the conditions for an expansion of that Afghan development zone to the east.

[Translation]

Our mission in Afghanistan involves conducting military operations in the operational zone assigned to us with a view to helping the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to establish and provide a safe environment with the full support of the Afghan National Security Forces, in order to increase the authority and influence of the government, thus promoting the development of Afghanistan and regional stability.

During the operations conducted by the International Security Assistance Force and the Afghan National Security Forces, the insurgents have suffered a season of significant tactical reverses, with considerable losses among their commanders and main operational leaders. The insurgents' main target in Afghanistan is Regional Command South, and to a lesser extent, Regional Command East and Regional Command West. During the summer and the fall, the insurgents turned once again to roadside bombs and kidnapping. The suicide bomb attempt in Kabul last October clearly illustrates the tactics they are prepared to use.

While the Taliban suffered significant losses, the insurgents continued to put up resistance in many regions. In Regional Command South, the insurrection continues to target mainly Helmand and Kandahar provinces. In Orozgan province, the insurgents have stepped up their efforts to settle in before winter. In Helmand province, following a break in operations at the start of the summer, the Taliban have generally been on the defensive and a significant number of Taliban have died during ISAF operations, which thwarted insurgent attempts at regenerating their numbers. Combat alongside the International Security Assistance Force has for the most part been reactive, but well organized and coordinated.

Civilian convoys, the Afghan National Police Corps and representatives of the Afghan government have been frequent targets, since the Taliban consider them easy targets to hit. A Taliban effort to encircle Kandahar City was halted by a Joint Task Force Afghanistan swift operation, as we saw some two weeks ago in the Arghandab region.

•(1115)

[English]

The deployment of our current rotation of troops in Afghanistan, as I said earlier, is based on the 3 Van Doo battle group out of Valcartier. It commenced in mid-July and was completed by the end of August.

As with previous rotations, this group of soldiers and this rotation was accomplished with minimal disruption of our operations. The air bridge was conducted with a combination of military airbuses and contracted aircraft from Canada into theatre. We used 24 flights—13 military, using our airbuses, and 11 contracted flights.

In the first week of August, the Joint Task Force Afghanistan change of command took place, and General Tim Grant, who we saw in the media mostly through the spring, relinquished his command to Brigadier General Guy Laroche.

While success in Afghanistan can be measured only over a long period, the success of last month's operations increased the stability and security throughout the Zhari and Panjwai areas, resulting in good progression of the Government of Canada's governance and development objectives.

Over the last month, Joint Task Force Afghanistan continued with the overarching operation Garrandy Zmaray, which means "Iron Lion". And if you can pronounce those names better than I can, you're better than me.

Operation Iron Lion was to extend the presence of the security forces in the Zhari and Panjwai regions.

Building on the previous successes of its joint Afghan National Police-Afghan National Army and ISAF operations, the joint task force conducted successive high-level joint operations such as Sadiq Sarbaaz, "Honest Soldier", and Reshteya Adalaat, "Truth and Justice", which resulted in a disruption in the freedom of movement of the insurgents and a reduction of the command and control of the insurgent leadership, which forced them to revert to small-group and IED tactics.

The Afghan National Police are now deployed across the regions in strongly built police substations, an absolute first. Through the police operational mentor and liaison team initiative, the Afghan National Police have become more effective in policing. More importantly, they can now survive under the constant pressure of the insurgents.

Furthermore, we continually improve the safety of our personnel and the Afghanis through the operationalization of the expedient route-opening capability, which has the nickname of "EROC". I'll talk a little bit more about that later. The operation is currently being employed with great effectiveness to clear the Zhari and Panjwai road networks.

The effects of this new equipment complement our continued and effective focused operations against the IED leadership and cells. These positive results have translated into a favourable impact on future governance and development efforts in the Zhari-Panjwai region.

We currently have operational mentor and liaison teams working with three infantry "kandaks", which are each the equivalent size of one of our battalions. When General Howard was here last you will recall that we had only one kandak that we were working with at the time, so this has shown tremendous progress in this space.

We also have a combat service support kandak and a brigade headquarters. In fact, Canada has had a direct impact on the training and development of the growth of a professional and credible

Afghan National Army that is now more than 35,000 strong. At any one time we are training and mentoring 2,000 soldiers through our operational mentor and liaison teams.

You're probably all aware of the recent operation that was in the news over the last couple of weeks, Operation Intizaar Zmaray, which took place in the Arghandab district. At the request of the Afghan authorities, Joint Task Force Afghanistan and the Afghan national security forces, which are a complement of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police, conducted coordinated operations in the Arghandab district in order to maintain a safe and secure environment for the local population there.

That operation will continue until such time as security is reinforced in the area, the insurgent activities in the district are contained, and local Afghan authorities can manage the security situation on their own.

While we still need to maintain our focus on the Afghan national security forces' capacity building, Operation Intizaar Zmaray represents the first operation in the Canadian area of responsibility where an Afghan National Army kandak and the Afghan National Police conducted land operations independently under the mentoring of our Canadian soldiers and with the support of coalition troops.

• (1120)

That kandak commander led his troops into combat in a remarkable manner and with great success. The Afghan National Police also achieved their assigned objectives. A major achievement is the level of responsiveness of the Afghan Security Forces, who launched their attacks with very limited time to plan and prepare.

[Translation]

This tactical success is a clear indication that our present model for Afghan National Security Forces' capacity building is meeting our objectives for [Editor's Note: Inaudible] autonomous Afghan force. Recognizing that we must train a larger number of troops and increase the operational self-sufficiency of the ANA and the ANP, these results clearly show a progression that highlights the efforts we have invested in the operational mentoring and liaison teams, as well as the ongoing supervision of operations.

We acknowledge that the Afghan Security Force is moving slowly towards self-sufficiency and continues to require our presence to increase stability and security in Kandahar province.

[English]

In our whole of government approach, we build on the security improvements to increase the governance and development. We've said before that without security, those other two critical pillars can't work. While we are starting to benefit from our Afghan national security force capacity-building efforts, the Joint Task Force Afghanistan and their partners ensure we maximize the opportunities and initiatives to provide Afghan solutions, not only to security but also in the areas of governance and development challenges. Joint Task Force Afghanistan maintains its focus on improving joint planning and execution as well as inter-agency coordination. The focus has a direct impact on governance.

Last week, media coverage from imbedded reporters highlighted the impact of the joint district coordination centre initiative. Those joint district coordination centres are another way to ensure a permanent presence of Afghan national security forces and Joint Task Force Afghanistan personnel to reinforce the Government of Afghanistan's influence within the districts, as well as enhancing the security force's interoperability.

At the provincial and regional levels, the creation of joint regional coordination centres and a joint provincial coordination centre facilitates inter-agency coordination and efficient passage of information. Three joint district coordination centre facilities are being established in Zhari, Panjwai, and Spin Buldak, and a fourth one will be ready to support future expansion. The joint district coordination centres are meant to act as a 24/7 operations centre and include representation from all the stakeholder agencies involved in maintaining security in their districts.

Joint Task Force Afghanistan will set the conditions for the establishment of a weekly coordination meeting for all Afghan national security force representatives, district leaders, and our own joint task force people. Members will convene to discuss security issues and take the actions that are required. The immediate results are Afghan solutions that not only assist in the establishment of a secure environment, but are conducive to development, improvement of their daily life, and the achievement of a self-sufficient society.

• (1125)

[Translation]

This joint approach will help develop a network that will enable local leaders and commanders of the Afghan National Security Forces to take control over security within their districts and to build a safer environment for women, children, and the elderly in their part of the country. This presence 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is key to providing security in Afghanistan and, consequently, reconstruction, development and good government.

[English]

Recognizing that the Afghan National Army, and especially the Afghan National Police, require more time and effort to reach an adequate self-sustainment level, the whole of government approach has already produced excellent results in security governance and development. The Afghan national security forces' capacity-building combined with the joint coordination centre approaches provide the foundation for an Afghan solution.

There are three great examples of signs of progress. The first is a trade show sponsored by the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team. This fair exhibited hand-made products in Kandahar city, with 27 stalls representing more than 3,800 locally produced items. There were more than 3,000 visitors, some of whom were international patrons. They spent more than 500,000 afghani, or \$10,000 U.S.—or about \$10,100 Canadian, since we're back in that space—during the course of the five-day exhibit.

The fair demonstrated the economic potential of small craftsmen in the Kandahar province. It promoted the local Pashtun culture, and provided a forum for future trade and cooperation.

In September the minister of rural reconstruction and development announced 69 new contracts worth \$4.2 million for development projects in the southern provinces. This brings the total number of contracted projects to 480 this year in Regional Command South.

The contracted projects are designed to significantly improve the quality of life in southern Afghanistan, and will include construction of new roads, water canals, schools, clinics, culverts, mosques, retaining walls, and drinking-water wells—all the things we take for granted here in our own country.

With the implementation of these new projects, more than 222,000 labour days will be created, benefiting more than 200,000 villagers. The funding of these projects comes from USAID, CIDA, the Department for International Development, and the Dutch and Belgian governments.

In the picture you can see a causeway that is under construction today.

[Translation]

From the development perspective, efforts are clearly measurable in the Arghandab region.

[English]

That's the area we were in just this past week.

[Translation]

Joint Task Force Afghanistan is currently building a causeway over the Arghandab River to improve travel between two major cities for security and economic development reasons. This causeway project will currently provide three months of work for 50 Afghans.

[English]

This bridge is a huge sign to the locals that we mean what we're saying. There's a huge community on both sides. It connects Kandahar City to Highway 1, and it's going to hugely enable local Afghans over the coming months and years. If things go well, it should be done before Christmas. We are hopeful.

I will provide to the committee a list of projects and governance and all sorts of things that have been completed. They're too numerous for me to cover, but I will provide that to the committee afterwards, and you can have that as a bit of a fact sheet on some of the progress we have seen over the last months.

We tried to capture on this next slide the three lines of operations: governance, development, and security. On the right-hand side are the impacts. As I said before, our mission in Afghanistan is to conduct whole of government, discreet yet synchronized operations across the full spectrum of conflict to support Canada's objective of supporting the Government of Afghanistan's effort to create a secure, democratic, and self-sustaining nation state, which is obviously where we want to go.

In the area of governance, pay equity in the Afghan national security forces is an area in which we have shown improvement. Government of Afghanistan officials are engaged to establish a visit program from Kabul to all the districts. Their provincial bureaucracy is getting better. The outreach program is a part of all our operations.

The district infrastructure is improving across the whole region. The joint district coordination centres, police headquarters, and district centres are being built and improved. There's an Afghan plan, which we are assisting to implement, that rationalizes checkpoints and police substations. Some of those checkpoints used to be Taliban. We've now put them to rest, and the police are there in force. There's increased coordination between Pakistani and Afghani customs along their border.

In the area of development, for basic human needs, there's a focus on health, education, and mine clearance. There is short-term employment via the cash-for-work projects. The priorities are expressed by communities through their community development councils and district governors. There are the roads and bridges we've built and this causeway, which I just mentioned a few moments ago.

Sustainable employment and rural infrastructure are moving. This is under long-term planning. We call it electrification. They obviously want to bring something that we take for granted, electric lines that will bring power to every one of those communities and that will stay on for more than a few hours a day.

In the area of security, as I already mentioned, we have the two new kandaks that have been enabled in the Zhari-Panjwai. The first of the 205 Brigade is approaching their initial capability. The Afghan national security forces have freedom of movement. The Afghan National Police are becoming more credible every day. They're vetted, they're trained, they're mentored, they're monitored, and as of last week, they're also paid.

We have a combined quick-reaction force and a combined operations centre, and we conduct combined operations with the Afghans. Coalition oversight is maintained throughout.

Finally, I want to cover three operational enhancements that are having a huge effect on the ground. I know that the minister announced the EROC, the expedient route-opening capability. They're on the ground, they're operating, and we're seeing the effect on those road networks each and every day. The full system, which is multiples of the three vehicles you see up there, will be in shortly, in the new year. They are having an effect.

We've taken delivery of two of our C-17s. On the second day after the delivery of the first one, it did a humanitarian mission into Jamaica. Two days later it was flying into theatre. They've conducted six rotations of flights into theatre, and they're on a two-week cycle as part of our air bridge. The back of that plane can carry an awful lot of stuff. There are a lot of things we had not been able to either rotate in or rotate out, and this has been a huge enabler and has taken some of the stress off our Herc fleet in a big way.

Also in the news is the delivery of the Leopard C2s. There's a troop on the ground operating today. As a matter of fact, they've been operating for close to a month. The other Leopards are being flown into the theatre at about one a day, and by the end of the month, the full squadron will be in place.

• (1130)

And on that, ladies and gentlemen, I'd be happy to take any questions you have.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

What we've done in the past, and hopefully we can continue with that practice, is to give each party an opportunity for one question and a response.

We can then move on with full understanding of the limits you have on responding to the military and development aspects of the mission.

Mr. Coderre.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you.

General Atkinson, the process is simple: if you cannot answer, tell me so. I will ask my questions all the same.

I would like to take a more in-depth look at the situation in Spin Boldak. Currently, there is the issue of Pakistan, and the fact that the area is important because of the situation with the Taliban. I would like you to say a few brief words about the impact of current events in Pakistan, on the border of Afghanistan. We have only got some 60-odd soldiers there, at a forward operating base. Realistically speaking, I think certain things could happen, depending on the state of emergency.

Can you give us a quick overview of what is happening in that region and what has happened in Pakistan?

[*English*]

BGen P. Atkinson: I won't go into specifics about the number of troops and capabilities we have in Spin Buldak. Spin Buldak, as you indicated, is on the border with Pakistan. It is a critical area, where we're working with both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

As I indicated in my text, we want to have the development zone butting right up against the border. It's a very important region. That's why we have almost a permanent presence there. We work every day with the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police in that area to maintain those sites, because coming through Spin Buldak is a major highway to Pakistan. Pakistan is a neighbour. As we've said in the past, any solution for Afghanistan involves Pakistan. So everything we can do in that space....

There are shuras with the Afghan army and the Pakistan army. The brigade commander conducts regular meetings with the Afghan National Army and the Pakistanis to improve relations, improve security along the border, and enable our operations, with the long-term view of developing stability in that area as that Afghan development zone moves out towards the border.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Have you observed more Pachtones from Pakistan crossing the border? Have the numbers of people increased because of the situation in Pakistan?

BGen P. Atkinson: That is not clear. The number of people travelling between Pakistan and Afghanistan has not changed significantly in recent months.

Hon. Denis Coderre: A second Afghan Kandak was supposed to be ready by November. Is it?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: We have three kandaks operational already. There is a fourth one, which appears to be on schedule. We hope that will occur. As I mentioned earlier, the operation at the Arghandab was something we have long hoped to see, where an Afghan battalion could plan and execute a joint operation just with mentoring. There is a clear indication that they are moving where we want. It is a vindication of our operational mentoring liaison efforts to bring them up to a level where they get to that. We hope to be able to do that with more kandaks in the future.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: General Atkinson, I know that we have put in place the new

[English]

joint district coordination centres, what we call 911.

[Translation]

We opted for that method because during operations, when we withdrew and left the police in charge, it did not work all that well. In fact, the Taliban gained back ground. The Senlis Council said certain things, but there are several organizations and no agreement on the importance of progress made by the armed forces in the field. Even if we are making progress, are we losing ground? Although the Taliban have suffered tactical defeats, they have unfortunately been successful in the case of suicide bombers and IEDs. Have we won back the ground that was lost since the 911 centres were created?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: As you know, the theatre in Afghanistan is very dynamic and our success in building the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police is what ultimately...as we build their capacity and get them to a point where we will achieve success.

The joint district centres, the 911 centres you talked about and I spoke about have enabled...with only 2,500 troops, the Canadian troops cannot be everywhere, but now that we are conducting joint operations with them, when the operations are complete it is with a view to leaving an Afghan security presence on the ground, both police and the Afghan National Army.

That is what we are able to do. This is not where we were six, eight, and ten months ago, because they had not got up to a level where we were able to achieve that. Today we are achieving success in that space. The activity in the Arghandab, which I just talked about, was a clear example of where they have gone. As the battle group is redeployed to other areas to take on other issues, a presence is left on the ground, where six months ago we weren't able to do that. So we are improving in that space.

You mentioned the Senlis report. A lot of issues were brought up in the report. It's a very important report and one that both NATO and Canada will read carefully as we are looking at the future of the mission. It's probably too early to comment directly on what is in there, as we just got it and we're taking a hard look at it.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Chairman, I would simply like to express my thanks. As you know, I recently went to Afghanistan, and despite all that happened politically, I received an exceptional welcome on the ground. I would like to thank General Laroche as well as all the troops in Kandahar.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coderre. Thank you, General.

Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to welcome General Atkinson and I wouldn't want him to get upset by what I will be saying in the next few minutes.

As much as I was very strongly in favour of the Standing Committee on National Defence receiving regular updates on the theatre of operations in Afghanistan, I think that this is a complete waste of our time. You might ask whether I still want such information sessions. I no longer want to hear such presentations, because I already know everything that has been said today. We are also being given a blue-sky view that is intended to convince the committee that everything is going well, when in my view nothing is going well.

I would like to read a few paragraphs from the Senlis report, which you have just described as being very well done.

[English]

In September 2006, Senlis Afghanistan released a security assessment report detailing the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan, pointing to the increasing hold that the movement has on southern provinces.

Some 14 months later, the security situation has reached crisis proportions. The Taliban has proven itself to be a truly resurgent force. Its ability to establish a presence throughout the country is now proven beyond doubt; research undertaken by Senlis Afghanistan indicates that 54 per cent of Afghanistan's landmass hosts a permanent Taliban presence, primarily in southern Afghanistan, and is subject to frequent hostile activity by the insurgency.

The insurgency now controls vast swaths of unchallenged territory including rural areas, some district centres, and important road arteries. The Taliban are the de facto governing authority in significant portions of territory in the south, and are starting to control parts of the local economy and key infrastructure such as roads and energy supply. The insurgency also exercises a significant amount of psychological control, gaining more and more political legitimacy in the minds of the Afghan people who have a long history of shifting alliances and regime change.

[Translation]

I could go on like that at length, Mr. Chairman. That is completely at odds with what the general has told us.

Of course, I am very disappointed by the turn of events. Especially since we had asked his predecessor, Mr. Howard, to show us photos of clinics, hospitals, schools, roads and wells that have been renovated, all those things that we need to see. But that's not what we have been shown.

Among other things, we were shown C-17 aircraft that were sent to Afghanistan. What a surprise! Did you think we didn't know there were C-17s in Afghanistan? Do you think that I am surprised to learn that the aircraft's hold can contain so much cargo? I am not at all surprised, because I boarded a C-17 and I know what it can transport. That is not what the Standing Committee on National Defence needs to know.

So I cannot ask the general to respond. I know he had a presentation to give, and he did a good job. But that's not what the committee needed. We need to know more about what I have just read is happening on the ground. Such information is not only contained in the Senlis report; it is being disseminated by others as well. This proves that there's still a culture of secrecy at National Defence.

I do not want to endanger the lives of our soldiers. I can understand that the general public cannot be informed of the kind of operations that will be carried out tomorrow. I am fully aware of that. But we, the elected members of Parliament, are not receiving more information than is being given to the public. There was nothing here that could not be made public. We could bring 5,000 people here without endangering our soldiers or ourselves. We would be treated the same as the general public, but as the Standing Committee on National Defence, that is not what we are looking for.

Therefore, I have no question to ask. However, I want to point out to my opposition colleagues that we should demand to know more, rather than waste our time with such briefings. We will have to get our information elsewhere. I, for one, am not at all satisfied with what has been presented to us and I think that this has been a complete waste of time. I have nothing further to add.

• (1145)

[English]

The Chair: You have no questions of the general? That was just a statement?

Okay.

I would move on to Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you for coming today, General Atkinson.

I share some of the point of view that my colleague from the Bloc Québécois has put forward, because you have indicated to us today that security has increased in the south region, and evidence we're getting from other sources would indicate exactly the opposite. However, I want to ask a couple of questions.

The U.S. forces with Operation Enduring Freedom, who are not part of ISAF, how do they operate within the Canadian Forces and the other ISAF nations there? How does that happen? I'm concerned about air strikes, I'm concerned that we have reports from Oxfam that tell us that four times as many air strikes happen in Afghanistan as in Iraq.

There is other information in the recent Oxfam report that was delivered to an all-party committee in Britain with other information that I think is applicable here in Canada. They indicate that there has

been \$15 billion in aid to Afghanistan since 2001, but life has not improved for ordinary Afghans. We know that Afghanistan is Canada's largest aid recipient. The Oxfam report raises a lot of really critical concerns about the whole notion of the military being involved with aid and the notion of the PRTs themselves, in fact.

We have the reports from our own Louise Arbour, a Canadian who has just recently been in Afghanistan, and she said that the rising rates of civilian casualties in Afghanistan are alarming. She said women are suffering disproportionately and continue to suffer disproportionately to men in Afghanistan, and despite the post-Taliban promises and commitments that were made, they're not making a difference.

So there's that question about U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom and how that relates to our ISAF. You mentioned the Kajaki Dam, which was mentioned to us before by General Howard, who did these briefings earlier. Is the Kajaki Dam secure now? Is electricity coming to Kandahar regularly without interruptions or are they still getting power in a very hit-and-miss way?

The final thing I want to mention is that the British committee of parliamentarians raised great concerns about the ANP and their report. We've heard, and I too have had great concerns about the ANP around the issues of lack of accountability, of corruption; it's well known. You mention they're finally being paid, and I think you said a week or a month. Who's paying them? Are we paying them directly or is that money still coming through the system in Afghanistan and many times not reaching the people who are meant to be paid?

Those are my questions.

BGen P. Atkinson: No problem. I'll try to answer all of them—one, two, three, four...six in one, but that's okay.

Your first question was about the U.S. forces. I think you'll appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on how the U.S. conducts their operations specifically.

As for our coalition, we are there as a member of NATO. There are U.S. troops who work in the NATO contract. In fact, in the Zabul province working with the Romanians, there is a combination of Romanians and Americans. The Romanians happen to be in command right now.

• (1150)

Ms. Dawn Black: I understand that. But I also know that there are, I think, about 8,000 Americans there, operating outside ISAF under OEF?

BGen P. Atkinson: Yes, there are, and OEF operates in another part of Afghanistan, in the region that they are in. We are focused on the province of Kandahar. In the province of Kandahar, there are Americans, Brits, Dutch, and we work together as a part of NATO. In Operation Enduring Freedom, there are certain objectives that the United States has put in place in that nation. They're the biggest contributor, and it works side by side and in tandem with NATO.

As to the specifics—you were asking about air strikes and other things—those are operational questions that I can't go into, other than to say that NATO has, obviously, air forces that support fully our operations. Air strikes and any sort of civilian casualties are of huge import to us. Those things are taken into account in all of our operations. In fact, in a number of cases we have stopped operations because of the danger of potentially having civilian casualties from air strikes.

You mentioned Oxfam's report. They are one of hundreds of organizations working inside Afghanistan, so they have a view. There are all kinds of other non-governmental organizations that are talking very positively about the work that's happening. The aid on the ground, and specifically in the Kandahar province where Canada is responsible, we are seeing the effects of the delivery of those projects and the aid. The facts on the ground—and that relates to the Senlis Council report—about the security in Kandahar don't bear out what is being said in the report.

I listened to a NATO response about the report this morning, and they didn't support all of the recommendations in that report. They put forward, as I indicated earlier—

Ms. Dawn Black: Which report?

BGen P. Atkinson: The Senlis report.

Ms. Dawn Black: That wasn't the one I raised.

BGen P. Atkinson: You mentioned two, the Oxfam report and the Senlis report—

Ms. Dawn Black: No, I didn't actually, but it doesn't matter.

The Chair: Sir, you have only two seconds left, so if you could....

BGen P. Atkinson: No problem.

You mentioned the Kajaki Dam. The Brits have taken over the security of that. The electricity is being delivered, and it is steadily getting better each and every day.

The Afghan National Police are being paid by the Afghans. They finally have a system in place and the police are being paid directly; it's not being, if you will, skimmed off a number of areas along the way. They're not 100% there yet, and the payment I talked about was, indeed, last week. That was an important step forward for those young policemen who are putting their lives on the line in our area.

Hopefully I've been able to touch on most of your questions.

The Chair: Thank you. You did a pretty good job on all those questions.

We have only one stop left, on the government side.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll be sharing my time with Mr. Hawn.

Notwithstanding the theatrics of some of the other members, you are welcome to be here, and I really enjoyed your briefing. Also know that references—

The Chair: Just a minute, there's a point of order.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, I've been sitting here observing and listening to

everybody. I don't think there was ever an expression of this general, or anybody, not being welcomed to this committee.

An hon. member: Go to the question.

Mr. John Cannis: I'd ask that to be withdrawn, sir.

The Chair: I'm not sure I can ask for it to be withdrawn. I'll leave it up to Ms. Gallant.

Ms. Gallant, please go to your question.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: In your commentary, you made reference to 3 RCR. I have met some of these soldiers who have had a chance to be in Afghanistan before, and they're very eager and inspired to go back because they feel they're really making a difference.

What sorts of things are these soldiers seeing on a day-to-day basis that would encourage them to go back and put their lives in danger?

BGen P. Atkinson: That's a very easy thing to answer.

Our soldiers interface with the Afghan population each and every day. It may be in the city of Kandahar, the villages, the soccer stadium, at the causeway that's being built, or at other bridges or wells. The focus of the provincial reconstruction team is in that whole of government approach, and the biggest part about the provincial reconstruction team is that word "reconstruction".

They're there, seeing all those projects being put in place every day, whether it's delivering wheelchairs, helping rebuild the schools, repairing canals, helping to get the sewage system back so it actually functions, or helping to bring electricity from the Kajaki Dam. Those are all the things they see each and every day.

They see the immunization program for the kids. They see the number of girls going back to school. They see a Terry Fox run done under another name inside the city of Kandahar this last year; they had 10,000 people participate. It actually had young men in shorts and T-shirts, something that has not been seen before in that part of the country.

Those soldiers are indeed our best spokesmen as they go out, because they see it firsthand. As you said, they come home and they are quite willing to put their lives on the line and go back to represent our country for something that they see as laudable and important, and they do see the progress.

I say our best spokesmen are those troopers, corporals, and master corporals who actually deliver each and every day. When they're asked the question, their response is almost unanimous: they can see the difference they are making on the ground.

• (1155)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, you have two minutes.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): I just want to make a couple of quick points.

First of all, in response to Mr. Bachand, the general public isn't behind that camera, so there is going to be a limited amount of information that can be spread.

The general said the Senlis report was important; he didn't say it was good. Senlis's credibility is not universally accepted.

To the general, obviously there are lots of challenges over there. People who have been there today versus five years ago universally comment on the improvements. There's a tendency on the part of some people to take every report that has good news in it as being automatically written with rose-coloured glasses, or to take any report that has something bad in it as automatically being the truth, which is very unfortunate and very unfair.

What I'd like to ask you, though, is this: with all the challenges we face—and we know we face lots of challenges with the ANP, the ANA, the Taliban, obviously, and all the things that surround them—what is our philosophical attitude towards meeting those challenges? I mean the attitude that our folks have. Cheryl's question touched on it, but from a higher level, what attitude do you see within the Canadian Forces? Working in theatre with all those folks, what attitude do we take to those challenges and what we see coming down?

BGen P. Atkinson: Across the board, from a trooper to the Chief of the Defence Staff, anybody who has been to Afghanistan has seen the impact we have on the ground. They understand the importance. If we don't solve Afghanistan today, it is something that could potentially come back to our shores as it did in 9/11.

To a man, the members of foreign affairs, CIDA, the RCMP, and the Correctional Service of Canada who come to work with us each and every day as part of that whole of government team see the impact we're having. We see it from the locals and we see it from the members in the Afghan ministry. Officers on our strategic advisory team in Kabul who work to help build capacity in those ministries return to Canada; they come back, and we put them on our plans staff so that we can take those hard things they've learned there and turn it around. They see it in spades. We are very positive about what we're doing because we see the results.

I have visited Afghanistan seven times in the last 18 months. In my last job I was the executive officer to the Chief of the Defence Staff. Over a period of time we'd make a visit every six weeks to two months; I would go in and I could see the tangible differences. If you're there every day, sometimes it may appear to be slow; when you go back periodically, you can see those changes. The amount of progress you see on the ground is incredible.

On my first visit to the Zhari-Panjwai, 18 months ago there was nothing. The villages were empty. There were no lights on. Today there are 30,000 or 40,000 people there. The markets are going. The electricity's there. The highway's paved. The commerce is going. Farmers are back in their vineyards. All the fields are being irrigated. We're just seeing a complete resurgence of the population.

Those displaced people who have moved back in represent the kind of progress our soldiers see, and they in turn are encouraged by their efforts and they know the impact they're having.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

There's one question I have, just to refresh my mind: How many Afghans are in a kandak?

BGen P. Atkinson: It can vary, but 600 is a good rule of thumb for an Afghan kandak. It could be anywhere from 400 to 800, but about 600, depending on where they are.

The Chair: Thank you, sir. We appreciate the time.

The committee will suspend for a couple of minutes while we move in camera.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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