

Printed March 31, 2009 01:36am AEDT

Battle for progress

Mark Dodd | October 09, 2008

Article from: [The Australian](#)

THE Australian Defence Force is rightfully proud of its work in refurbishing the Tarin Kowt provincial hospital in the war-scarred Oruzgan province of Afghanistan. Visitors to the nearby Australian base at Camp Holland, the sprawling joint facility shared with the Dutch military, inevitably will be briefed about the showcase project, an outstanding example of winning Afghan hearts and minds.



Australian soldiers in an ISAF mission patrol the town of Tarin Kowt in the war-torn Oruzgan province of Afghanistan.

Nobody in their right mind would argue that a hospital is not needed: Afghanistan has one of the lowest levels of life expectancy in the world, just 43 years.

For the Diggers there is a sense of pride in delivering a desperately needed hospital in a country where access to proper medical care is a scarce luxury.

Sadly, no foreign aid organisation has been willing to staff the hospital or provide the sort of support envisaged when the army's valiant Reconstruction Task Force began the project. Security is regarded as being too poor, even though the hospital lies within sight of the main Dutch-Australian base.

Security, or lack of it, was the main theme when Mark Carleton-Smith, the outgoing commander of Britain's crack 16 Air Assault Brigade, let loose in an interview last weekend with The Times in London. The blunt-speaking brigadier said his troops had "taken the sting out of the Taliban" in war-racked Helmand province, southwest of Oruzgan, but at a terrible cost: 32 killed in action and 170 wounded during his six-month tour of duty.

Carleton-Smith went further. In the absence of a substantial troop reinforcement, a military victory over Taliban extremists was neither feasible nor plausible, he said.

Political accommodation with moderate Taliban elements would be a prerequisite for any political solution in Afghanistan, he warned. "The Taliban tactically is reasonably resilient, certainly quite dangerous and seems relatively impervious to losses," Carleton-Smith said.

Despite a smattering of modest successes by the chronically understrength NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, violence in Afghanistan has increased to its worst level since 2001. Neither the Taliban nor the ISAF has been able to break the stalemate, and now President Hamid Karzai is seeking Saudi help for mediation with the insurgents, an overture that appears to have fallen on deaf ears among Taliban hardliners.

Delivering aid to the long-suffering Afghan people is getting more difficult and dangerous. Taliban extremists have even declared open season on aid workers. In August, in one of the worst incidents of violence, insurgents shot dead three female international aid workers employed by the International Rescue Committee. A Taliban spokesman justified their murders by calling the women -- a Canadian, a British-Canadian and a Trinidadian-American -- foreign spies. The attack occurred just outside the capital, Kabul.

Nineteen aid workers have been killed this year, more than during the whole of last year. More telling is the number of attacks on aid agencies: at least 84 so far this year. It is one reason aid agencies are fitting additional security gates to their well-guarded Kabul compounds and wearing bulletproof vests when venturing on to city streets.

Scott Gilmore, executive director of the Canadian-based Peace Dividend Trust, says there is no debate: the security situation has gravely worsened since 2005. As head of a mid-size aid agency focusing on income generation for Afghans, Gilmore says special security measures have to be used to ensure not just the safety of foreign staff but also Afghan employees.

"Our national staff go out (from Kabul) sterile: no cell phones with Western contacts, no business cards. We go to extraordinary lengths to avoid anyone knowing where we go or what we do," he says.

Another foreign aid agency, which asked not to be identified, tells The Australian it was recently forced to withdraw one of its female foreign staff members from a field office back to Kabul over concerns she was being set up for kidnapping.

"We don't know whether it was Taliban, ISI (Pakistan's intelligence service) or criminals," the aid official says.

While Australia's sole AusAID official remains hunkered down behind barbed wire at Camp Holland, others are achieving results. The Peace Dividend Trust recently negotiated more than \$200 million in military-outsourced logistical support, earmarked for Dubai and Pakistan, to be spent in Afghanistan, creating thousands of jobs. "We also managed to get the (US) military to shift its bottled water contract to a local company, a \$30 million contract creating hundreds of jobs but, more importantly, delivering to the Afghan people a tangible peace dividend that they would not have had otherwise," says Gilmore, a former senior diplomat.

"I consider that a big success. There is no military solution in Afghanistan. In the long term, stability and peace will come from economic recovery. It's only when these Afghans have jobs and a livelihood that you are going to be able to draw them away from fighting for the Taliban or corruption or general criminality."

This week Australian Defence Force chief Angus Houston and Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon have backed Carleton-Smith's concerns. Houston "agrees that the insurgency in Afghanistan will not be resolved by military force alone", a defence spokesman says. "Ultimately, progress in security is sustainable only with progress in governance and development. This requires the co-ordinated effort of the international community, with increasing ownership by the Afghan people."

And that is the problem, according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Raspal Khosa. With only 50,000 troops deployed, the ISAF lacks sufficient strength on the ground to achieve a strategic victory, Khosa tells The Australian.

"It's really going to be a containment strategy that they (the ISAF) are going to pursue and they're really starting to put out the (diplomatic) feelers now," he says. "There's been a lot of reports put out now that they are wanting to talk to the Taliban. There is that realisation the Taliban is a political reality and you have got to deal with (it)."

But just who is the Taliban? Khosa says the name covers a diaspora of shifting allegiances and groups. Among the more prominent groups with links to al-Qa'ida that are being targeted by US special forces is the Haqqani network based in eastern Khost, its name derived from former Taliban minister and army chief Jaludin Haqqani.

Hezbi Islami is led by veteran insurgent Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, trained by the ISI which, it is alleged, retains close connections with his former paymasters.

During the Soviet era, Hekmatyar received millions of dollars in funding from the US in support of his fearsome anti-Russian mujaheddin. The US now wants him dead.

"And then there is Baitullah Mehsud's Tehrik-e-Taliban, the powerful south Waziristan commander who most recently has been demanding a halt to Pakistani military operations on his turf," Khosa says. "They are more closely connected with al-Qa'ida and they're the groups the Americans are going to have real difficulty in dealing with. Also involved are the Iranians and Pakistanis."

The US accuses Iran of stoking the re-energised Taliban insurgency by providing specialised ordnance such as armour-defeating, shaped explosive charges for use in deadly roadside bombs, the insurgents' weapon of choice.

The fear of a unified Taliban movement based just across the porous Afghan frontier in Pakistan's lawless northwest tribal region is one reason for the increase in US attacks using pilotless drone aircraft. The Pakistan Government has reacted with fury at the cross-border incursions, which have plunged relations between Washington and Islamabad to a new

low.

"There is a suggestion that militant groups are now coming into the western side of Afghanistan. The Taliban has aggressively been moving into provinces such as Herat," Khosa says of the spreading insurgency.

Into this dangerous mix is a booming narcotics industry fuelling the Taliban.

"Narcotics is paying for the insurgency. The narcotics opium trade is correlated geographically with militant activity," Khosa says. Production is booming in the two least secure provinces, Helmand and Kandahar.

Afghanistan is the world's biggest producer of illicit opium and last year harvested 8200 tonnes, double the most conservative estimate of global annual consumption.

The problem has become so bad that one Paris-based think tank, the Senlis Council, is proposing legalising opium production for medical purposes on the debatable presumption that it would lower the price of prescription drugs while offering the only practical solution to rolling up what is a growing \$4 billion narco-economy.

The US, Britain and Australia are firmly opposed to the initiative.

Meanwhile, the first signs of international fatigue with Afghanistan are beginning to show. One week before Canada goes to the polls, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a conservative in the John Howard mould, called for more focus to be given to training Afghan security forces so they can take on greater responsibility.

Of all the NATO countries, Canada has been most in the thick of the fighting in the south, with 2500 troops deployed in war-torn Kandahar province. Since 2002, 97 Canadian soldiers have been killed in action, most from roadside bombs. It's no surprise that most Canadians oppose the Afghanistan mission.

For Kevin Rudd, Afghanistan has been an easier sell. Compared with the Canadians and British there have been far fewer body bags; only six, so far. Even so, a recent Lowy Institute survey showed increasing unease among Australians about the conflict.

On the positive side, a 300-strong Australian special forces task group has been achieving good results in helping stabilise the security situation in Oruzgan, including tactical successes targeting Taliban leaders.

With more than 500 troops based in Oruzgan, including the special forces, the ADF believes that, along with the 1600-strong Dutch contingent, there are enough troops to contain the insurgency.

"The Afghanistan project will be successful if we properly resource and co-ordinate the military, civil and political efforts," Fitzgibbon says. "While we're doing very good work in Oruzgan, in the military sense and reconstruction sense, progress across the country is, at very best, very slow."

That is of course little comfort to the ADF, which would like nothing more than a sympathetic aid agency to set up at Tarin Kowt hospital. It would stand as a confidence builder. For now, the Defence Department is reluctant to speculate on why its pride and joy is underused for the most part.

"Security in Tarin Kowt, as with many areas in southern Afghanistan, remains a concern. Defence will not comment on specific assessments for operational security reasons," was all it would say yesterday.

Mark Dodd is The Australian's defence and foreign affairs writer.

Copyright 2009 News Limited. All times AEDT (GMT + 11).