

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [Afghanistan](#), HC 994

Tuesday 28 January 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- Lieutenant-General James Everard
- Vincent Devine
- Neil Crompton

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Members present: Mr James Arbuthnot (Chair); Mr Julian Brazier; Mr James Gray; Mr Dai Havard; Mr Adam Holloway; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Sir Bob Russell; Bob Stewart; Ms Gisela Stuart; John Woodcock

Questions 1-69

Witnesses: **Lieutenant-General James Everard**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations), Ministry of Defence, **Vincent Devine**, Director Operational Policy, Ministry of Defence, and **Neil Crompton**, Director for Afghanistan and South Asia, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Defence Committee's inquiry on Afghanistan. I will begin by asking you to introduce yourselves, although this will not necessarily be the first time you have appeared in front of the Committee.

Lieutenant-General Everard: My name is Lieutenant-General James Everard. I am a three-star in the MOD, responsible for military strategy and operations.

Vincent Devine: I am Vincent Devine, director of operational policy in the Ministry of Defence.

Neil Crompton: I am Neil Crompton, director for Afghanistan and South Asia in the Foreign Office.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. You are all welcome.

Because of the withdrawal of our combat forces this year, we are now coming to the end of an operation that has lasted for several years. Throughout that process, this Committee has taken evidence from the Ministry of Defence and from other Departments. The evidence we have received has always had a general tone: that things are not only going well—better than they are portrayed in the press in this country—but looking good for the future. The tone has been optimistic, but there seems somehow to have been a shortage of empirical evidence

to back up the optimism in the evidence we have been given. Some people might say that tactical successes have been achieved by the Armed Forces, and in some cases other Departments, but that the strategic success we have been hoping for is less secure.

I suggest, therefore, that we are coming to the time for a straightforward historical analysis of what has happened—of what we have done well and what we have done badly—as recommended by this Committee in our report on the defence and security review to come. I begin by asking: is there an appetite in the Ministry of Defence for a historical discussion of what we have done well and what we have done badly? That is your starter for 10.

Lieutenant-General Everard: I have an opening statement, but perhaps I will return to it after responding to the question, if you are happy for me to do so; it might help frame some of our discussions. In answer to the point about desire to learn lessons, let me say that I think there is a huge appetite to do that. Through the doctrine centre and PJHQ we have amassed an enormous amount of evidence. We used to call it “lessons learned,” but we recognised that on many occasions we were repeating the same mistakes, so we re-labelled it “lessons identified,” in recognition of the fact that there is a process for taking the data and genuinely learning from it. Across defence, and certainly across the Army, there is a desire to do that, both in real time and in future.

Q3 Chair: Do you intend that process of identifying lessons to be made public?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I would have thought that, because what we learn will be incorporated into our doctrine, which we share with many of our allies and partners, it would by necessity be made public.

Q4 Mr Gray: What you say about learning lessons is easily said, and would have been said by the military throughout all the generations. It doesn’t actually mean anything. Will you be doing a strategic-level assessment of how well we have done in Afghanistan, of whether the aims and ambitions were laid out properly, and of whether they were achieved? Will you be publishing that bit?

Vincent Devine: On the first question, there is a huge appetite within the Department, indeed across Government, to learn lessons from our operation in Afghanistan. That appetite has been there for at least three, four, or maybe five years, and there was a period of real self-examination, almost self-flagellation, around 2009 and 2010—quite rightly, as we concluded in capitals, not just in London, that we had not proceeded in the most optimal way in this operation. So there is a huge appetite for lessons to be drawn, at the tactical level, in procedural issues, and at the operational level. In due course, I am sure there will be a Government and departmental appetite from Ministers, officials and military officers for strategic lessons learned.

You will understand that the extent to which we make those lessons public formally will be a matter for Ministers. But I could talk about some examples of areas where we are doing very thorough work to capture the lessons, to drive the changes that we have made in theatre into our doctrine and into our capabilities, and to ensure that things that we now do rather well in Afghanistan we can continue to do well in the future. So I think there is a genuine appetite.

Q5 Mr Gray: I hope that you won’t mind me saying that you would say that, wouldn’t you? Obviously, it would be a bit odd if you said: “We’re not going to pay any attention whatsoever to this and that.” That would be a very strange statement. Let me put it differently. Let me be very direct about it. A very senior serving officer, in a private conversation with me this week—he shall remain nameless for obvious reasons—said Afghanistan was a strategic catastrophe. Would you endorse that description?

Vincent Devine: Absolutely not, and I cannot think what position of authority he thinks he can make that statement from. Afghanistan is an ongoing operation in a military and political sense. So I absolutely refute that observation.

Q6 Chair: Mr Devine, you said that you would be able to give some examples. Would you like to do that now?

Vincent Devine: Yes. Without going into too much detail, one of the issues from which we have learned a great deal—I personally have spent a great deal of time in Afghanistan—is detention and exploitation of our opponents, the insurgents. We have learned a lot from issues at the policy level of what is the correct overall approach for the Government to take. Not least through our long-term engagement with the courts. I think we have developed a much greater understanding of the legal issues around detention.

We have made some mistakes, not just in Afghanistan, but more pertinently in Iraq. We have learned from them. We have completely revised our procedures and our training, and that has all been written into doctrine. We have set up new structures to manage that, within both the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence. I co-chair a steering group that reports directly to the vice-chief. And across Government, I work very closely with Neil's people in the Foreign Office.

We have also made some real technical advances. You may have had the opportunity to visit our forensics facilities or see our biometrics capabilities in action in theatre. All that has been developed and is being held for Afghanistan. We are now doing quite detailed work to ensure that the doctrine and the procedures are pushed into our SOPs, that we find a home in the Armed Forces for these capabilities—the biometrics and forensics — and that we continue to exercise the challenges of detention, just as we exercise the challenges of indirect fire or close air support.

That is an area that I have spent a lot of time on. I think I can report to our Secretary of State with some confidence that we are capturing the lessons and, more importantly, implementing them. We need to be honest. The test will only come when we try to do this again, as to whether we have really captured and mainstreamed the lessons. But that is just one example that I have spent a lot of time on.

Lieutenant-General Everard: If CJO were here, he would talk about the very good lessons—the capture process—that feed into the urgent operational requirements space and the changes in tactics, techniques and procedures that we use when deployed. One of the big challenges for the Army now, as it looks to reset for contingency, is looking at this massive capabilities that we have absorbed over the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and working out which of those are now going to come into our core structures and change the way we fight in the future. Our first brigade, 12 Brigade, completed a full training year last year, and absolutely the point of that process was this challenge. I think we learned huge lessons just in that one year, and I am sure we will continue to do that into the future.

Q7 Mrs Moon: There are lots of different levels at which we need to learn lessons. As a country, we need to learn lessons for our Armed Forces, but we have also operated in alliance, as part of NATO and as part of the international security assistance force. Are we going to be looking at those different levels as well? What are the important messages and sharing that we need to do at that level? How can we improve co-operation and partnership, given that it is very clear that that is where we are going? Next time we are in a very serious operation, we are going to be in partnership, and that is the sort of partnership we are going to be in. How do we make sure that they work much more efficiently and effectively at that level, too?

Lieutenant-General Everard: You are absolutely right. The fact is that collaboration and complementary activity is where we see ourselves going in the future, not just within NATO, but perhaps in support of our slightly non-traditional partners like the AU. With our core defence alliance, NATO, the structures exist and work well. I understand that NATO will, as it normally always does at the end of a long campaign, conduct its own internal review to see how those can be improved. I am sure we will be part of that process.

Q8 Ms Stuart: I may be doing an extraordinary injustice to you, but you look to me like three witnesses who, as the French would say, are not comfortable in their skin. So far, I hear about procedure, but I have not really learned anything. Just to aid me on how you will learn, tell me how open you will be with your colleagues in the Department for International Development as to what should not be done and what might be done again. How open will you be with your colleagues in NATO? I hope that you will not just say, “I trust that we will be part of it.” Am I really so misguided to think that you are to be one of the leading partners of this review within NATO? Just to keep me happy, tell me one thing that you would not do again, so that I can hold on to one thing that is not procedure.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Perhaps the reason we are uncomfortable is that in terms of what we deliver, we are delivering on the operational design and the planning theatre. What you are asking about at the moment are those high-level political negotiations and ministerial discussions that lead us to implement a plan. I feel slightly that I am out of my space in that area. In terms of your question, I would say that we have a mechanism in Whitehall within the MOD. I chair something called the Defence Crisis Management Organisation, which brings together all those partners we operate with, across Government, all the time, in a battle, which I think has led to better understanding and co-operation across Whitehall than people have seen for many years. The fact that we have so many nations that come to see us to understand how that process works, and indeed how the National Security Council process works, tells me that in terms of our coherence of understanding, we have a very good model. That has evolved over time from the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Again, there is a huge focus on making sure that the NSC evolves to be better still. I think we have grasped that nettle of ensuring that cross-Government collaboration—working together—is a real priority.

Q9 Chair: What would you not do again in future?

Ms Stuart: Just one thing you would not do again.

Vincent Devine: I am happy to answer that question. You know that this is a difficult road to start down. The discussions that NATO had as an alliance around 2009 and 2010 are a matter of record, much of it within the public domain. The report that General McChrystal produced on how we needed to evolve the campaign rapidly is, I think, also a matter of record, though I am not sure it was put into the public domain. I think all of those would be pretty much endorsed by the United Kingdom, as they were at the time. A specific thing we would do differently: I think we would have established the NATO Training Mission—Afghanistan and enhanced our focus on building up Afghan National Security Forces more rapidly if we were to approach this campaign again.

Chair: Just to reset the tone slightly, while I started with the suggestion that the general tone of the evidence has always been optimistic, I do want to draw the attention of you, the Committee, and the public, to the fact that there has been an enormous amount to be proud of in what we have done and achieved in Afghanistan. We must not forget that while we as a Committee do our job of trying to hold the Ministry of Defence—and the Foreign Office in this case as well—to account for the things that could be done better in the future.

Q10 John Woodcock: May I push you a little further on what you said about the process of self-flagellation, as you described it, in 2009? That process obviously began four years ago, which would suggest that there have been significant changes, with lessons learned and implemented. Is that the case? Can you expand on that? I know you have just mentioned the two reports, but can you say what has been done and what is still to be done?

Lieutenant-General Everard: At the operational level, in many ways our whole doctrine has been written in the way we fight. Five years ago, a company commander would not recognise what he owns now, in terms of the depth of capability.

Q11 John Woodcock: Forgive me if I am making an ignoramus of myself, but give us a description of what is different.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Five years ago, a standard rifle company would have been between 100 and 120 people with an assortment of small arms weapons, from heavy machine guns down to rifles and pistols. These days, a company commander can expect to have a much bigger company of between 140 and 150, because specialists in counter-IED and electronic warfare have now come into his organisation, and there are links to very sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and target-acquisition suites that he can call on at a very low level. Before this campaign started, in the days of the cold war, those activities were executed and called for at three-star level; now they happen almost at the point of contact on the ground. Companies are much bigger, much more capable and much more sophisticated organisations, and the doctrine has to be rewritten so that a company commander understands from his training how to operate with that, which has been done.

Coming back to Vincent's point, a huge amount has gone on within the joint environment to ensure that people are better prepared, better set and better equipped to fight in the environment in which they have found themselves. As I said earlier, the challenge for us now is taking that hugely sophisticated machine and working out what it needs to look like for the next challenge.

Q12 Bob Stewart: I want to follow up the Chairman's point and your answer in detail. Speaking as someone who was a soldier back in the days when the world was black and white and we had muskets, I have not seen one lesson that has gone right the way through the Army, and certainly not from Afghanistan. The level of training and the expertise of our soldiers is now second to none. The incredible concentration on the individual soldier is now enormous, and I have never seen anything like that expertise and professionalism. In my day, we were in the Stone Age by comparison. That is one lesson that has come through. Forget about the command and control and forget about officers and NCOs; the individual man is quite outstanding, which is a result of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Yes. I think if you took every function and area in which we operate, such as medical for example, the level of medical training that is now held within a section is hugely more capable than it was 10 years ago. We perhaps learned those lessons in world war two and Korea and have forgotten them.

Q13 Bob Stewart: They are almost all combat medics, aren't they?

Lieutenant-General Everard: We are seeking to minimise the attrition and casualty rates of the Afghan National Security Forces, and they have just completed a programme to train very nearly 12,000 front-line combat medics because they need the same level of capability that helped to reduce our overall casualties.

Q14 Mr Holloway: General, when we leave, what will we have achieved in Helmand province?

Lieutenant-General Everard: When I look at Helmand province from a military point of view, our military objective was to create effective Afghan National Security Forces, and security architecture that could hold the ring when we went and could create the space for good governance to thrive. I think the evidence shows that actually, the ANSF is nearly 35,000 strong in Regional Command Southwest—bigger than our NATO footprint ever was—and is operating hugely effectively. There are some figures I was going to quote in my opening statement: I find it interesting now that we absolutely rely on it to conduct operations—97% of all operations are planned and executed by it alone. It now leads on 90% of its own training. When you look at some of the complex operations it has conducted, including incorporation of air and air assault, this is our proficient machine that I think will hold the ring. In that end state, I think we have been successful.

Q15 Mr Holloway: So you do not think the South and East are going to go back to the Taliban over the next couple of years? You are confident that our success will be—

Lieutenant-General Everard: I was interested to read the Asia Foundation Survey that came out quite recently. Having done quite a wide trawl, it gave a figure that 84% of people living in Helmand—clearly, it is a poll—believe that the country is moving in the right direction. I think there is a level of confidence there that perhaps we have not seen before.

I was also interested to see the recent downturn in the number of security incidents that we are seeing year on year. If you compare 2013 to 2012, both the Afghan and the ISAF evidence show a 25% reduction in the number of security incidents. These are trends, and it is probably too early to read too much into it, but I think the fact that you now have Afghans in the lead in terms of security is changing the nature of the fight. In large part, not so many insurgents are prepared to engage in these sorts of operation.

I come back to the point that I think we have created the space through the work of the provincial reconstruction team, pulling those strands for good government. I hope that Helmand will thrive, but I have a note of caution. You accuse us, quite rightly, of being over-optimistic, and that is clearly a fault. If you look at the history of Helmand province, in large parts of the rural area, there has probably never been a very strong Government presence. As the ANSF chooses to focus its resources where it thinks it they will have the best effect, I am sure that means some areas will not have a presence that will maintain strong security. In that case, is that ground ceded to the Taliban, or will it revert to localism and go back to some of the tribal structures that have existed for years? I do not think it can be black and white, but I think we have created a space to give them a good opportunity.

Q16 Chair: Yesterday, General Karimi said that he thought the Afghan National Security Force would be able to maintain control, and that the Taliban would not come back into power. Do you accept his assessment of what is going to happen in Afghanistan?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I do. General Karimi is a hugely talented and vastly operation-experienced commander. He looks at his deployed footprint—as I say, it numbers nearly 35,000 now down in the South-West—and I think he reckons he has the levers. I am mindful of the fact that we are still working very hard to close off some of those gaps, particularly in enabler support, but if we work to close those off and we are closing those gaps, I absolutely agree with his assessment.

Chair: We are dotting about a bit among lots of different subjects. I will call John Woodcock, and then we are going to try to get back into some form of structure here, although it has been very interesting to follow the evidence where it took us.

John Woodcock: Chair, you asked what I was about to ask, so please move on.

Q17 Chair: General Everard, I am going to ask a question. In your answer, perhaps you could incorporate what you wanted to say in your opening statement. What is your assessment of how Afghanistan has gone in 2013, and what is your prediction and prophecy—not that you are necessarily a prophet—of how it is going to go in 2014?

Lieutenant-General Everard: In that case, I will do a slightly tailored version of this, and then probably add a bit at the end. I recognise that you are asking for a brief assessment on the current security situation in Afghanistan and the challenges looking ahead to next year, recognising, as I hope everybody does, that the NATO combat mission comes to an end on 31 December, with NATO transitioning to a much smaller follow-on mission, Resolute Support, in which I hope the UK will play an important role.

As you know, the 49 nations that contribute to the International Security Assistance Force mission went into Afghanistan to remove AQ and prevent the country from being used as a platform for attacks across the world, including against the UK and UK interests. Today, AQ has no safe haven in Afghanistan and the number of AQ fighters remains low. Across the country, compared with the same period last year, Afghan reporting shows a significant reduction of 12% in overall security incidents over fighting season 13, including a reduction of IED attacks of 22%. The full ISAF end of year record of enemy-initiated attacks comparing 2012 with 2013 shows a 25% reduction in Regional Command South-West where the UK is based. All that is positive.

Of course, in addition to extending Government authority across the country, a key ISAF military strategic campaign objective has been and is the development of the structures required to maintain security in Afghanistan without the assistance of international forces. Again, I would argue that with ISAF support the ANSF has made some striking progress. The surge strength of 352,000 all up—ANA, air force and police—has largely been achieved. Manning sits at 98% and the trend is up. Recruiting remains very solid. Since assuming the lead for security on 18 June, the ANSF has successfully contained the Taliban throughout the latter half of fighting season 13, and grown in operational effectiveness and confidence. I will just repeat the figures: 97% of all operations are planned and executed by ANSF and they now lead on 90% of their own training.

It is that success that allowed us, in line with ISAF direction, to reduce numbers and shift quickly to a train, advise and assist role, which now includes a very focused effort this year to develop the institutions, systems and end-to-end processes necessary to sustain the ANSF ahead of full security transition. Indeed, the only unilateral UK operations that we now conduct are in support of our force protection, route clearance, sustainment and redeployment activity.

You asked about the future. I think there are challenges and opportunities that need attention. I would list them as follows: ANSF attrition levels; ANSF reliance on ISAF and US enablers; and further ANSF development in planning, programming, budgeting, acquisition and the better management of human resources is a challenge. Secondly, although the Taliban are not an existential threat to the Afghan Government or the ANSF, and 87% of the population view them negatively, they remain a potent threat and capable of contesting Government control in some rural areas, mounting high-profile attacks in others or inspiring lethal insider attacks.

Another challenge is the election in April 2014. We must as a priority maximise every opportunity to help the Afghan Government and the ANSF to deliver a credible, inclusive election, noting to date that planning is going well and the Independent Electoral Commission of Afghanistan has delivered 11 credible candidates, which again is positive.

Next, I mentioned redeployment. After considerable planning, we must now continue to deliver a complex redeployment plan, noting that so far the vehicles and major assemblies we have removed from theatre represent only 47% of the total number. Lastly, there is the transition to Resolute Support mission, where no decisions have been made on the final size of the UK footprint ahead of the bilateral security agreements and related status of forces agreement that will frame our freedoms and constraints.

In summary, we know that some form of political settlement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban is needed and that there are challenges ahead. We have to be cautious and remain flexible and continue to balance the operational requirements with our redeployment imperatives and force protection. What I think is clear is that we have made responsible and sustainable progress in the development of the ANSF. Again, the evidence shows that in virtually all tactical engagements, with often limited ISAF support, the Taliban have been overmatched by the ANSF. With just over 34,000 ANSF now deployed in Regional Command South-West, they generally do have that strength in depth. Critically, the ANSF are well set to support the elections, which is a key step towards a democratic future for Afghanistan.

In summary, looking back, there is evidence that the foundations are in place to give the Afghan Government what they need. Some of the trends would indicate that violence levels are coming down, and I think we are shaping up well for the elections and the period after that.

Chair: You talked about the tactical engagements where the ANSF were effective and successful. The questions we were asking earlier about lessons learned are questions that you tended to answer in terms of tactical lessons learned. We will want to know from the Ministry of Defence that there will be strategic lessons learned, and that there will be a date by which the Ministry of Defence will produce, probably for public consumption, the strategic lessons learned manual or whatever of the history of Afghanistan and our most recent deployment there, but I do not expect you to answer that now, because I do not expect that there is an answer now.

Q18 Sir Bob Russell: Mr Crompton, we have just had a military overview from the Foreign Office perspective. How would you describe the political situation in Afghanistan?

Neil Crompton: I would echo the positive remarks that the general made. If I look back to the things that we were worried about this time last year, 2013 was a very important year for the security transition. It was the first year in which the Afghan National Security Forces were going to be in the lead across the country, and I think the collective Whitehall assessment, and indeed the collective assessment of our allies and everybody in the US system, including the intelligence community, which has historically been a bit more pessimistic than the UK military, has been that the Afghan National Security Forces have performed better than expected, and that is a very positive thing. They have held their own against the Taliban, and that generates a lot of confidence in the political community.

The security transition is one of the big themes for this year. The other big theme is the political transition. We have the presidential election in April, which will see a successor to President Karzai elected. For us as diplomats, the collective Whitehall view was that it was very important that the elections took place on time. We thought it was important for Afghans to see that there was a plan that its political leaders were sticking to, and it was important for Afghans generally in terms of their political development to see that power can be transferred peacefully through the ballot box, which has not been a feature of Afghan history, or indeed in that part of the world generally.

This time a year ago, we were worried that the elections would be postponed for one reason or another. It was not clear that President Karzai would stand down. People were worried that the security situation would preclude elections. What we have now is a situation in which elections are taking place on time. All the bits that you need to support a good election, such as election laws, are in place. There are two electoral commissions—one to oversee the elections and one to rule on violations—and I think international observers will be there.

I do not want to give you the impression that this will be a west European election. It will be run according to the standards of the region, but there is a credible set of candidates. There is a real buzz in Afghanistan talking about the elections, and at this stage the result is wide open. I do not need to tell the people here that that is actually how elections are supposed to work. It has not always been a feature of life in south or central Asia, and in a sense that is a measure of success. There is a lot of optimism about the elections but, naturally enough, whenever there is a change of this sort, it creates uncertainty as well.

Q19 Sir Bob Russell: Would you like to clarify what you mean by the standards for the region in terms of elections?

Neil Crompton: If you look to the north, in central Asia there have not been many elections in recent years. If you look to the south, Pakistan held very important elections last year, but that was the first time in Pakistan's history that a democratically elected Government had served its full term and transitioned to another democratically elected Government. On Afghanistan itself, its political history I expect you all know better than I do. I think this will be the first time an elected Afghan President will be handing on to another elected Afghan President peacefully. In the regional context this is not a first time, but it is a newish event. It is not the experience of everybody and I think that will set the tone for the election.

Q20 Sir Bob Russell: So is the overview of the Foreign Office that the preparations for the forthcoming presidential elections are on schedule?

Neil Crompton: Yes.

Q21 Sir Bob Russell: And no hiccups anticipated?

Neil Crompton: Well, I think there could be—

Sir Bob Russell: I did say “anticipated”.

Neil Crompton: There are lots of things that we need to work on hard. The Afghans are working hard on the security plan. ISAF will do what they can to support that. If you had asked me a year ago what the big pieces were that need to be in place, I think we have ticked, or, more importantly, the Afghans have ticked all those boxes, with encouragement from us.

Q22 Sir Bob Russell: General Everard, what impact will the elections have on the draw-down of UK forces?

Lieutenant-General Everard: If I look at next year I see it in four quarters. At the moment, train, advise, assist and helping the Afghan national security force shape for an election is the priority, recognising at the same time that force protection and redeployment activities underpin these operations. You then have the elections themselves. How long will that last? Will there be one vote, or will it be a run-off? It could extend through until June. When those elections are successfully completed, I do see in our own mind a mental shift to a change in priority, when our priority becomes consolidation of our force and we look ahead to

the last stage of the redeployment and transition to whatever our Resolute Support mission becomes. I think the end of the elections is a key moment for us because it indicates a shift in direction.

Q23 Sir Bob Russell: My final question to you, General Everard is: will UK forces have any role in protecting polling stations during the elections?

Lieutenant-General Everard: Our role is, in extremis, to provide support to the Afghan security forces from the air and from the ground. Neil was talking about the preparation for the elections. There has been what we would call a war game—a tabletop exercise—with all the core commanders I know in Kabul, which has gone extremely well. People have got a lot of confidence in what they are doing. At the moment, there have been no requests to UK forces to support ANSF in that endeavour. Clearly, if events drove a requirement and the request was made, then that is what we are there for.

Q24 Sir Bob Russell: But as we approach the end of January, is the hope that UK forces will not be required to provide any protection at polling stations?

Lieutenant-General Everard: We will not be providing protection at polling stations.

Q25 Bob Stewart: A year ago, we weren't sure what was going to happen to President Karzai. Now we know he has declared he is standing down. What do you think he is going to do?

Neil Crompton: That is a very good question. We don't really know the answer to that. I think for now he is busy as President but also in trying to shape Afghan politics. He says when he tells us, and we take his comments at face value, that he wants to step back. I think that historically in Afghan politics, former leaders have tended to play an elder role. People defer to experience and age, so he may have a role in helping to shape difficult political or constitutional decisions in future—but I think he will be doing it from one or two steps removed. I really don't know the answer to your question.

Chair: There is life after.

Q26 Mrs Moon: Given the importance of these elections, would it not have been better if the UK had held back from drawing down until after the elections, so that we could be absolutely sure that the Taliban couldn't disrupt them and stop them taking place?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I will start with that. The more I look at this, the more I think the timeline that was set on the end of combat operations in December 2014 and the trigger points on transfer of security to Afghan national security forces have acted as a forcing function which has changed the dynamic on the ground. I fear that if we had waited in larger numbers we would not have seen the progress that we have seen elsewhere. I think it was the right approach, even though it carries risk.

Neil Crompton: I would echo that. In terms of lessons learned, what we have learned from our different conflicts is that in transition letting go is the hardest bit. If it does not feel uncomfortable for us then we are probably not doing something right.

Q27 Ms Stuart: I just want to check if I misheard or my memory is playing tricks with me. Lieutenant-General Everard, did you say at the beginning that you expected the Afghan Government to have to come to an accommodation with the Taliban?

Lieutenant-General Everard: No; I just can't see a long-term stable Afghanistan without at some stage having some form of accommodation with the Taliban. This is Neil's area of expertise, so perhaps he would like to come on to it.

Mr Holloway: That is Government policy.

Q28 John Woodcock: Can I ask about your current assessments of the Taliban thinking on the prospects of a peace settlement?

Neil Crompton: There is a range of views within the Taliban. There are probably some who still think they can march into Kabul—I think they are a minority. There are some who recognise realities—that they are not going to get back into Kabul or get back into power on their own terms—and have in a sense been putting out diplomatic feelers over the past two or three years. There have been various stillborn diplomatic initiatives, with the Taliban attending conferences in Japan and France and elsewhere. There was an attempt to establish a Taliban office in Doha last year, which would have acted as an official office for the Taliban political leadership.

I think that debate still takes place within the Taliban. For those who believe that they have to come to some sort of political accommodation with the authorities in Kabul, two factors will come increasingly into play. First, the nature of their insurgency is changing. A year ago 80% of Taliban attacks were directed against international forces. I think you can reverse those figures now: 80% of Taliban attacks are directed against Afghan national forces. It is much harder to sustain the idea of a jihad when you are fighting Afghans than when you are fighting western—US and UK—forces. We believe that is a cause of concern to some of the Taliban leadership.

Secondly, the elections and the departure of President Karzai also change the dynamic for them. Part of the Taliban narrative has always been that President Karzai was a western stooge who was imposed at the Bonn conference, which they did not buy into. President Karzai will depart in April and a totemic figure for them will have gone. The more thoughtful of the Taliban—those inclined to a political settlement—are thinking how to manage that challenge. Their political space and horizon are changing, but at what point a critical mass of the Taliban favours negotiations as opposed to military operations we don't know. It will be the task of diplomats to try to accelerate that process.

Q29 John Woodcock: Say they do, as a coherent group, favour negotiations, and say those negotiations are successful, can you give a necessarily very broad view on how realistic it is that that future state remains one in which the security danger to our country and others is lessened, making the overall intervention by the UK worthwhile? What kind of state would that look like? It would surely be quite different from the one we have today.

Neil Crompton: That is a big question. Perhaps President Karzai articulates a widely held Afghan view when he says that the Taliban would be eligible to run for elected office, provided they accept the political process, such as it is, and they could hold any elected office that they can secure enough votes for. My guess is that they cannot secure the presidency, but they may be able to secure some local positions. The appointed positions in the Government would be divided, much as they are now, on the basis of the power understandings between the different political and ethnic groups within Afghanistan. The Taliban know that they will need to break their relationship with al-Qaeda. Their leadership understand that, and we believe that they have discussed that among themselves. They know that that is something they will have to do at some point if they are to have a place in the political process and if they want to enjoy the benefits of international support which would flow to other parts of the country where they would not be popular.

Q30 John Woodcock: Those two last things you mentioned are clearly critically important. Are those within grasp—a possibility or a likelihood? What would you say?

Neil Crompton: The Taliban know that those are issues they have to deal with. We have seen evidence of them discussing among themselves the relationship with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan. It is a matter of public record now that they considered breaking with them before, but they didn't. The other issue they know they will have to deal with is that they will need—for want of a better term—a more progressive position on women's rights. It is not going to be a position that we would necessarily favour, but I think they know that they have to evolve if they are to remain relevant in a society that has changed greatly in the last 10 to 12 years. Those of us who monitor it closely have seen evolutions in their position; so the formal Taliban position now is that girls have a right to education. The formal Taliban position now is that women have a right to work. Neither of those were formal Taliban positions two years ago, so attitudes are evolving, but you are right: it would be a slightly different country from the one that was envisaged.

Chair: We will come on to those issues later.

Q31 Mr Havard: Together with a couple of colleagues, I had a meeting with the regional governor of Helmand a couple of weeks ago. It was very interesting to talk to him about the reconciliation, rehabilitation and reintegration processes at the various levels of the Taliban. You are talking about the Taliban at a fairly high level, but there were interesting reports about where that process was running right the way through, down to a district level. Maybe you would like to comment on that.

Can I ask you about the neighbours? We visited Pakistan back in November, and that was the last time we went out to Afghanistan as well. We had a discussion with them. Their military has changed and is changing. They have their own Taliban-type problem. They are obviously hugely important in terms of settlement for the longer term. Is there anything you would like to say about where you believe the neighbours are in that process, including the other neighbours: China, India, because of its relations with Pakistan and its influence there, and also Iran?

Neil Crompton: Sure. Just on reconciliation, I think what the governor told you is right. There are a number of processes running in parallel. At the highest level there is discussion among the Taliban leadership, largely based in Quetta, and some of their surrogate groups like the Haqqani group, about whether they can sustain the fight, whether they can win the fight or whether they should pursue their aims through political means. That debate is unresolved. Within the country itself a lot of local deals will be struck between people who are involved in the insurgency but do not necessarily take ideological instruction from Quetta. Local Afghan leaders and Afghan commanders and politicians will deal with these things in Afghan ways. We see some evidence of that already. Your conversation with the governor will have given you some insight into that. To outsiders this will look quite messy, but to Afghans it will look quite natural.

In terms of the neighbours, I will start with Pakistan. One of the reasons I share everyone's sense of optimism is that one of the positive things that has happened in the last two years has been an improvement in Pakistan-Afghan relations. That has taken place for a number of reasons. Pakistan always argued that for there to be a settlement or political stability in Afghanistan it needed to be inclusive, so it needed to involve the Taliban. That view wasn't the international consensus until the Bonn conference in December 2011, when United States and ISAF nations explicitly backed that proposition. The Pakistanis began to see that there was a proposition that they could support, and at the same time, as you alluded to, their own security problems at home have intensified, so they have a terrible and deepening insurgency. Increasingly, the Pakistani army looks west—mostly it now cuts its

teeth fighting the insurgency, rather than worrying about India. There has been a growing realisation, shared by both the security services and the civilian establishment in Pakistan, that you cannot resolve the insurgency in Pakistan without a greater degree of stability inside Afghanistan.

What we have seen over the last year or two is a thickening dialogue between the Afghan and Pakistani Governments about how the peace process might advance. They are beginning now to discuss some quite specific steps which will allow the Afghans and Taliban to get talking. I think there is still a long way to go in that, and it is a relationship that has a lot of historical mistrust, but from where I sit, Pakistan's overall position is a constructive and very important one as we go into 2014 and 2015.

With the other neighbours, we find an unusual confluence of positions. As General Everard said, the end-of-2014 deadline focused everybody's minds in different ways. We are in an unusual situation now where countries as diverse as Russia, China, Pakistan, India and some of the central Asian states are all advising President Karzai that he should sign a bilateral security agreement with the United States, because they would like the international presence to remain for a little longer. We see some evidence of countries such as China doing slightly more to help in the security field—for example, training Afghan police. They are also doing things that we want them to do, like trying to help Afghanistan develop its mining sector.

I would put the Iranians broadly in that camp, as another country whose interest lies in stability in Afghanistan. We hope very much that the easing of tensions between Iran and the international community over nuclear fuel will have a beneficial knock-on effect and allow for a resumption of some of the co-operation we had ten years ago.

Q32 Mr Havard: And the Russians?

Neil Crompton: The Russians are in a similar place. They have been telling President Karzai in no uncertain terms that they think he should sign a bilateral security agreement. President Putin famously told President Karzai in Shanghai last year that he had lots of problems with US foreign policy, but he didn't have any problems with what they were doing in Afghanistan and he would like them to stay. Russia offers us lots of advice on avoiding the mistakes that they made.

Q33 Mr Havard: Lots of bandits talking to one another to come to an accommodation—lovely. I want to ask you about the bilateral agreement with the United States and what happens if they don't get one.

Vincent Devine: My understanding is that if we don't have a bilateral security agreement between the United States and Afghanistan, there will be no significant US presence. There will therefore be no NATO mission and I expect there will be a very limited UK presence. That has been the Government's position throughout. It is not the scenario we are planning against.

Q34 Mr Havard: The MOD tells me that it is not planning against independence in Scotland, either.

May I ask you about that sequence? The American agreement is obviously the main thing. As you say, there would be no NATO mission without it. There are plans, however, for a NATO mission at the moment, and the UK will have bilateral discussions at some point. Presumably they will be roughly in that order. We have declared that we are going to train, but we have not said what else we might do. The NATO mission as I understand it, however, is to train, advise and assist—whatever that might mean. We saw ourselves the assistance

that the Afghan forces might need—extra enablers and so on. That is one thing. I was told two years ago that there would be training, a continuing counter-terrorism mission and then it would be something that talked about supporting the fielded force—which are roughly the same elements as the NATO mission.

I want to be very clear about this question of where the neighbours are and those relationships. You are talking about something that trains people and assists them to do their job. Alongside it, there is still going to be continuing counter-terrorism missions of some sort, either more in concert with the neighbours or not. That is going to be very difficult to talk about publicly—I appreciate that—but can we be clear about what the structure of the relative agreements is likely to look like? Something that just allows the Americans to have forces in the country is one thing, but there are other questions about what the missions will be able to do relative to one another.

Lieutenant-General Everard: I think this is hugely difficult, because as I said in my opening statement, we believe that the freedom and constraints of the operation in a whole raft of areas will flow from the BSA and the related SOFA. As Vincent said, our planning assumption at the moment remains that it will be signed at some stage, and our options are planned around that. The NATO Secretary-General has laid out a vision for what he sees the resident support mission looking like. He has talked about a strong core in Kabul and a number of hubs and spokes out in the field to continue that support that you have talked about.

I think we have to wait and see where this goes. I don't think anybody is yet in the space of thinking about UK bilateral agreements, because that would undermine everybody's position in relation to the BSA and the SOFA.

Q35 Mr Havard: So we wait and see what happens with that first and then we have the elections, and we have this discussion later?

Lieutenant-General Everard: Yes. Recognising that our contribution is going to be in Kabul, primarily centred on the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, which we were asked to commit to early—and we have done so, within a NATO framework—I would argue that actually those other contributions that sit as choices for Ministers can afford to wait for a time yet.

Q36 Chair: The implication of what you are saying is that the delay in signing the bilateral agreement is not having much effect on the withdrawal of British forces. Is that correct?

Lieutenant-General Everard: Correct.

Q37 Bob Stewart: General, I am going to ask you about the security situation, both in Helmand and nationally in Afghanistan. Can we quickly wrap up the national security situation: what is your impression of that at the moment?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I would caveat this with the fact that a lot of the data we are now receiving is coming from the Afghan security forces themselves. Whereas one could have complete faith in the ISAF product, clearly we are getting some of this slightly second hand, but I think the metrics show that the decrease in security incidents that we are seeing in RC South-West is pretty much replicated across the whole country, with the exception of RC East, which is still down, but is much less down¹.

¹ Note from witness: The metrics show that the decrease in security incidents that we are seeing in RC South-West is pretty much replicated across RC South which, with the exception of RC East, account

I come back to the Taliban. We know what their objectives were for fighting season 13 because they have now published them, but they fell well short of those and have been largely pushed out from the populated areas—hence the fact that a lot of the fighting takes place where not many of the people live. I also come back to the point that I think you see an ANSF that is growing in confidence. The picture is good.

If I can come back to the enabler point, we of course recognise that there are certain areas where they still lack the capability to stand on their own. That is a priority for COMISAF and the force this year. The most obvious one that people talk about is air, but it is interesting that when you drill into air, there is a capability there that is beginning to look quite impressive.

Q38 Bob Stewart: Let's go back into the comfort zone that we have in Helmand. I am going to ask you three questions, and you can take them as you wish. First, what do you think of the situation in Helmand now? What are the current priorities for our forces in Helmand—obviously, working with others? Finally, I am not going to ask you whether it is mission accomplished; I am going to ask you what you think our mission was, and how you think it is turning out. Those are the three questions; answer them in the way you wish.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Vincent might want to comment, but in answer to your first question, the situation in Helmand is stable, which is good. In terms of our priorities, I think I set them out. At the moment, they are: train, advise and assist, and set the conditions for the elections in support of ANSF. That is going well. The planning is more detailed and thorough than we had expected at this stage, and that is good. At the same time—and underlining that train, advise and assist mission—we recognise our requirements to conduct a complicated redeployment force plan, which we continue to get on with, while ensuring that our force protection remains a priority. It is those three things of train, advise and assist—clearly, force protection underpins them—at the same time as we begin our redeployment. And is this “mission accomplished”—

Q39 Bob Stewart: I did not use that word.

Lieutenant-General Everard: No, but if you look at that military strategic objective that the military were given to create the security apparatus, I think you can say that that has been largely completed, recognising the shortfalls I talked about: those areas which we will continue to have to polish, even post-2014 in some regards. But in terms of the security structure, it is a job well done. In terms of the AQ threat, I think Neil has covered that. It is significantly diminished and we do not see a threat to the UK from Afghanistan.

Q40 Bob Stewart: This is my final question. As we withdraw from Helmand towards the end of the year, it will not be a classic withdrawal in contact, but a withdrawal with covering forces provided by ANSF as we withdraw—we are already starting that. Do you have any comment on how that is going and how you see it happening?

Lieutenant-General Everard: Clearly as we grow smaller our reliance on the Afghan National Forces increases, but what we have not done is take risks on our own force protection. David Capewell has used a phrase: stronger for longer; so in terms of the force protection envelope we leave around our forces right through to the last moment, that will continue to have close air support, the enablers to cue it, ISTAR, medical and all the things that you would expect. Recognise, as well, that we are expecting the three-star headquarters in Afghanistan to place our final movement in the context of a theatre plan, and there is a theatre reserve, just as we have our own UK reserve. The ANSF will have an important part

for the vast majority of all nationwide security incidents.

to play, because they are holding the Taliban at distance, but we are not reliant on them for our direct force protection.

Q41 Bob Stewart: So our responsibility here is to ask you to ensure that our soldiers are really well protected until the last moment, and your answer to that question is yes.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Yes.

Q42 Mrs Moon: Does security, and the mission accomplished, look different if you are a woman in Afghanistan, given that in the last six months we have had nine high-profile political leaders, police officers and human rights defenders murdered?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I might ask Neil to comment, but from our point of view, the opportunities for women look very different. When I look at our training academy up in Kabul, there are 30 places on each course reserved for women, and I understand that they are popular. You have three female vice-presidential candidates. I do not think that you would have found those sorts of events happening before we got there, but I think Neil is right when he talks about some people thinking that things have not changed and they can still march on Kabul. Those people still pose a threat to women, so I think the honest answer is: how you feel will depend on where you live in Afghanistan.

Neil Crompton: The obvious answer to your question is: yes, it probably does feel different as a woman. I go to a lot of conferences where, thankfully, leading Afghan women figures turn up and stress the importance of continuing to support women's international rights. There is a security dimension to this as well as a social dimension, but I do think the fact that Afghan society has so profoundly changed in the last 12 years gives us cause for hope. So many women and young girls have been educated since the international community became involved, and I hope that that will allow for enduring progress. One of the things that international donors have made clear to any Afghan Government is that the extent of international support will depend upon continued commitments in these areas—and a few other areas, of course.

Q43 Mr Gray: Just briefly, to interrupt the middle of the conversation, if you like. May I remind you of the Chairman's injunction at the beginning of this evidence session that all the briefings over the past 10 years that I am aware of have said consistently how frightfully well it is all going, and to ask you to differ from that? Every single thing you have said in this session so far about every single aspect and every single thing that has occurred in Afghanistan is that it is frightfully good, it is going jolly well, it is really outstanding and spiffing, top marks, jolly good.

Can you imagine any circumstance under which you as a senior serving officer, and Mr Crompton and Mr Devine as senior civil servants, come before the House of Commons Defence Committee and say, "Actually, I'm afraid to say that it is not going frightfully well."? Or are you just briefed? Are you just giving us the director of staff solution? "It is all going jolly well. Please carry on Sergeant Major." Or is there a way we can get a few problems out of you?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I think I gave you a list of challenges. I started off with ANSF attrition. You have a force that is losing 32% of its strength every year. That is not good news, and we need to work very hard on that. You are seeing far too many people do what is called "drop from role", going AWOL and staying away from their place of duty for more than 21 days than we would like. In all those cases we understand the nature of the problem. Any army wants a cycle of rest, training, operations. For a large part, the Afghans are just doing operations.

Q44 Mr Gray: But to interrupt rather rudely: the ANSF are not directly our responsibility. My question is whether the things that are our responsibility have gone wrong. You are right that the attrition in the ANSF is a bad thing and we will come back to that later in our evidence session. I am just puzzled by the notion. I am trying to imagine any circumstances in which people of your seniority would ever come before the Committee and admit that it has all been a foul-up. Is there any chance that that would ever occur, or will you always tell us that it is all jolly good?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I do not think we will always tell you that it is jolly good. I think it is the nature of the military that you play the cards you are given. I certainly think our deployed troops have played an often extremely difficult hand of cards extremely well. I inherit a set of cards and we play them as skilfully as we can. Again, I look at the direction of travel we are going with and I am satisfied with our progress. I agree with Vincent: I wish we had started training security forces earlier for longer. I wish some of the high-end capabilities they rather lack we had brought into them sooner rather than later. There are things that we wish we had done better. Overall, given where we are, there are reasons to be optimistic.

Q45 Mr Brazier: I want to come back to the Chairman's earlier point about whether lessons learned should be tactical or strategic. Everyone on this Committee thinks that the guys on the ground do a very brave and professional job, and most of us think that the outlook is a bit brighter than it was a couple of years ago, but do you really think, General, that the main lesson to be learned from Afghanistan is that we should have had more capabilities and technology at company level, that that was really what went wrong at the beginning?

Lieutenant-General Everard: No. Last time we spoke I was the assistant chief of the general staff. The major lesson for defence is that our forces were poorly structured for the campaign that we were to commit them to. Have we learned strategic lessons? I would like to think that through the work the Secretary of State has driven on Army 2020 you see a force that has been redesigned based on the lessons we have learned in Afghanistan.

You do not want a force just held for contingency; you need a force that goes out and engages in the world, so that we better understand it before we go to these places. I know that CDS used a quote in his recent speech that our greatest failure has been to try to change the world without understanding it first. That has been the big strategic lesson that we were poorly prepared in structure for the challenge that we faced. We recognise that the SDSR has to come and will decide how much resource goes into this area. In terms of structure, our forces have reconfigured to take account of that lesson. In large part that has been invisible to many people, but it has happened.

Q46 Mr Brazier: That is actually quite a good answer, if I may say so. Could I ask you to go back a little bit to the structure for lessons learned? The doctrine centre comes up every so often. Who and where is that now? The biggest problem we have had over the years and nobody is responsible for their predecessor's record. Who is now the custodian of lessons learned and where are they physically located? Who can we visit to say, "This is what we have learned from X, Y, Z and H. This is where we have stored the specific lessons from this campaign. This is where we can be certain that 10 years on we won't find ourselves reinventing the wheel"?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I attended a very good day at Shrivenham hosted by the doctrine centre about 10 days ago, which looked at future operational trends and at a larger piece of work designed to shape our thinking on the joint expeditionary force but also looking ahead to SDSR. Many of its starting points are rooted in the lessons we have learned from Iraq and Afghanistan. Did they hold up a tome on the lessons we have specifically learned from there? No, but I would be surprised if they don't have one. It might be

something I have to come back to you on. I am sure that there will be a product at that level with military lessons to be learned. On the point about strategy, we await the Secretary of State's direction.

Chair: We will now move on to the issue of narcotics.

Q47 Mrs Moon: We were going to lead on narcotics. How well do you think we have accomplished our task in relation to narcotics? What are the problems that we are leaving behind for Afghanistan in relation to narcotics? How much of the narcotics are being utilised by the Taliban to fund the insurgency?

Neil Crompton: I can give you a general answer. The lead for counter-narcotics lies with the Home Office. The honest answer to your question is that we have not achieved everything we set out to do. We made a real and determined effort to try to deal with this problem which affects us in the UK. We probably made lots of mistakes along the way. We have learned along the way when dealing with problems like this that they are a multi-generational problem; it involves a comprehensive approach which includes everything from law enforcement in the streets of London through to capacity assistance in the Afghan Government.

The recent UN figures which show that opium production is rising in Afghanistan have been very disappointing. What our Ministers, led by the Home Office, are collectively looking at at the moment is how we can continue to contribute to Afghan efforts to deal with the counter-narcotics problem when we draw down next year. I think for the Home Secretary this is a priority, but clearly we will not have as many forces or capabilities in country. For a very detailed answer you have to go to the Home Office.

On your question about links between the Taliban and opium production, the Taliban tax opium production in the areas that they control. It is a source of revenue to them. I think opinion is divided on how important it is as a source of revenue to them. Sometimes the idea that the Taliban are 90% dependent on opium production is overdone. The reality is that if they were not growing opium they would be taxing wheat production or some other crop. Clearly that is a cause of concern, but among the analytical community there is this debate about how significant a source of revenue it is for the Taliban.

Q48 Mrs Moon: I have some tolerance for your saying it is a Home Office lead, but this Committee has also been looking at the attack on Camp Bastion. One of the most jaw-dropping facts that came out of that was that right up to the fence of the British base were poppy fields. They were being allowed to flourish because of water run-offs from the British base. How real has any attempt been on behalf of the UK to tackle poppy production when we can tolerate fields growing outside the fences of our bases?

Neil Crompton: I confess that I had not heard that story about poppy fields on the run-off around the base at Bastion. Her Majesty's Government have spent large sums of money and devoted much effort to trying to deal with the CN problem. As you said at the beginning, for a long time we had the lead within the G8. The lead passed to the UN from 2010. A lot of money internationally, money from America and other western countries, has been spent on this and we have not had the results we've wanted.

Q49 Mrs Moon: It seems that a lot of money has achieved very little. Do you agree?

Neil Crompton: I think Ministers have said that. You would have to ask Ministers for a definitive assessment of that, but they have admitted that we haven't achieved everything that we set out to achieve.

Q50 Mrs Moon: Have we achieved anything?

Neil Crompton: Yes. We have made life more difficult for narcotics traffickers and made a lot of arrests. We have helped to develop the capacity of Afghan authorities to deal with this problem in the long term, but it really is a multi-generational problem that we will be dealing with for decades, I believe. I am not an expert on this, but that is my understanding of the experience of people who have been dealing with these problems in Latin America and elsewhere.

Q51 Mr Gray: I am very sorry to be so negative, but this is a lot of rot, isn't it? Our counter-narcotics operation in Afghanistan has been a total and utter, complete and abject failure.

Mrs Moon: Absolutely.

Mr Gray: There is more opium grown today in Afghanistan than has ever been grown in Afghanistan. The narcotics trade is thriving. Anything we have tried to do in Afghanistan has been a complete shambles. How can you sit here and mumble away about how it's all been frightfully good? It isn't, it's a disaster and catastrophe. Why can't we just admit to that and say we should never have wasted our time on the narcotics trade in the first place?

Lieutenant-General Everard: No, I think the figures speak for themselves and I have them here somewhere: the third consecutive year of growth, I think, in opium across Afghanistan. If you spoke to a deployed commander a number of years ago when we were operating in support of the Afghan Government in trying to help to eradicate some of these things, what you found is that it was an enormously unpopular policy because there was no alternative livelihood. It alienated communities against people who were trying to expand the writ of Government and, although I am absolutely no expert, I think just in terms of sequencing and dealing with Afghanistan's problems, this one slipped.

Q52 John Woodcock: Do you think it may get even worse in the short term after UK forces withdraw, or can it not really get any worse than it is at the moment?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I don't think there appears to be any restriction on people expanding their opium cultivation.

Q53 John Woodcock: So we are at rock bottom.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Pretty much. I don't know if we are at rock bottom—

Q54 Mrs Moon: So we have wasted our time and our money.

Lieutenant-General Everard: I again go back to Neil. We have left in place a much better Afghanistan counter-narcotics structure, both in terms of a deployable arm, particularly to try to take down those high-price drug barons, and in terms of the knowledge to deal with it, but I think it will have to find its place in Afghan Government priorities.

Q55 Mr Holloway: Since you mention drug barons, would it be fair to say that our partners in the Afghan political elite prosper far more from opium production than do the Taliban?

Neil Crompton: Certainly, some members of the Afghan Government are involved in the counter-narcotics trade.

Q56 Mr Holloway: Further, if in a couple of years' time, the south and the east are controlled by the Taliban, which is a pretty likely scenario if we are honest, do you think there will be more or less opium production in that region?

Neil Crompton: I really don't know the answer to that. It is an open question.

Q57 Mr Holloway: There wasn't much when they were in power.

Neil Crompton: It is much debated. When I was in Iran in 2001, the Taliban imposed a fatwa on opium production, but there is a lot of debate about their motivation. Were they trying to court international opinion, were they trying to drive the price up, were they doing it for pure reasons or nefarious reasons? I don't think anybody knows the answer to that. CN grows in places where there is ungoverned space and the antidote is to improve the capacity of the Afghan Government and create jobs.

Chair: Moving on to the status of the ANSF, there may be a few questions still to ask about this.

Q58 Mr Brazier: I think we have pretty much covered it. I shall just ask about niche capabilities. The most frequently mentioned item in conversation is support for IED work. They are happy to provide the teams, but the kit involves complicated maintenance and they could do with help with training on it and so on. Do we think we are going to continue to provide that, either directly or through contracts or whatever, after we leave?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I understand from CJO that our counter-IED support, particularly to our brigade within 215 Corps, has been pretty successful, through the number of people trained to use it and, of course, their own high-risk search operators and IED operators complementing that fact. At the moment, we have loaned IED equipment to them. I think there is still a decision on gifting and part of that is related to their ability to maintain it into the future. So it hangs there as a question to be answered, based on whether people come up with a different item of equipment that can do the same job but is easier to maintain. I always do counter-IED and medical together.

Mr Brazier: Medical is the second one, yes.

Lieutenant-General Everard: With medical, the story is a good one, because the role 2+ facility that the NSF established at Camp Bastion with our support has made genuine progress. It now takes all category Cs since December the year before last. Cat Bs, the more serious injuries, have started coming in since November last year, and it is now beginning to treat cat A casualties, the most seriously injured. The plan to move it from a role 2+ facility, which is surgical capability with some intensive care beds, to a regional hospital are coming to fruition, and that hospital will be established by July 2014. I know that there was huge concern when you spoke to the Secretary of State about 12 months ago, that people had not gone firm on the plan to establish this regional hospital. That has now been agreed and is progressing very well.

Mr Brazier: That is good news, but the former is clearly not resolved yet. The only other thing I would like to do for a moment is come back to my earlier questions. It would be helpful if you could come back to us in writing on the doctrine facility and how far it extends, because it might be something that we might be interested in finding out more about at a future stage.

Q59 Ms Stuart: On a very specific point, you said that you would have started the training earlier. Do you now regret that we did not invest sufficiently in foreign language

capacities among our own people? Neither the military nor the Foreign Office were really training up people and we were heavily relying on interpreters.

Lieutenant-General Everard: I do, but set within the context that none of us really thought that we were going to Afghanistan. Therefore, if we were learning languages, I am not sure that Pashto and Dari would have been top of the list. Again, if you go to Army 2020, it places a premium on people becoming area specialists, being culturally aware and learning the languages. It is difficult. I was in the era of the Balkans and I am now surrounded by people who speak Serbo-Croat and haven't used it for near on 16 years, because we have been going to other places. I absolutely think the point is right. We should develop better language skills for the places that we think we are going. The art here is to get it right.

Q60 Ms Stuart: I am afraid that doesn't wash. I was told exactly that in 2005. I was told it would take two years to train someone up to have sufficient skills. That was in 2005. It would have served you well.

Lieutenant-General Everard: What we have done, for example, is we know that the Middle East is going to be an area of importance to the UK into the future, so we are training more people in Arabic than we used to. Are we training more people now than we have done before in Pashto and Dari? No, we are not.

Q61 Ms Stuart: You misunderstand me. In 2005 I was told there was no point in starting the training because it would take two years.

Vincent Devine: I think that is the right lesson. It is important that we try to learn lessons that is, but not that we should now all go and learn Pashto and Dari. Just as following Iraq perhaps we drew some of the wrong lessons about the capabilities we might need to bring into the Armed Forces, such as the ability to repair oil infrastructure. We talked earlier about the really strategic lessons we have learned. One was that we needed to improve our understanding of an operation before we embarked upon it. That is well understood. Another was that we simply needed to be more adaptable and more responsive once we were in an operation. That includes things like ensuring that it is genuinely the main effort for the Department or that the training syllabus and deployment training is more suited to that operation. I think we understand that. That is about adaptability, not about identifying five years in advance the language that you might need for some unforeseen operation.

Lieutenant-General Everard: You are absolutely right. We were slow. I know of cases in my own division of young officers who came back with very good reports about the way they had got on with the Afghan National Security Forces, who had made huge efforts to learn the language and be culturally aware and who were keen to go back and do another tour, yet we did not let them, because it did not match their career progression; if we did so, they would have been career failed. We now have, we hope, a mechanism emerging from work going on at the moment that will get round that and offer people a career in what the Americans would call foreign liaison service—I am not sure we have really come up with a name for it yet.

Chair: That is a very useful lesson learned that we can take away from this.

Q62 Mrs Moon: Before I go into my final set of questions, can I ask a very niche question in relation to hospitals? Who is doing the nursing in the hospitals, and how are you training them? This may be a question for DFID rather than the FCO. Culturally, nursing in Afghanistan has not been a woman's profession—or a man's. Is that something that you are working on?

Lieutenant-General Everard: Again, if you are happy, I will come back to you. I know that our medical services are mentoring Afghan medical services at both doctor and nurse level, but I do not have a gender breakdown or know how that is being done.

Q63 Mrs Moon: Thank you. That would be very helpful. What role do you think our forces are going to play post-2014? What are we going to be doing?

Lieutenant-General Everard: We won't have anybody down in the south; that mission will have completed. As I said, we have so far committed to the Afghan National Army Officers' Academy, and everything else is as yet undecided pending the ministerial choice. It will not be decided until they see the freedoms and constraints that flow from the BSA and the SOFA.

Q64 Mrs Moon: How are we going to protect our people who are left behind? How will we make sure they are safe?

Lieutenant-General Everard: Take the Qargha Academy, where we are based. Our numbers, which have been largely approved by Ministers—I say “largely approved” because they may increase if others leave as a result of the BSA—absolutely take account of the need to look after our own people. Again, this area is under discussion. The drive out to Qargha—I do not know if you went to Qargha, or if you drove it or flew it, but if you drive it, it is a potentially difficult and dangerous route. Therefore, you would wish to have the ability to use aviation. In the future, if others at Qargha have aviation, we might not need it. If they do not, we will have to insert it into our force package, so I think our final force package will depend on what others do as a result of the BSA and SOFA, and we might need to amend it.

Q65 Mrs Moon: Will we have any specific plan for protecting human rights defenders and ensuring that the gains made by women endure? Will that be a Foreign Office lead?

Neil Crompton: Those will remain priorities. The Foreign Office and DFID, through their capacity-building programmes, spend a lot of money trying to support them, whether through human rights NGOs or civil society NGOs, and invest in trying to protect women's rights. I think that Ministers, reflecting the mood of the public, will continue to make that a priority after 2014.

Vincent Devine: On the last point, the international community will continue to fund much of the Afghan Government's activity, and that funding will remain conditional on Afghan Government behaviour, including on issues such as women's rights. That is the Government's position.

Mrs Moon: Thank you. That was my final question: will we be making sure that they only get the blinking money this time around if they actually sign up to the plan?

Q66 Mr Havard: I wanted to ask you some questions about the law. You know that we are doing some sub-inquiries—maybe you don't know, but I will say it anyway—for our defence and security review overall studies. One relates to the military and the law, and I would like to ask you about that. Currently, we have cases in the Supreme Court and Appeal Court, and what was said earlier is true. I see from the evidence that lessons were learned about detention policy and all sorts of things, largely things that stemmed originally from Iraq but some of which were illustrations from Afghanistan.

But Afghanistan is different—that is what the MOD tells me anyway, in your own memoranda—for human rights legislation. It is protected differently because we are involved in an ISAF operation, and other legal niceties cover it. If we are going to move to a situation

post-14, what is going to be the legal surety, as it were, for the protection of the individuals involved and is there guidance on their legal protections in terms of the extra-territorial nature of human rights legislation, universal jurisdiction and all these other things that are developing? We want to say something that learns from Afghanistan, which goes into a projection about where we are going to go in terms of a strategic discussion for the defence and security review.

Vincent Devine: Quite briefly, or I could go on for several hours, the current ECHR court case is about Government responsibility rather than individual responsibility, and that will play its way out over the coming months. On jurisdiction over our personnel in Afghanistan post-2014, the Government position is clear. We expect to have a status of forces agreement that gives us jurisdiction over our own personnel when they are acting in the course of their operations. In my view, that is likely to be a red line for our Secretary of State. So the UK will retain jurisdiction over UK personnel in the NATO mission. This is one of the issues that we in NATO in due course—and the US currently—will debate with the Afghan Government. We will retain jurisdiction over our own personnel.

Q67 Mr Holloway: Mr Devine, in terms of the big lessons, do they not lie somewhere around massive over-optimism and lack of honesty by senior commanders; the mismatch from the beginning of ends, ways and means; and not really understanding at all the political, social, tribal and economic context in which you are operating?

General, you have made a success of Afghan National Security Forces taking our place when we go. Well, I think most of the Afghan army is made up of Tajiks and Uzbeks, many of whom do not even speak the same language as the people in Helmand, so how are they going to hold the ring?

Lieutenant-General Everard: I noticed that last time you spoke to the Secretary of State you talked about ethnicity. It is interesting. The army breakdown is meant to be 44% Pashtun; it is currently 39%. It is meant to be 39% Tajik; it is currently 33%—there are Hazara, Uzbek and others—so there is a set formula for the breakdown of the army.

Q68 Mr Holloway: Forgive me, General, but that is a classically misleading MOD answer. You are talking about Pashtuns, including northern Pashtuns, who were planted there 180 years ago and have nothing in common with the people in the south and the east. The number of the people in the Afghan army who are southern Pashtuns is what?

Chair: Allow the General to answer your accusation of being misleading.

Lieutenant-General Everard: Interestingly enough, we do not know, and the Afghan National Security Forces tell us that they do not know, either, because they group them as Pashtun and they have recruited them against that Pashtun label, so I don't know. The last time I was there, the two people who briefed me were southern Pashtun officers, so there must be some of them there. It is an interesting question, because I had not seen the breakdown of the ANSF model until quite recently, and it does lead to a number of other questions, which we have not yet got the answers to.

Q69 Chair: Mr Devine, would you like to answer the question posed to you?

Vincent Devine: First of all, we do not dispute that the southern Pashtun are underrepresented, particularly in the officer corps, and we are working on that. That is just a reality.

I think your summary is reasonably fair, with the exception of the suggestion that there was a lack of honesty. I think there was a lack of understanding of the operation we were becoming

involved in and the wider theatre we are engaged in. It is a matter of record that previous Governments and this Government have recognised that. I think we did fail to match our resources to the task. Again, that has been recognised publicly. Having done that—such errors happen—we failed to adapt rapidly enough as a Department to the kind of conflict we found ourselves in. We kept ploughing that furrow rather than stopping, thinking and resetting.

I think also, as the Government has previously said, that we failed to fully identify or resource Afghanistan as the main effort probably until around 2008 or 2009 when it became the main effort not just in name, but in reality in terms of allocating resources and moving UORs through. The lessons we have learnt—I will not use the phrase mistakes that have been made—across the alliance in Afghanistan are pretty much a matter of consensus now.

I take what members of this Committee have said about the optimism we are portraying about Afghanistan. Speaking personally, and having discussed this with a range of colleagues from across the alliance, I genuinely believe that we now have the best strategy available to us in Afghanistan, and we have seen the way in which that strategy has played out, particularly over last year. I re-read the transcript of the session with the Committee in December 2012. I think both people at this table and people around the Committee table at that point would have been pleasantly surprised at the way in which 2013 has indeed panned out—the extent to which we have pushed the ANSF into the lead in theatre, in a way in which the Committee suggested in your report, and the way in which they have taken the strain and performed, frankly, probably beyond our expectations. I think the development of the ANSF enablers which we talked about at great length last year has also pleasantly surprised us. They are making great progress on the medical front. They are improving the logistics. The Afghan air force has jumped forward in a way that one year ago we would probably not have predicted. I think it is just worth adding that caveat.

Chair: A couple of other colleagues would like to come in. I would ask them whether it might be better to raise their questions when we have a Minister in front of us because what you have just said was a rather good note on which to end this evidence session.

As I have said before, as we pursue our role of holding the Ministry of Defence to account, we ought not to forget what we have achieved, the courage of the armed forces and, in terms of government within the Ministry of Defence and other Departments, the way you have managed to produce results which have been more in many cases than we could possibly have expected. We would like to pass on our thanks to those you represent. In many cases, there are things that we would have done differently and that we would like to have seen done better, but I think we ought to end on the positive note of thanks and gratitude for what has been done.