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THE PRIME MINISTER

11 July 2009

Dear Alan

Ahead of my appearance before the Liaison Committee next week and in view of the recent tragic losses by our Armed Forces serving in Afghanistan, I wanted to write to you to update the Committee on our current operations in Afghanistan, and on the related work we are doing in Pakistan, in case you wanted to raise this.

The last ten days have been extraordinarily difficult. My thoughts are with the families of the brave servicemen who have been killed. The sacrifice that they have made in the service of our country will never be forgotten

While I know there are some who have questioned our strategy, I continue to believe our strategy is the right one.

Eight years ago the problem was the Taleban regime in Afghanistan. After violently seizing power in the 1990s, they ruled the country with utter brutality and contempt for human rights - and provided a safe haven to Al Qaeda. It is right that we helped to remove a regime which allowed Al Qaeda to plot terror around the world, culminating in the attacks on 9/11.

So in 2001 the case for intervention in Afghanistan was to take on a global terrorist threat and prevent terrorist attacks in Britain and across the world. In 2009 the overriding reason for our continued involvement is the same - to take on, at its source, the terrorist threat, and prevent attacks here and elsewhere.

Eight years ago we removed the Taleban from power, and drove Al Qaeda from Afghanistan. As Al Qaeda relocated to the remote mountains of Pakistan's northwest frontier province and federally

administered tribal areas, a new crucible of terrorism has emerged straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

The Director-General of our Security Service has said that three quarters of the most serious plots against the UK have links into these mountains. So our purpose is clear: to prevent terrorism coming to the streets of Britain. Our security depends on strengthening the Pakistan and Afghan Governments to defeat both Al Qaeda and also the Pakistan and Afghan Taleban. If in Pakistan, the Taleban are allowed to overwhelm Pakistan's democracy, Al Qaeda would once again have greater freedom from which to launch terrorist attacks across the world - and the longer term implications for the stability of this crucial region, and for global stability, could be more serious still. If, in Afghanistan, extremists return to power and once again provide a safe haven for Al Qaeda, then the same threat of global terrorism arises.

So this is a fight to clear terrorist networks from Afghanistan and Pakistan, to support the elected governments in both countries against the Taleban, to tackle the heroin trade which funds terrorism and the insurgency, and to build longer term stability.

To succeed in one of the two countries would mean that Al Qaeda could still attack us from the other.

Progress in one of the two countries will never be sustainable without progress in both.

This is why our strategy, published in April, reflects an integrated approach across both countries. It sets out why it is both in our interest to train the Afghan forces to resist the return of the Afghan Taleban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and in our interest to support Pakistan's security and armed forces against Al Qaeda and the Pakistan Taleban in Pakistan.

Let me deal first with progress against the terrorist insurgencies in Pakistan. The Pakistani Government has recently launched successful operations to drive out militant extremists from the Swat and Buner regions in the north west. Operational success has come at a heavy price for the Pakistani security forces, and also a heavy humanitarian cost with millions internally displaced. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of the Pakistani people fully support their government's action,

recognising that failure to bring these regions under the control of the Pakistani Government would pose a fundamental threat to the future of their country

It is vital to ensure that we do not allow humanitarian problems to become for some a pretext for radicalisation. That is why Britain is playing a leading role in international assistance to Pakistan to help its internally displaced people. And as Pakistan steps up the fight on terrorism so we will focus greater attention on the basic human challenges it still faces - in education, health and respect for human rights - in each of which failure serves only to fuel radicalisation. Britain's development programme in Pakistan will become our second largest worldwide, with £665 million in assistance over the next four years, refocusing much of our aid - including over £125 million of education spending - on the border areas

Our work in taking on terrorism in Pakistan must be matched by progress in Afghanistan. But while in Pakistan our role is to support Pakistan's security forces, in Afghanistan we are not yet at the point where the Afghan army and police can maintain control of the country without direct outside help. The immediate priority is to ensure security for the population in the run up to the presidential elections in August. I am working together with President Obama and other leaders to ensure the UN has all the support it needs so that those elections are free and credible. In the military campaign, as the Committee will know, President Obama has reinforced the US presence by 21,000. Most are now in theatre, many of them alongside British forces in Helmand - because, as the new American Commander General McChrystal has explained, it is increasingly clear that Helmand is where the insurgency is concentrating its efforts, with over a third of the violence in the whole of Afghanistan. And in April, I announced that the UK would temporarily increase its contribution to 9,000 for the election period.

American and British forces are now working together to secure the key population centres. The British effort is focused on a major operation, Panther's Claw, supported by Afghan forces, driving the Taliban from the areas of central Helmand which have until now remained beyond the reach of the Afghan Government. The Americans are engaged in a similar operation in the southern part of the province

These operations are co-ordinated and based on a joint civilian-military plan. This was set out in detail in our April strategy and in my statement to the House of Commons. Where an area is cleared and security is established, Governor Mangal and his district governors follow up with plans to build basic services - clean water, electricity, roads, basic justice, basic healthcare, and then economic development. This inevitably takes time, but the important thing is that work has begun, to give the people a stake in the future. One of the first signs of this will be polling stations for the Afghan presidential elections opening in areas where previously that would have been impossible.

None of this could take place without the fearless work of our troops. They will continue to face a tough and dangerous battle and we will continue to place the highest priority on their safety. I know that there are particular concerns over vehicles. In the last three years, we have spent over £1bn in urgent operational requirements for vehicles. This includes 280 Mastiffs, which offer world leading protection against mines and roadside bombs. In addition we almost doubled our helicopter capability from late 2006 to early this year. Operational funding comes from the Treasury Reserve, in addition to the defence budget: Reserve funding for Afghanistan has increased from £700m in 2006-07 to £1.5bn in 07-08 to £2.6bn in 08-09 and over £3bn this year - demonstrating that we have continued to ensure that this operation has the financial backing it needs. We will go further later this year with the deployment of the new Ridgeback vehicles and Merlin helicopters. While it takes time to train crews and adapt equipment to the conditions, our defence forces are working as fast as they can.

Despite the tragic losses, morale remains high - and I can report the assessment of commanders on the ground: that the current operations are succeeding in their objectives. They are having a marked impact on the Taliban in central Helmand, will improve security for the population in the run up to the elections, and will allow longer term work on governance and development to begin.

But our brave service men and women know that taking the fight to the enemy will unavoidably put them in harm's way. The majority of recent casualties - British and American - have been sustained not in direct confrontation with the insurgency, but from improvised explosive devices. From April we started to deploy additional units to tackle this growing threat. I can also assure the Committee that the Ministry of

Defence is equally focused on strengthening our approach in ways that will enable our forces to have the greatest impact, including better campaign continuity, further improvements in civilian-military integration, the closest possible co-ordination with American forces, and above all a gradual shift towards training and mentoring of the Afghan army and police, who hold the key to long term success. We will of course continue to review our force levels, based on the advice of our commanders and discussions with allies.

The major challenges in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the links between them, and our responses, are set out in more detail in the strategy the Government published in April, a copy of which is attached. The broad nature of that strategy reminds us of the importance both of operation Panther's Claw, which understandably and rightly remains the focus of public attention, but also of our work in other parts of Helmand where progress, while taking time, is significant: roads are being built, shuras are bringing proper justice not Taleban justice to the local people, farmers are being persuaded to switch from poppy to wheat - all because of the security created by our forces.

It has been a very difficult summer and it is not over. But if we are to deny Helmand to the Taleban in the long term; if we are to help Afghanistan and Pakistan to defeat this vicious insurgency and prevent the return of Al Qaeda - then it is vital that the international community sees its commitment through

It is a mark of how important this is to global security and stability that over forty countries are in Afghanistan

At the G8 meeting all members agreed on the importance of the work now being done there, and I talked directly with President Obama about the shared challenges we face. I am determined that Britain will continue to live up to its obligations, and with 9,000 troops - more than twice as many as any other nation besides America, serving with distinction where the fighting is hardest - I believe we are shouldering our share of the burden in Afghanistan

I also know that British forces will continue to show the immense courage and professionalism for which they are rightly renowned. And I hope that the Committee - and indeed all parties in the House - will

stand with our Armed Forces at this difficult time. I shall of course be happy to answer any questions the Committee have on this.

I am sending this letter to all relevant Committee Chairs, and I am placing a copy in the Library of both Houses.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Williams', written in a cursive style.

The Right Honourable Alan Williams MP