



Minister of Defence

27 FEB 2007

Dianne Yates
Chair, Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade Committee
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Dear Dianne

During my meeting with the Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade Select Committee in June 2006, I indicated that I intended to look at what further information could be given regarding the activities of our special forces, the 1st New Zealand Special Air Service Group (NZSAS). I set out below for the Committee's information a summary of New Zealand SAS operations alongside our other commitments in Afghanistan.

Background

It has been the long-standing policy of the New Zealand Government not to provide details of the operational activities of our special forces. Successive governments have rightly judged that protecting the lives of NZSAS members and their families outweighed the public "right to know" and have refused to comment in detail on special forces activities.

The reason for this policy is that we require our special forces to be able to survive and fight effectively in high-risk environments. Disclosing details of operations risks providing intelligence to opposing forces on tactics, capabilities, techniques, and specialised equipment which could compromise the effectiveness of current or future operations and potentially place the lives of our service members at even greater risk. It is generally also important to protect the identities of members of our special forces to avoid any compromise to their effectiveness or safety. I am, however, prepared to give broad details about operations after they have concluded, and do so below.

The SAS

The New Zealand SAS has conducted operations in Afghanistan over the period December 2001 to November 2005. The first deployment was for 12 months, with two subsequent deployments each for six months. The size of each contingent has varied between approximately 40 and 65 personnel, with all deployments working alongside other special forces as part of the United States-led Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force.

Missions have been conducted in all seasons on ground ranging from open desert-like expanse through to the high altitude, mountainous landscape of the Hindu Kush. Tasks for deployments have included special reconnaissance, direct action, close personnel protection and specialist search. In addition, personnel have been involved in the planning and conduct of Special Operations Force missions. Many of these missions resulted in the development of intelligence.

The NZSAS's unique skill at long range and duration patrols has been a highly valued and significant enhancement to other special forces' efforts during the Afghanistan campaign. Typically patrols would last for upwards of 20 days and be re-supplied by helicopter. This exceeds the endurance of many others and allowed for considerable detail to be collected and analysed for application in decisive stages of a mission.

During the first deployment (December 2001–December 2002), the NZSAS conducted operations involving both helicopter inserted foot patrols and long range vehicle-mounted special reconnaissance patrols. During the second and third deployments (May–September 2004 and June–November 2005) operations were focussed on long range vehicle-mounted special reconnaissance patrols and direct action tasks.

Throughout the deployments, the New Zealand Chief of Defence Force has retained full command of all NZDF personnel and assets through a Senior National Officer appointed by the Commander Joint Forces New Zealand. This is the same for all NZDF overseas deployments.

The employment of NZDF personnel and assets on tasks other than those agreed at the outset requires consultation and approval from Wellington. Any tasks or locations considered inconsistent with the government's policy objectives, or which may cause undue risk to NZDF personnel and assets, are declined, pending further advice from CDF.

The New Zealand SAS is held in high regard, - as demonstrated by the United States Presidential Citation awarded to the NZSAS on 7 December 2004:

"For extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy in Afghanistan Task Force K-BAR successfully executed its primary mission to conduct special operations in support of the United States' efforts to destroy, degrade, and neutralize the Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership and military. These precedent setting and extremely high-risk missions included search and rescue, special reconnaissance, sensitive site exploitation, direct action missions, destruction of multiple cave and tunnel complexes, identification and destruction of several known Al Qaeda training camps, explosion of thousands of pounds of enemy ordnance. Task Force K-Bar set an unprecedented 100 percent mission success rate across a broad spectrum of special operations missions while operating under extremely difficult and constantly dangerous conditions. They established benchmark standards of professionalism, tenacity, courage, tactical brilliance, and operational excellence while demonstrating superb esprit de corps and maintaining the highest measures of combat readiness."

Theatre experience, modern equipment capabilities and the high skill base of the individual soldier and the leadership and command ability of its commissioned and non commissioned officers have ensured that the NZSAS is well regarded.

On several occasions New Zealand SAS have been involved in direct action. Casualties were suffered on both sides. No New Zealanders have been killed but some have been injured and that has been made known by the New Zealand Government at the time.

NZSAS troops have also been involved in actions where individuals were temporarily detained in order to capture Taliban and for Al Qaeda suspects believed to be among them. On two occasions during the first deployment New Zealand SAS elements were involved in operations during which they temporarily detained individuals for up to five hours. The number detained was in the range of fifty to seventy in total. The NZDF understands that no person who has been held, even temporarily, in New Zealand custody is currently in the hands of the United States or other nations represented in the international forces.

The Chief of Defence has put in place procedures for the notification of the International Committee of the Red Cross of the fact that persons have been captured and/or transferred to another power, but not the details of the operation in which that occurred. Wherever possible, that notification is to include details identifying the individuals captured or transferred. New Zealand has, from an early stage, made clear our expectation that all detainees would be treated humanely and in accordance with international law.

Provincial Reconstruction Team

Following the UN-mandated intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the focus of operations broadened to reconstruction and the creation of an environment within which Afghan authorities could re-establish control and stability. A key component in this process was the establishment of provincial reconstruction teams. In 2003 the New Zealand Government approved the deployment of a PRT to Bamyan province. New Zealand formally took command of the Bamyan PRT on 23 September 2003. This has been our greatest commitment to Afghanistan in terms of troop numbers and its value has been widely recognised by coalition partners and the Afghani population alike.

At present there are 23 PRTs operating in Afghanistan. They are designed to assist reconstruction efforts and conduct civil-military operations at a regional level and are often multi-national, inter-agency teams including military and civilian personnel. Their size, structure and role vary depending on the objectives of contributing nations, the requirements of the region, and the level of instability within the region.

Bamyan Province is a geographically remote area, which lies in the Hindu Kush area of central Afghanistan, approximately 160km Northwest of Kabul. The Province covers approximately 17,400 square kilometres and has an estimated population of 350,000. The environment is harsh and poor roads add to the

isolation of the area. Altitudes in the province range between 2500m above sea level to 4500m with temperatures ranging between 40 degrees in the summer and minus 20 degrees in the winter.

The population of the province is predominantly Shia Muslim Hazara, although there are some Tajik, especially in the northern area of the province. Long periods of conflict between the local people (Hazara and Tajik), and the persecution of the Hazaras by the Taliban has left the majority of the population opposed to the Taliban and receptive to the support being provided by the New Zealand PRT.

Bamyan is an underdeveloped province. The international reconstruction effort since the defeat of the Taliban has focused on rebuilding homes, providing basic infrastructure (such as electricity, roads and water supplies) and re-establishing agriculture and food production.

Activities undertaken by the New Zealand PRT include security and liaison patrols, supporting the Afghan Government; participating in the Governor's security and reconstruction meetings; counselling adversaries and refereeing disputes; and facilitating, overseeing and advising on aid and reconstruction. Typically, patrols from the NZPRT deploy for three to four weeks at a time, basing themselves out of remote forward operating bases in each administrative region. Our PRT also assists and mentors the Afghan National Police, and has three New Zealand Police officers attached to support security sector reform.

A significant success has been the provision of security advice and assistance to the police and local officials for the conduct of the presidential elections in 2005 and national and provincial elections this year. This in no small way contributed to very good results where Bamyan stood out in terms of voter registration, participation and the highest representation of women throughout Afghanistan in the process.

The NZ PRT has been successful in assisting in the extension of the authority of the central Afghan government through its work with the provincial Governor. The Governor now has freedom of movement throughout the province and the PRT has provided mentoring and assistance to the Governor and her departmental officers. This has included significant assistance with the initial preparation of a Bamyan Province Strategic Development Plan.

To date over NZ\$5.6 million has been spent on projects by the PRT in Bamyan on behalf of NZAID with a further NZ\$ 3 million committed. NZAID as a whole has expended NZ\$15 million to date and has a further NZ\$15 million committed over the next three years. This has included our contribution to the rebuilding and equipping the Bamyan University and the Bamyan Boys School, and the construction and equipping of the Bamyan Hospital maternity block. Significant effort has gone into improving infrastructure throughout the province, by constructing or rehabilitating bridges, and assisting with roading development and winterisation arrangements for keeping key alpine passes open for as long as possible.

In the security sector, the PRT, again utilising NZAID funding, has planned and supervised the construction of five new Afghan National Police district

headquarters. In addition, vehicles, communications and other equipment have been provided for the Afghan National Police.

On 5 October the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation took military operational control for international forces in Afghanistan. The New Zealand PRT has transferred from US to NATO International Security Assistance Force control and new formal agreements between New Zealand and NATO have been concluded covering all our deployed elements.

Nearly 900 New Zealanders have served or are serving in Afghanistan as part of the New Zealand PRT. The success of our PRT has been acknowledged by our international partners and when prospective coalition partners are investigating the viability of either contributing or contributing to a PRT, they are inevitably advised to visit the NZ PRT as an outstanding example of what can be achieved by a small nation with a small Defence Force situated 'half a world' away. While our model works well in Bamyán, it will not necessarily be the most appropriate in provinces with greater security concerns.

Other Operations

New Zealand has taken part in other counter terrorism-related military operations since December 2001. At various times, New Zealand has deployed a frigate as a part of OEF Maritime Interdiction Operations and an RNZAF P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft, C-130 Hercules airlift support, and filled staff and training appointments. The professionalism of New Zealand's Navy and Air Force contributions were widely praised.

HMNZS Te Kaha deployed from December 2002 until February 2003 when it was replaced by HMNZS Te Mana until June 2003. Core maritime interdiction tasks were investigation of vessels not responding to "radio hails" (typically non-English speaking dhows) and visits of other identified vessels. These were the primary methods deployed to detect and deter any suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban movement. Both frigates were involved in numerous interventions, some of which led to crews undertaking boarding operations.

During Christmas 2003, three vessels were tracked and reported by the RNZAF P-3 Orion, resulting in millions of dollars of heroin and hashish being able to be seized.

Since December 2001, New Zealand Defence Force staff officers have been attached to headquarters overseeing the various operations we have been part of. As well, two Non-Commissioned Officers have been attached to a British Army Team assisting in training the Afghan National Army.

Staff and training appointments provide valuable international experience for NZDF officers and NCOs. The staff appointments also provide New Zealand with insight into mission planning which affects our operations in Afghanistan, as well as access to information covering the full spectrum of international military and development engagement in the country.

Conclusion

Over 70 Nations are currently involved in the provision of military and/or development assistance in Afghanistan. New Zealand's wide-ranging participation is based upon the international community's acknowledgement that Afghanistan's stability is important to global stability. Despite substantial contributions from the international community over the past five years, there remains a strong demand for resources to continue to be made available. Our longstanding commitment to collective security underlies New Zealand's interest in seeing the international community's high profile commitment to Afghanistan succeed in establishing a viable government and economy.

The New Zealand PRT is the centrepiece of our commitment to Afghanistan and continues to receive considerable praise as a "model PRT" from local leaders, NGOs, Afghan authorities and NATO members. More than this, the wider NZDF involvement has contributed to, and continues to assist in, the consolidation of gains to date; countering insurgents; supporting security sector reform (including the development of Afghan national forces); and promoting stability and the facilitation of development.

New Zealand's special forces contributions have been necessary and welcomed by other contributing nations. They have a well deserved reputation for being amongst the best and most professional special forces in the world. In Afghanistan, they have proven so in cooperation with both special and regular forces from other nations.

I hope this information is of assistance to the committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Phil Goff". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Hon Phil Goff
Minister of Defence