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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (0905)

[English]

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

Today we have two orders of business. The first one is the regular briefing by General Howard. After that's over, we'll move into in camera to further our deliberations on the Afghanistan report.

General, welcome, and we look forward to your presentation. As usual, there will be a round of questions afterwards.

The floor is yours.

Brigadier-General A. J. Howard (Director General, Operations, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Honourable members of Parliament, good morning.

I am here once again to provide you with a short update on Canadian Forces operations in Afghanistan. My presentation will aim to update you primarily on the reportable security issues over the last several weeks, since the last time I was here. And I am prepared, following my presentation, to provide clarification on operational issues presented, if I can.

[Translation]

As you know, Canada is in Afghanistan at the request of the democratically elected Afghan government. While the three strategic lines of operations of the NATO-led and UN-sanctioned ISAF mission are interconnected, I would like to focus mainly on security, where the goal is to support and improve the other two lines of operations, in order to build capacity so as to enable Afghan forces to overcome obstacles and rebuild the country.

[English]

There are challenges that confront even the most determined soldiers in Afghanistan. However, in many areas of the country, life is improving for Afghans. Canadian soldiers—your soldiers—see and contribute to this every day.

The soldiers themselves are motivated by statements from humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF Canada. Most recently, the head of UNICEF Canada, Nigel Fisher, underlined the very positive effect the soldiers are having in helping to improve the lives of Afghans. Sometimes these positive steps, among all the challenges we deal with every day, do get lost. But I am here to represent the soldiers and to let you know—and you know this—that they contribute in a significant way.

For example, of the 8,000 kilometres of new and refurbished roads that are now in Afghanistan, our soldiers provided security for some 10 to 15 kilometres of Route Summit, which has allowed the Zhari-Panjwai region to connect with Kandahar city and other major centres to permit easy travel and hopefully to improve commerce. In fact, some of your soldiers have given their lives so Route Summit could be constructed. The soldiers, in their work, most certainly from their perspective, are making a difference.

Regional Command South, which is depicted on this slide—the normal one I use with the four principal countries and their partners leading—remains a high-tempo area in which to operate when compared with the majority of Afghanistan, which is calm.

The focus of ISAF and Regional Command South operational activity over the last several weeks has continued to be the provision of security in this region by disrupting the Taliban and by setting the conditions for further development, particularly in the Kandahar Afghan development zone.

The Dutch-led headquarters has commenced its transition to the U.K. lead, and in very early May—in fact, on May 1—Major-General Page, a British officer, will assume command. He'll be backed up by a very capable Canadian deputy, Brigadier-General Marquis Hainse, who was recently the commander of 5 Brigade Group, and his last job was actually Chief of Staff, Canada Command. There will be about 40 Canadians who will join that headquarters. It is very much a multinational headquarters based on all the countries you see there, but with a U.K. lead.

Certainly, in Regional Command South, the focus of operations has been in Helmand province. I described to you, when I was here last time, Operation Achilles and the aim there of securing the area around the Kajaki dam.

The concentration of effort within this area has been in the vicinity of the Sangin valley. The task forces that are assigned in Helmand have conducted their normal patrol patterns along Highway 1 and in the Afghan development zones that are in the Helmand province.

This is very much in partnership, within Helmand province, with Afghan national security forces. In the operations that have been conducted over the last several weeks, there have been over 5,000 Afghan soldiers actually involved in that operation as well.

Both ISAF and the Afghan national security forces are determined to improve and refurbish the Kajaki dam, and operations will continue to establish the necessary security around the dam to permit this.

● (0910)

[*Translation*]

With respect to Task Force Uruzghan, the main focus is on security in the regions of Deh Rawood and Tarin Kowt. Task Force Zaboul's focus is on maintaining security operations on route 1, ensuring security in the Afghan Development Zone and continuing operations in the Mizan district.

[*English*]

In Task Force Kandahar, the main effort is on security, reconstruction, and development in the Panjwai-Zhari area of operations to continue setting the conditions for success for the Kandahar city Afghan development zone.

Let me step back somewhat and address some of the challenges that NATO allies and partners, our Afghan partners in Regional Command South, have had over the last several weeks. Overall, Helmand province continues to suffer the brunt of Taliban activity. This is due in part to the continuous and ongoing aggressive U.K. operations along the Helmand-Sangin river valley to improve the conditions for local Afghans by getting that dam squared away, and it also poses a direct threat to the Taliban's main line of communications within this region. ANSF troops are actually going into areas that have not seen ISAF troops before, so that is challenging in itself. The most recent operation in the Sangin district centre has affected Taliban capabilities in the area, forcing them to flee the district centre for points further north.

In Kandahar province, things have been relatively quiet compared with Helmand province. While the Taliban has tried to reassert itself within the province after operational successes that we achieved in the Zhari-Panjwai regions, not only our own troops but the Afghan security partners who were alongside continue to have a positive influence in this region.

Quite frankly, the Taliban has proven incapable of confronting our forces as it did last fall and has proved unable to surge in any significant way. This has a very positive impact on families and on everybody else—the families who live in this region. The Taliban then has had to resort to terrorizing all with indiscriminate use of mines and IEDs. It's about the best they can do in the Zhari-Panjwai area.

As you are aware, on 8 April, a light armoured vehicle struck an improvised explosive device, killing six Canadian soldiers and wounding four. On 11 April, two more soldiers were killed and two were wounded when their Coyote reconnaissance vehicle struck a mine.

Finally, on 17 April, a remote-controlled explosive device was detonated in Kandahar city as a UN road convoy coming to help local Afghans was attacked. The blast claimed the lives of an Afghan driver and four Nepalese guards working with the UN office for project services. It kind of underlines why we need to have a secure and stable environment. The Taliban are quite happy to attack their own people. They are quite happy to attack Afghan national security forces, and they will attack UN and NGOs if they're allowed. This is disturbing when it does happen.

It's clear that the Taliban are trying to disrupt the international communities' efforts to bring in aid and reconstruction. Sadly, the people most impacted by this are the Afghans themselves, who want a better life for their children but are terrorized by the Taliban, who attack the very soldiers and aid workers who are trying to help.

Certainly within the Canadian contingent there's a very heartfelt respect for the Canadian families who have lost a loved one in recent weeks, but by the same token, there is a steady resolve to continue to press ahead, as fallen comrades would insist the soldiers do, so that their sacrifice was not in vain. The troops today can see progress and will tell you that the situation is getting better. For example, this time last year you would not have been able to conduct foot patrols through the Zhari-Panjwai area. That would have been impossible to do. Today, after we have concluded with Operation Medusa and Baaz Tsuka, you will see that our own soldiers are actually foot patrolling on the ground because they don't need the protection necessarily of their armoured vehicles. As I described when I was here last time, you can stand in that region at night and see lights on. The markets are flourishing. In one little area we've been able to bring a little bit of stability.

There are other challenges, obviously, throughout the region. I don't want to be over the top here, but it is an example. That's what the foot soldier sees on the ground. That's how he measures some of his progress.

● (0915)

Certainly the ongoing initiatives to provide our troops with the very best of equipment to help protect them and Afghans are essential. The recent announcement of new tanks will afford the troops better protection and will ensure that our troops can continue to create the conditions for meaningful improvements to governance and reconstruction that Afghans want and need.

Going to the next slide, I will briefly turn to highlighting the activity of our troops over the last several weeks. The right-hand green oval points to the Zhari-Panjwai area where our main effort of providing security to support reconstruction and development is occurring. Our activities have included security patrols with our Afghan security partners to reassure local inhabitants of our commitment to help. We've been engaging in conversation with Afghans and their key leaders in order to start mapping the tribal framework in the area and develop a detailed assessment of pattern of life to set the conditions so that village and school assessments can occur.

We assisted the Afghan army and police to establish vehicle checkpoints. For example, the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team engineers installed wiring, lighting, and additional security fencing at six checkpoints this past week.

All of this is aimed at helping Afghans take control of their towns and villages. It is a work in progress, but even the small steps mean a lot. Let me point to one of those small steps. For example, on April 8, 2007, despite it being a very tough day for Canadians, over 100 young Kandaharis participated in a Kandahar fun run.

This picture on the next slide clearly demonstrates a small step. This would have been unthinkable last year, to actually conduct a road race, as we would see down the canal here in Ottawa, in the town of Kandahar city. I know this didn't get any play back here in Canada, so I thought I would bring it to you. It shows the potential that exists, if we can create the stable environments that Afghans want themselves. There are very positive things going on. This 10-kilometre race was conducted without any security incidents, and again, shows one small step forward, from which the troops certainly benefited.

In the next slide, the green oval to the right points to the Maywand district in Kandahar province, where Canadian troops had been conducting patrols along the border region to interact and meet with local leaders and establish a degree of trust with them, to ensure the Taliban did not use this district as a safe haven to attack Afghan and ISAF forces in Helmand province as they conducted their very important work in support of Operation Achilles. Our troops have recently returned to Kandahar airfield from a successful mission through that particular area, with the one exception of that terrible LAV incident where we lost six comrades.

As indicated in the next slide, with respect to the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team, the main effort remains on civil-military cooperation-led operations in the Zhari district. Secondary efforts, including key leader engagements at the provincial and district levels, strengthening the Afghan National Police through capacity-building and infrastructure enhancements, support to ongoing operations, rehabilitation of a whole number of infrastructure projects within Kandahar city, development initiatives, delivery of existing programs, and identifying new opportunities are many of the activities that our PRT works away at every day.

Significant progress has been made in Kandahar since January 2007, through accelerated processing of projects under the Afghan government national area-based development program. This is a direct reflection of the Governor of Kandahar's leadership and the continued support of the international community.

On the next slide, at the tactical level, the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team supports operations by assessing villages within areas of operation for quick impact projects and cash-for-work programs. These projects are of immediate value. They are designed to improve security or local trust while at the same time extending the influence of the Government of Afghanistan.

● (0920)

You've heard me talk many times about Route Summit. This route is essentially complete. We still have the bridge to put in over the Arghandab River. This route will be handed over in the near future to allow Afghan national security forces to be responsible for its security.

Recently, the PRT activities focused on supporting the establishment of the Kandahar Afghan development zone through the construction of 11 Kandahar city vehicle checkpoints as well as the in-place mentorship of the police and the auxiliary police who will man them. Additional ongoing security sector enhancements include the construction or improvement of 10 police substations in the Bazaar-e-Panjwayi area and the construction of temporary vehicle checkpoints.

As an example of ongoing projects, the Kandahar University enhancements project is intended to repair damage and assess the feasibility of a new work request. Our team is helping others facilitate the repair of the university so that education, a cornerstone of any emerging state, can flourish more than it has.

Continuing its role as a facilitator, the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team has been working closely with the Government of Afghanistan through such Afghan agencies and programs as the national solidarity program and the Minister for Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Minister Zia. Working closely with the world food program and UN agencies such as UNICEF, the PRT assists in the coordination of food distribution, vaccine programs, and mine clearance initiatives, among many development activities.

On a positive note, in March, Minister Zia announced 34 projects, worth almost \$2 million U.S., which are being fully funded by CIDA. These projects will provide a combined total of 49,000 labour days and will benefit a total of 74,000 people. The projects include a solar power initiative that will bring electricity to 800 households. Other projects include cleaning an irrigation canal, building five water networks that will supply clean drinking water, the construction of two health clinics, and the digging of 378 water wells.

Ms. Black asked me last time to address the issue of IDP camps. I would like to say that UNHCR has been caring for IDPs living in refugee camps, approximately 11,000 individuals, for the past five years, especially in the Panjwai-Maywand districts of Kandahar province and in districts in Helmand. The majority among these IDP camps are nomadic Pashtun tribesman from southwestern and eastern Afghanistan.

As I understand it, UNHCR has been organizing the voluntary return of IDPs to their places of origin. UNHCR and the local authorities are working together on a plan to assist these families to return as soon as possible. Other UN agencies have expressed their interest in supporting the operation. Our own Joint Task Force Afghanistan is not directly involved in providing support to these camps, since they are UNHCR-led. However, we do maintain a working relationship with the UN officials, and if asked for help, we would certainly consider it.

As you know, Minister Verner recently announced \$10 million in additional Canadian funding to help the world food program and UNHCR deal with the IDPs. This is on top of the \$13.4 million that had been announced before.

Ms. Black, you had asked about civilian contractors who are involved with ANA and ANP training. These are contracted by the U.S. combined security transition command that is responsible for all of the Afghan national security force capacity building. It is a U.S.-led headquarters of which we have a brigadier general and a dozen staff members. It is a multinational endeavour. They lead this effort within Afghanistan, working with the Afghan authorities. The contractors they hire are to assist in programming where we may not have enough troops, for example, or they bring a certain expertise, but it is done under the principles established by the Afghan government itself and this particular headquarters.

• (0925)

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my briefing. I would be happy to try to provide points of clarification on my briefing.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We'll get right into the questioning then and start with Mr. Coderre for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

General, sadly we have learned that one of our soldiers belonging to JTF 2 has died accidentally on the base at Kandahar.

Can you tell us what happened? We're hearing that he was working on a communications tower. How did the accident happen?

[*English*]

BGen A. J. Howard: With our Joint Task Force Two personnel, one of the difficulties we have in talking about what they do is the very classified nature of their work and our requirement to protect their identities and that of their families. What I can tell you is that this fine, upstanding soldier, who was a communicator—he was a communications expert—was working on a communications tower and he slipped. It's as simple as that. His unfortunate accident is just as important as our other deaths. It is very unfortunate. Our condolences go out to his family, but I'm afraid I couldn't provide much more information than that.

Hon. Denis Coderre: That was the question. He just slipped. Okay.

BGen A. J. Howard: Yes, sir.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Do you believe, General, there is an escalation of violence right now?

BGen A. J. Howard: An escalation of violence on the part of the Taliban?

Hon. Denis Coderre: Yes.

BGen A. J. Howard: Typically, the experts will tell you, having mapped it over the last six or seven years, a reduction in activity occurs over the winter months. So as that activity reduces, as Taliban go back across the border or go back to their families, you will see a reduction in activity. Typically, then, in the spring we return to what I would call "normal" levels of activity.

So I'm not seeing any escalation. From my vantage point, we are seeing less than we did before. When I look in the Zhari-Panjwai

region, compared to this time last year, things are much quieter in the Canadian area of operations.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I have one last question. What is your view right now on the situation of the prisoners of war that we send back to the Afghan government? The fact that there is a close relationship with our governments, the fact that you have a strategic advisory team that helps President Karzai on governance, and my understanding is that there is also some activity to bring back the rule of law, so there are communication channels between the two governments—So what is your view on that situation and the unacceptable situation we have seen in the press for the last two days? Of course, it's been quite a few months, and almost a year since we started to ask questions about that. So what's your say about it?

BGen A. J. Howard: With regard to the treatment of detainees by Afghan authorities, I think the Prime Minister and the minister have spoken to this yesterday, to take the allegations seriously, and to follow up with Afghan authorities.

You ask me, as a soldier, my view on this matter. I have been trained my entire career and understand my obligations to treat detainees humanely. This is trained to the soldiers. I've personally been involved with this my entire career. Our soldiers understand the requirements. We are extremely diligent, and we will investigate fully any deviation from that internally. We've not had too many causes for concern in that area. We need to investigate this fully. Afghans themselves are in an emerging country. I think it would be safe to say that there are some challenges in this particular area, and they do need help with capacity building. But I think we need to look closely at the facts, and certainly I am as interested as anybody else in getting to the bottom.

But to me, the bottom line is that we want detainees to be treated humanely.

• (0930)

Hon. Denis Coderre: But you believe that to respect the Geneva Convention is not just to do what we have to do when the captives are under our own custody, but also to ensure that when we transfer them we don't send them to torture. Right?

BGen A. J. Howard: I've been trained all my life to treat Afghan detainees, in a general sense, humanely. I think that's the bottom line that we need to get to on this one.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coderre.

Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

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

First of all, I'd like to thank you for the note that you sent me. I don't know if you sent it to the other members, but it had to do with the incident in Babaji in which 40 Taliban were killed.

Since your last appearance, has someone from the committee approached you and asked you to focus your presentation more on development and reconstruction operations?

[English]

BGen A. J. Howard: No, I did not. Part of our activities in Afghanistan, our PRT, are very focused on the activities, so I've simply related the small activities that our PRT do conduct.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Would it be possible for you to bring along photographs of construction projects the next time you're scheduled to appear? You spoke of building health clinics, digging wells, giving vaccinations, digging and clearing out ditches and distributing food. I think it might be interesting for the committee to see some photographs of the good work being done by the PRT.

I'm not questioning your ability to explain military operations. Moreover, as you know, the Bloc Québécois would like the mission to be more focused on reconstruction and development operations. In fact, photographs would help to reassure me. I trust my colleagues will agree with me on this. They seemed to be in agreement with me last week when I broached the subject. I was a little surprised to learn that no one talked to you. I'd like to see a little more concrete evidence of reconstruction and development efforts.

Do you think that you would be able to provide us with some photographs?

BGen A. J. Howard: Certainly.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you.

Now then, I'd like to hear your views on the prisoner situation. Canadian soldiers stationed in Kandahar province in Afghanistan must be wondering how they should behave exactly toward prisoners. When prisoners are captured, they are brought to a temporary detention centre at the Kandahar airfield.

How long do these prisoners remain in the custody of soldiers before they are handed over to Afghan authorities?

[English]

BGen A. J. Howard: It will depend on the circumstances. We aim to quickly move the detainees. We try within 96 hours to have processed them because we don't have a large facility and we don't have the expertise.

As I've mentioned, a fair amount of training goes into the soldiers to handle the detainees humanely. One thing that they really get and understand is to treat someone like you would like to be treated. That's certainly what we aim for in this particular regard.

But as they're returned to CAF, it is simply a matter of our obligations being to identify who these folks are and give them medical treatment if they require it. We do have some very injured detainees who go right—and they get the same level of care that our soldiers would. So they might stay a little bit longer before they're handed off to Afghan authorities. But our practice to this point has been to try to aim for a 96-hour turnaround.

• (0935)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: In any event, from what I've read, the problem does not lie with Canadian soldiers. It's more a question of what happens to the prisoners once they are handed over to the Afghan authorities.

Can you tell us if the Canadian Forces legal services have assessed the likelihood of the Canadian government, or even some Canadian soldiers, being charged with violating the Geneva Convention, given that Canada is a signatory to the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court?

Many people argue that if prisoners continue to be transferred into the custody of Afghan authorities, charges are certain to be laid. What resolution do you see to this problem in the short term? In my opinion, we can no longer continue turning these prisoners over to Afghan authorities. Even if we were told that the matter will be investigated, the evidence is overwhelming. Conditions in Afghan jails are not very good.

Are you concerned at all that Canada, or Canadian soldiers, could face charges?

[English]

BGen A. J. Howard: I think in this particular case we need to look closely at what's occurred. We need to find out what has happened. The Canadian Forces are seized with this issue. The Judge Advocate General and the senior members of the Canadian Forces have been huddling over the last several days and are taking these allegations seriously. We do need to look at it, and the Prime Minister and the minister have committed to doing that.

I think we do need to take a look at the situation. It's a very complex situation, but at the end of the day I think we all have the same goal: we want detainees treated humanely.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachand.

Ms. Black is next.

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

Thank you for coming again, General Howard. I also appreciate your follow-up to the specific questions I asked the last time you were here. Further to that, in terms of the contractors who were hired through the U.S.-led police training program, who are the U.S. contractors?

BGen A. J. Howard: The name of the company—I have that written down—is DynCorp. That is the name of that particular contractor. There might be others, but that one I'm familiar with.

Ms. Dawn Black: Okay.

My next concern is on the detainee transfer issue that's been front and centre the last few days in the media and the allegations of routine torture by Afghan authorities once we've handed prisoners over.

I'm very frustrated about this. It was the first question I asked of our government the first day this Parliament sat in the House of Commons. It was around the detainee transfer agreement and why we didn't follow the Dutch and British model that provided for follow-up by Canadians. I'm really frustrated about it.

I've looked at what Afghans and people in positions of authority in Afghanistan have said. They have said that torture and abuse are routine. In fact, a direct quote from the man who's in the position, incredibly, of being the ombudsman for the NDS in Afghanistan was that sometimes they need to get rough with these suspects—that in these cases “people need some torture”.

I'm somewhat comforted to hear that the Department of National Defence—the military—is looking at this very seriously and following up, but until we stop transferring detainees into this system wherein torture and abuse are admittedly deemed to be normal, I have a lot of serious concerns—and serious concerns, in fact, for the men and women in the Canadian Forces who are in the position of being told to transfer people knowing this may be the case.

Would you agree that we should immediately stop transferring detainees until we can really ensure they will not be tortured and abused?

• (0940)

BGen A. J. Howard: As I've indicated before, I share your sentiments. My own position, the position of any soldier, and the position of the Canadian government is that we want to see detainees handled humanely; it is not my decision to make on the policy the Canadian government will follow. The Prime Minister has indicated we will investigate this fully, and I'm just not at liberty to stray out of that lane from there.

Ms. Dawn Black: Fair enough. I accept that from you.

However, I hear the minister again say—He told us for months and months that the International Red Cross would provide that oversight. Clearly they don't, and that's not the mandate. Now we hear from the minister yesterday, and from the Prime Minister, that the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission can provide that oversight; they say they cannot do that, so—

I understand you can't change this, but my frustration increases.

Thank you very much for your—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hiebert is next.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you again for being here.

During the early part of your presentation you talked about the attacks that were occurring in April. You mentioned that in some instances the Afghans themselves have been not just casualties but perhaps the focus of their attention. Can you elaborate for the committee? Do the Taliban at all differentiate between their foreign targets and targets of their own people, the Afghan people?

BGen A. J. Howard: Certainly the international community has faced a huge security challenge in going into Afghanistan. Certainly before our arrival I think it's well documented how the Taliban treated local Afghans. You simply need to read any report to see some of the absolutely excruciating activities that were occurring under that regime. Our own soldiers have been targeted by the Taliban. Trying to explain to some families back here why their sons have been murdered in trying to help Afghans is certainly a difficult proposition.

The Taliban continue to try to terrorize and coerce everybody within Afghanistan. The attack that we saw on the UN convoy I find absolutely unacceptable, as these were simply aid workers trying to come in and help local Afghans, but it does show that without a secure environment the development cannot take hold.

So I think we're on the right track when it comes to trying to provide secure environments. We do need to show Afghans that there is a better way and they need to rise up and take responsibility for their security, to work with their own fledgling Afghan national security forces. Capacity building is required through all segments of Afghan government, and we do need to find a way to neutralize the Taliban. You do that by showing the Afghans a better way.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Are you saying, then, that the Afghan casualties are inadvertent, or are they often their own targets? My question is this. Are they trying to disperse the casualties among the Afghan people to undermine the foreign efforts, or does it just happen to be that sometimes that happens?

BGen A. J. Howard: I have to be careful of how much I can say on this particular issue. It is very evident to our soldiers that the Taliban will target the local population, especially if they see them cooperating with us. There is the delivery of what's called night letters that say, if you continue to assist with ISAF forces—whether you're an interpreter or whether you're providing information—then you can expect us to come and deal with you. So the Taliban do target Afghan nationals; they do target NGOs and IOs, and they do target ISAF forces.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Mr. Chair, I'll share the balance of my time with my colleague.

• (0945)

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Earlier you were asked about escalation. Upon the announcement of the tank purchase and leasing, there was the allegation that we were in fact escalating the conflict in Afghanistan. Would you please explain, for the committee, the role that the tanks are filling in Afghanistan as opposed to the LAVs, in some situations?

BGen A. J. Howard: Certainly. Maybe I could just start a little further back. You'll recall last fall there was a request from the joint task force itself. There were three serious pieces of enhancement they required. First off was an infantry company to help better protect the PRT. That, in my opinion, has been a great success because they've been able to double their output—double the number of patrols, double the number of secure meetings that have occurred.

The second was a request to deploy Leopard tanks to better protect the troops and to allow us to better establish secure conditions so that reconstruction and the like could continue. And the third enhancement was to bring in a number of experts, engineers, to help with quick impact projects and the like.

I'm sorry I didn't get to the tank issue per se.

The Chair: Thank you. I just have a question. There was some indication after the LAV explosion, which claimed six of our soldiers, that there was better technology, that the Taliban were using different explosives and different techniques. Was that the case, that you're aware of, or was it just bad luck?

BGen A. J. Howard: At the end of every serious incident we conduct a very rapid analysis of what's occurred. I call it the "96-hour report". In this particular case, the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, Lieutenant-General Walt Natynczyk, personally asked for the 96-hour report in order to huddle with the Chief of the Land Staff, expeditionary commander, and ADM Materiel and actually go through our analysis and pictures to see what actually occurred here.

That analysis is under way. At this point it would be premature to speculate on exactly what occurred. The analysis is still going on.

The output of all of this is that, having realized what's occurred, are there any other further equipment improvements we could make? What do we need to change through our procedures?

My own personal view at this point is that we had some bad luck in that one particular location. We've had many IEDs go off in the last several weeks. Our equipment and our procedures have saved many Canadian and Afghan lives. The equipment we have is first-rate. But we need to look closely at this one. It was catastrophic, the result, and none of us want to see that occur again.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, and thank you for being here today. We certainly look forward to your next visit.

The committee will switch to in camera to discuss the report.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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