

# Chapter 11

## Safety of aid workers and Australian civilian personnel

11.1 A hostile environment generates manifold problems for aid workers and those they seek to help. Aid agencies readily acknowledge that the lack of security hinders their operations and limits their access to people in need.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the committee considers the safety of all workers involved in the delivery of Australian aid programs in Afghanistan and the implications for the effective delivery of aid.

### Safety of aid workers—limited access and ability to consult and monitor

11.2 People delivering development assistance in Afghanistan face great insecurity. Between 2006 and 2010 there were over 160 attacks on aid workers with over 50 recorded for 2011.<sup>2</sup> According to the 2012 TLO report, 40 per cent of NGOs interviewed raised concerns about security even though local organisations often managed successfully to avoid threats and work in insurgency-controlled areas. It found, however, that insecurity restricts organisational mobility and creates an imbalance of coverage, with more projects implemented in secure areas. The report quoted one NGO respondent, who stated that: 'security is manageable most of the time in our target communities, but it is a major problem for outreach'. He stated further: 'If we expand to other sectors, we will probably only work close to the district centres'.<sup>3</sup> As a result, there is an imbalance of development activities between districts considered relatively safe and accessible (Tirin Kot, Deh Rawud, and Chora) and those where governmental control is more tenuous (Gizab, Char China, Khas Uruzgan, and Chenartu).<sup>4</sup>

11.3 As noted previously, NGOs operated in Afghanistan long before the fall of the Taliban in September 2001, when the country was highly insecure. At times, they withdrew from areas affected by conflict, but generally re-entered following agreements reached with the warring parties.<sup>5</sup> According to one study, aid agencies 'negotiated access to contested areas on the basis of the population's right to aid, the value of development services and their own impartial position'.<sup>6</sup> In this regard,

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1 See for example UNHCR, '2012 UNHCR country operations profile—Afghanistan', <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486eb6> (accessed 18 September 2012).

2 Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Morgan Hughes, *Aid Worker Security Report 2012, Host states and their impact on security for humanitarian operations*, Humanitarian Outcomes, December 2012, pp. 3–4.

3 TLO, *Uruzgan: 18 months after the Dutch/Australian Leadership Handover*, A TLO Provincial Profile, April 2012, p. 8.

4 TLO, *Uruzgan: 18 months after the Dutch/Australian Leadership Handover*, A TLO Provincial Profile, April 2012, p. 8.

5 See comments by Caritas and CARE Australia, Chapter 6, paragraphs 6.12–6.13.

6 Phil Sparrow, *In it for the long haul? Delivering Australian aid to Afghanistan*, ACFID Research in Development Series Report no. 1, March 2011, p. 21.

Caritas acknowledged the challenges ahead for NGOs operating in Afghanistan but noted that many had been embedded within communities for many years and are highly regarded for their understanding of the local context which enables them to operate safely. Even so, Mr de Groot explained:

Many of us are wondering, 'How does civil society survive into the future?' Whilst forces may leave, the security conversation, and the support to it, still needs to be considered. This is a country that still has conflict, and that cannot be ignored just in a transitional way by ISAF.<sup>7</sup>

11.4 He noted that security would be a continuing issue that needs ongoing debate—not just for NGOs to do their work but for the people of Afghanistan. In his view, the international community still needs to consider carefully how to invest in security, systems and apparatus within Afghanistan for the sake of the people.<sup>8</sup> Mr Poulter agreed with the view that security would likely be 'a key issue for outside actors going into Uruzgan'.<sup>9</sup>

11.5 Undoubtedly, the security environment poses a risk to the personal safety of those delivering aid and of the effectiveness of the aid provided.<sup>10</sup> This danger to aid workers places severe constraints on their ability to deliver assistance effectively.<sup>11</sup> In some cases they are forced to manage projects remotely from more secure locations, sometimes they remove themselves altogether from troubled areas. Thus, insecurity impedes the delivery of basic health and education services, hinders the construction of necessary infrastructure, inhibits job-creation and arrests private sector activity.<sup>12</sup>

11.6 While insecurity poses a threat to the welfare of aid workers and in some cases to the intended beneficiaries, it also undermines efforts to achieve development objectives in other ways. For example, the Afghanistan country level joint evaluation found that insecurity, which had expanded and escalated in Afghanistan, contributed to the difficulties of data collection for assessing development results.<sup>13</sup> AusAID

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7 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 54.

8 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 54.

9 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 42.

10 See for example, *Submission 2*, p. 1 and *Submission 16*, p. 9.

11 Professor Maley noted the extreme difficulty when undertaking reconstruction in an environment where basic security is absent including increased risk to the beneficiaries of reconstruction projects, in ways that can be life-threatening. Attachment to *Submission 4*, William Maley, 'Reconstruction: A Critical Assessment' in Amin Saikal (ed.), *The Afghanistan Conflict and Australia's Role*, Melbourne University Press, 2011, p. 91.

12 See for example, Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Joint Evaluation of the Paris Declaration Phase 2: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2010*, p. 7. It stated that insecurity impedes appropriate utilization of aid and achievement of development results.

13 Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Joint Evaluation of the Paris Declaration Phase 2: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2010*, p. 7. According to Christian Aid 'Ethnic and regional tensions are once more on the increase with ethnic bloc parties re-emerging and Afghans fearing ethnic warfare once international troops depart'. Christian Aid, written evidence to UK Select Committee, paragraph 3.5.

similarly observed that the presence of military conflict severely restricted movement of development workers and affected their ability to monitor programs directly.<sup>14</sup> According to AusAID:

Credible and capable delivery partners are limited in number, particularly in Provinces such as Uruzgan. Partners that advocate for women's empowerment and are able to provide services direct to women and girls are even more limited.<sup>15</sup>

11.7 Professor Maley also referred to problems monitoring project implementation and that donors operating in insecure areas may be inclined to favour large organisational recipients of funds rather than small, community-based actors as direct beneficiaries. In his view, it could foster excessive reliance on dubious subcontractors as ground-level delivery agents.<sup>16</sup>

11.8 Defence not only highlighted the risks to safety posed by hostile elements but from worksite accidents. It stated that safety practices and culture within the local construction industry were not at the same level as more developed nations. Furthermore, the security environment in Uruzgan does not allow full time supervision of worksites by the PRT.<sup>17</sup>

### **Summary**

11.9 The uncertainty generated by the withdrawal of foreign troops by the end of 2014, means that aid agencies must think seriously about their operations in Afghanistan. Security and the safety of aid workers and the intended beneficiaries then looms large in decisions about the type of aid that would be most effective and sustainable; the best channels for delivering assistance; the means of engaging local communities; and monitoring and evaluating aid programs effectively.

### **Safety of Australian personnel**

11.10 The *Independent Review of Australia's Aid Effectiveness* commended AusAID for its flexibility in responding to a range of new challenges over recent years and cited its performance in Afghanistan with its rapidly increasing program in a difficult and dangerous environment which exposed staff to risks. Indeed, AusAID staff with the Uruzgan PRT regularly travel outside the secure military base at Tarin Kowt and spend periods of time at forward-operating bases—four to five times a week to meet communities and provincial government officials.<sup>18</sup> They do so under the protection of

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14 *Submission 16*, p. 8.

15 *Submission 16*, pp. 8–9.

16 Attachment to *Submission 4*, William Maley, 'Reconstruction: A Critical Assessment' in Amin Saikal (ed.), *The Afghanistan Conflict and Australia's Role*, Melbourne University Press, 2011, p. 91.

17 *Submission 17*, p. [4].

18 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Committee Hansard*, Estimates, 31 May 2012, p. 79 and *Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness*, April 2011, p. 268.

the ADF. The review recognised AusAID's role in Afghanistan as integral to Australia's whole-of-government efforts. It observed:

Ongoing insecurity, coupled with the very weak capacity of the Afghan government at national and provincial levels, constitute a difficult environment for delivering Australia's program of assistance.<sup>19</sup>

11.11 The Review noted that the scale of Australia's country programs to Afghanistan in 2015 'will hinge on the context at the time, around which there is considerable uncertainty'.<sup>20</sup> It went further:

...in any scaling up there needs to be a strong emphasis on both the safety of Australians and their ability to get the job done. In Uruzgan, there would clearly need to be close synchronisation between Australia's military presence (including how long it will last) and aid personnel being there.<sup>21</sup>

11.12 Some Australian agencies do not have personnel in Afghanistan and their direct contact is mainly through visits to Kabul. For example, ACIAR noted that as a result of poor security and political uncertainty, the operating environment in Afghanistan was complex which limited Australian scientists gaining access.<sup>22</sup> ACIAR does not have permanent officers in Afghanistan but occasionally has staff visit the country. During such visits, they do not go outside Kabul. ACIAR relies on its implementing agencies, such as ICARDA, to visit the provinces where they have people working on projects. Dr Dixon explained that some of the staff on the ground in Afghanistan would be internationals but most would be local personnel employed by the international organisation.<sup>23</sup> Professional private security contractors support AusAID and other embassy personnel located in Kabul.<sup>24</sup>

11.13 The AFP has permanent officers stationed in Afghanistan but generally they do not 'go out into the community'. Defence provides security when AFP officers are required to go beyond the secure perimeters at Tarin Kowt. In May 2012, the AFP conducted a security assessment to determine the security issues relating to AFP operations in Afghanistan, and found that the risk to AFP operations remained very high and indicated that officers should not travel outside the wire in Tarin Kowt.<sup>25</sup> Assistant Commissioner Mandy Newton told the committee that AFP personnel were operating in a war zone where the ANP in particular and coalition forces were a priority target of the insurgency.<sup>26</sup> She noted:

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19 *Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness*, April 2011, pp. 268–269.

20 *Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness*, April 2011, pp. 11 and 143.

21 *Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness*, April 2011, p. 143.

22 *Submission 1*, p. 2.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 34.

24 *Submission 16*, p. 9.

25 Assistant Commissioner Mandy Newton, AFP, *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 41.

26 *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 38.

...at this point in time the Afghan National Police are dying at a rate of two to one in comparison to military personnel in Afghanistan, so they are the highest targets in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup>

11.14 DFAT recognised that the work of the civilian officers with the Uruzgan PRT would not be possible without the ADF's support, which provides force protection to enable staff to move outside their base in Tarin Kowt.<sup>28</sup> According to Mr Peter Baxter, the ADF was providing 'a purpose-specific contingent of its personnel to look after this increased civilian component and all of the equipment and the like that goes with that'. Mr Baxter explained that, in such a very difficult security situation, the ADF would provide support for AusAID development officers when they move off secure bases to inspect projects, to consult with local communities and conduct other activities associated with delivering an aid program.<sup>29</sup> This protection also covered DFAT and AFP personnel.

*Operating in a war zone*



*A US Air Force CH-47 Chinook helicopter circles the Australian Reconstruction Task Force camp. (image courtesy of the Department of Defence)*

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27 *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 40.

28 See Mr Dawson, Mr Lehmann, Ms Rawson and Mr Sargeant, *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, pp. 6, 19 and 48.

29 *Submission 17*, p. [4] and Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Committee Hansard*, Estimates, 3 June 2010, p. 51.

11.15 Defence stated that, given the security environment in Afghanistan, the safety of both military and civilian personnel remained 'an ongoing challenge'. It explained that force protection measures used to manage security threats included the provision of physical security, personal armour and tactical training to operate in the Afghan environment.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Closure of PRT***

11.16 Clearly, hostile forces in Uruzgan pose a serious threat to the safety of Australian personnel working in the province. The closure of the Uruzgan PRT will affect the way in which development assistance previously undertaken by its members is delivered. DFAT acknowledged that access was likely to be more difficult after the transition and informed the committee that it would seek to maintain links to Uruzgan after the completion of the transition. Its level of engagement, however, would depend on the security situation.<sup>31</sup>

11.17 In May 2012, Mr Baxter explained that AusAID had tailored its program to take account of the time when ISAF forces withdraw from the country and Afghan national security forces take the lead for providing security throughout the country. He accepted that without the provision of force protection—the physical presence of the ADF in Uruzgan province—AusAID would not be able to continue to operate as it had.<sup>32</sup> AusAID explained that when that happens in Uruzgan, rather than retain a physical presence in the province, AusAID would run its programs at the national level and manage most of the activities for which it is responsible from Kabul.<sup>33</sup> As noted previously, a private security firm provides security for Australian personnel attached to the embassy in the capital.<sup>34</sup>

11.18 The committee has described the numerous development projects that Australian agencies have undertaken in Uruzgan. Many of the current activities in the province are expected to conclude within the coming 12 to 18 months and, after security transition, AusAID anticipates that it would have only a small number of activities in Uruzgan itself.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Summary***

11.19 As Australian forces withdraw, the ability of Australian personnel to go out into the field to meet and talk to local leaders and communities and to plan, design and

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30 *Submission 17*, p. [4].

31 *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 3.

32 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Committee Hansard*, Estimates, 31 May 2012, p. 80.

33 *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 7 and Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Committee Hansard*, Estimates, 31 May 2012, p. 80. See also *Submission 16*, p. 9.

34 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, *Committee Hansard*, Estimates, 3 June 2010, p. 48.

35 *Committee Hansard*, 3 December 2012, p. 7.

monitor programs will be further limited. The pull back of Australian personnel delivering development assistance from Uruzgan to Kabul means that the opportunities for close consultation with local people and for gathering data and assessing projects will shrink. This remoteness from intended beneficiaries creates particular problems for the effective delivery of aid—not only for future programs but for the sustainability of completed and current projects especially in the less secure provinces such as Uruzgan.

### **Afghans who have worked with Australian aid agencies**

11.20 At the beginning of December 2012, Professor Maley reminded the committee about the many Afghans who have exposed themselves to risk by working closely with Australian aid officials or agencies working on behalf of Australia. He stated that their future safety and well-being needed to figure prominently in planning for the next phase.<sup>36</sup>

11.21 On 13 December 2012, the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, the Hon Chris Bowen MP and the Minister for Defence, the Hon Stephen Smith MP, announced that Australia would offer resettlement to Australia to eligible locally engaged Afghan employees at risk of harm due to their employment in support of Australia's mission in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

11.22 The policy is intended for locally engaged Afghan employees at 'the greatest risk of harm' as a consequence of the support they have provided to Australia's mission in Afghanistan. Under the policy, locally engaged Afghan employees interested in resettling in Australia would be assessed by their employing Australian agency against specific threat criteria. If deemed eligible, the locally engaged Afghan employees would be able to apply for a visa under Australia's Humanitarian Program. They would have access to the same resettlement services as other humanitarian entrants, including accommodation support, basic assistance to set up a household, English language courses and help to access government, community and health services.<sup>38</sup>

11.23 The committee welcomes this announcement, but highlights the importance of Australian government agencies working cooperatively together to ensure that visa applications and the process of resettlement is managed well. The committee cites the shortcomings identified in the processing of scholarships and visa applications covered in chapter 9 to underscore the need for effective whole-of-government administration of this scheme. The matter of corruption, which has marred the Australian Leadership Awards Scholarships program for Afghanistan, is a particular

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36 *Submission 4*, p. [5].

37 DFAT, answer to written question on notice no. 14.

38 The term 'at the greatest risk of harm' is used in the Joint media release by the Hon Chris Bowen MP—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and the Hon Stephen Smith MP—Minister for Defence, 'Visa policy for at-risk Afghan employees', 13 December 2012, <http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/cb/2012/cb192423.htm> (accessed 17 December 2012).

matter of concern and should be a vital lesson that is applied to the resettlement scheme.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**11.24 The committee supports the Australian Government's initiative to offer resettlement to Australia to locally engaged Afghan employees at the greatest risk of harm as a consequence of their support to Australia's mission in Afghanistan. The committee recommends, however, that the Australian Government ensure that the resettlement program is available to all such locally engaged staff at credible risk and not just those at the greatest risk of harm.**

#### **Recommendation 5**

**11.25 In light of problems with the Australian Leadership Awards Scholarships for Afghanistan and the delay in processing visas for visiting Afghans, detailed in chapter 9, the committee recommends that DFAT, AusAID, and DIAC review carefully the procedures and protocols governing this resettlement scheme. The committee recommends that together they build measures into the administration of the scheme that will expedite the process, minimise risks to the safety of those in Afghanistan seeking eligibility and uphold the integrity of the scheme (especially guarding against corruption). The committee recommends that all relevant agencies give close attention to strengthening inter-departmental communication and liaison, oversight of the program, and streamlining administrative processes.**

#### **Conclusion**

11.26 For over a decade, international forces have been helping Afghanistan to restore peace to the country. Despite this considerable presence, disruptive elements within Afghanistan continue to undermine these efforts. Indeed, Afghanistan is a country whose people experience persistent insecurity due to continuing hostilities between opposing factions. As Afghanistan approaches the transformation decade, when it will take full responsibility for its own affairs, the country's security remains uncertain.

11.27 Evidence before the committee has demonstrated the link between security and the effectiveness of delivering development assistance. A hostile environment poses risks to the viability of aid projects, to the welfare of the beneficiaries of development assistance and to the safety of aid workers. The uncertainty about Afghanistan's future security as it transitions to the transformation decade requires all donor countries and aid agencies to consider carefully how to manage the risks while ensuring their aid is effective.

11.28 The committee also discussed the numerous reconstruction projects in Uruzgan involving the building of schools and training facilities. The PRT with the cooperation of local communities has achieved much progress especially in the education and health sectors. The committee is most concerned about their sustainability as the PRT shuts down and AusAID staff draw back to Kabul. It understands the need to relocate Australian civilian staff from Uruzgan following the closure of the PRT due to the lack of a secure base from which to work. The



committee is of the view that Australia should not abandon the province but seek to achieve a phased and gradual transition. Planning for development assistance must recognise this fact and the possibility that political and military hostilities may escalate and take on new forms. Many witnesses raised concerns about the gains made to date being lost should the security situation deteriorate. In the following chapter, the committee recognises that the effectiveness of Australian aid to Afghanistan is inextricably connected to security.

