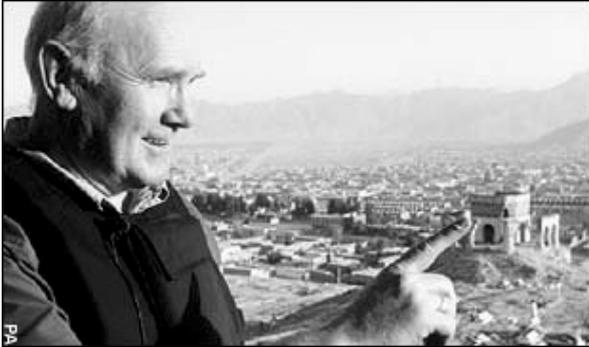


## OUT OF THE FRYING PAN?

Early this year John Reid, Defence Secretary, announced that Britain would be sending to Afghanistan an additional 3,300 soldiers, with accompanying helicopters, planes and artillery. Yet since 2002 Afghanistan has been the "forgotten war", overshadowed by events in Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Iran. So why are British troops going to Afghanistan, what will they face there and what are the likely consequences of this action? As many of the soldiers have only recently returned home from Iraq, are they going out of the frying pan and into a very dangerous fire?



*John Reid in Kabul*

The present situation in Afghanistan is worse than at any time since the US "victory" of 2002. Just as the Soviets found a decade earlier, it is not possible to control the country in the accepted sense. The US/UK coalition has installed the government of President Hamid Karzai, legitimised by an election victory in 2005. Outside Kabul, Karzai has little power, and even within the capital it is reported that electricity and water supplies are sporadic and crime is soaring. He drafted some of the leading tribal warlords into the government, but they have not reciprocated by allowing the forces of law into their fiefdoms. The war-lords are well-known to be double-dealing, siding with whichever side is in the ascendant, and are frequently engaged in criminal activities. In addition, there is widespread corruption in local government and police forces.

Insurgent activity, led by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, is growing all the time, especially in the south of Afghanistan where the bulk of the UK forces will be sent to the province of Helmand. In 2005, insurgents killed over 1,500 people and in a recent Congressional hearing, US Navy Rear Admiral Robert Moeller said *"We anticipate that we are going to see a fairly violent spring and summer and then an improvement in overall conditions"* though it is hard to share his optimism for the future. There is a growing use of car bombs and suicide bombers, tactics learned in Iraq. In February, 200 Taliban fighters engaged 300 government troops in Helmand, forcing them to retreat despite help from US ground-attack planes.

Taliban forces are especially targeting schools, as symbols of "un-Islamic" culture – they teach girls – and because many are built with western aid. Teachers have been murdered, and 66 of the 224 schools in Helmand

are closed. Some say the Taliban want an uneducated, suspicious population as it is easier to control.

A major problem for the British troops in Helmand will be the huge growth of the opium poppy industry in the last couple of years. Before 2001, the Taliban government had all but eradicated the poppy for religious and moral reasons, but now it is back with the warlords who returned to Afghanistan with the US and UK forces. Heroin production is estimated to be over 4,500 tonnes in 2006, a grim record. The trade is worth about £650m a year in Helmand and in total accounts for one third of the Afghan Gross Domestic Product. The drugs trade brings corruption and crime and has now been joined by the Taliban, who see it as a way of harming the occupying powers. Indeed, it is estimated that 90% of the heroin sold in Britain now comes from Afghanistan. There is a lethal alliance of drug traders and Taliban with a lot to lose – these are the people the British troops will have to defeat.



*Opium poppies in Afghanistan*

By July there will be a total of 5,700 UK troops in Afghanistan, costing an estimated £1bn over 3 years though the commitment may be longer. The armed forces minister, Adam Ingram, recently told the Commons defence committee: *"It would be foolhardy to say at the end of three years it's over or at the end of five years it's over. We don't know how this will develop."* Worryingly, Mr Ingram also said there had been *"too much talk of a need for an exit strategy."*

The EU estimates that only 13% of Afghans have access to safe drinking water, and that 70% are undernourished. One child in four dies before the age of five. Drugs and the associated crime and corruption offer a quick way of making money. It seems to be impossible to control Afghanistan militarily – perhaps a military withdrawal and offer of a way to improve the country's economy would be a more effective way of ending the conflict there. Or is there another agenda, another reason for installing well-armed western troops there? Southern Afghanistan shares a long border with Iran...