



House of Commons
Defence Committee

Afghanistan—Camp Bastion Attack: Government Response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report of Session 2013–14

**Second Special Report of Session
2014–15**

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The Defence Committee

The Defence Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies.

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Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the internet at www.parliament.uk/parliament.uk/defcom.

The Reports of the Committee, the formal minutes relating to that report, oral evidence taken and some or all written evidence are available in a printed volume. Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are James Rhys (Clerk), Karen Jackson (Audit Adviser), Eleanor Scarnell (Committee Specialist), Ian Thomson (Committee Specialist), Christine Randall (Senior Committee Assistant), and Rowena Macdonald and Carolyn Bowes (Committee Assistants).

Contacts

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Second Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Thirteenth Report of Session 2013–14 on Afghanistan–Camp Bastion Attack on 16 April 2014. The Government’s response to this Report was received on 17 June 2014. This is appended.

Annex: Government response

The Government welcomes the House of Commons Defence Committee’s Report (HC830) on the Camp Bastion attack of the 14–15 September 2014, published on the 16th April 2014.

Our formal response to its recommendations and conclusions is set out below. The Committee’s headings and findings are highlighted in bold, with the Government’s response set out in plain text. For ease of reference, paragraph numbering in brackets refers to the order in which they are presented in the Committee’s Report.

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) would like to reiterate our sympathy to the families of Lieutenant Colonel Raible and Sergeant Atwell for their profound loss and pay tribute to the bravery of all UK and US personnel who defeated the enemy during the attack on Camp Bastion that night.

The burning man incident

1. At the time of the attack the Memorandum of Understanding between USCENTCOM and PJHQ had not been revised, despite the fact that all parties appeared to agree on the necessity to make revisions in the aftermath of the “burning man incident”. Witnesses were neither able to explain to us which members of the Executive Steering Group rejected the revised draft MOU nor what the reasons for the rejection were. The delays to the process of revision allowed weaknesses in command and control arrangements for force protection to persist. It is an enduring characteristic of conflict that the enemy fights back. ISAF personnel were exposed to unnecessary risk. In response to our report the MoD must explain why the failure to revise the MOU prior to the September 2012 attack should not be regarded as an act of omission. (Paragraph 24)

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is a political, high level document which records commitment but is not legally binding. Often it defines a relationship, avoiding the formalities of a treaty. In this particular instance, the MOU was designed to provide a framework for the operation of the Bastion, Leatherneck and Shorabak Complex at Theatre level, covering cooperation ranging from infrastructure, the operation of the airfield, with force protection being just one element. As with UK delegation of Command, the day to day operation of this MOU was the responsibility of the in Theatre Commanders enabling flexibility to adjust operations accordingly. Therefore it would be inappropriate for CJO to do anything other than provide operational guidance, leaving those empowered in Theatre to make tactical decisions on the ground.

The attack on Camp Bastion, 14-15 September 2012, was the result of a number of causal factors that contributed to the vulnerability of the complex: the fact that the extant MOU had not been revised was not one of these. Although the Deputy Commander of ISAF stated that the command and control arrangements detailed in the extant MOU at the time were sub-optimal, the Joint Review Board documentation released by the US as part of their investigation, states that command and control of the incident was effective and well coordinated. The MOD believes that the significant emphasis that the Committee has placed on the importance of the MOU is therefore unwarranted.

The proposed revisions to the extant MOU in question were never formally exposed to the UK command chain. The minutes of Executive Steering Group (ESG) meetings at the time make no mention of any formal discussions or decisions taken regarding the MOU.

Security incidents recorded in Helmand Province

2. The inference we drew from the Chief of Joint Operation's evidence was that the number of security incidents was unusually high in Helmand Province in 2012. Unfortunately the MoD declined to provide us with comparable details of the level of security incidents recorded in Helmand for previous years as this information was classified. This would have allowed us to make an informed assessment of the relative threat levels in the area at the time. (Paragraph 26)

The MOD apologises for the delay in sharing this data and has provided a copy of the requested classified information with this response.

Camp Bastion guard towers

3. The arrangements for manning of the guard towers around the perimeter of Camp Bastion were exposed by the attack as inadequate. The decision not to man Tower 16 on the night of 14–15 September 2012 contributed directly to the failure to detect the insurgents at an early stage which might have limited the impact of their assault. We note that all guard towers are now manned constantly. (Paragraph 33)

As stated in the Joint Review Board documentation released by the US as part of their investigation, Tower 17 also had sight of the location where the insurgents broke through. However, whilst Tower 17 was manned, due to that night's extremely low light levels, of just 2% illumination and no moon, it was assessed that the guards were unable to detect the attackers. The attackers were obscured by a Wadi until the last 250m and they struck 140m from Tower 16 and 200m from Tower 17 at the extreme range of visibility from these towers.

The decision not to man all the towers at any one time reflected the assessed nature of the threat at the time, which was predominantly focused on vehicle entry points to the complex. The UK position on guard tower manning was consistent with measures implemented by ISAF forces across the complex.

Perimeter Security

4. We were concerned to learn of the number of breaches of the perimeter fence of Camp Bastion in the two years prior to the attack and the apparent tolerance of poppy cultivation immediately outside the fence. We consider that the failure to take concerted action to prevent these activities increased the risk of surveillance and intelligence gathering by Afghan nationals which could have assisted insurgent planning for an attack on the base. (Paragraph 38)

Investigations of previous breaches concluded that they were likely to be low-level criminal activity and scrap metal theft, often conducted by unarmed juveniles and children.

Any identified breaches of the perimeter fence due to scrapping activity were investigated immediately and the damage to the fence repaired. As CJO said in the open session: “At the edge of the camp, as you were right to point out, there were settlements, but those settlements were not cleansed. Imagine the circumstances in which you would have to find reason to do that. Those people were going about their normal day-to-day business. There was a mixture of criminality and silliness by children, and the last thing we want to do if we find a kid trying to get over a fence is to shoot him or her dead. In the balance of judgment at the perimeter level, you have not only to be absolutely sure that this is a terrorist intervention or an enemy intervention, but to make sure that, in determining that, you do not mistakenly kill an innocent person going about his normal business or who may just be mischievous. Some of those judgments are really difficult. Soldiers face difficulties every day when trying to come to those judgments about whether or not an enemy threat is real.

Since the incident we have implemented measures to improve force protection. This includes increased manning of towers and patrolling within set sectors of the perimeter as was demonstrated to the HCDC during their visit to theatre.

Force Protection projects and expenditure

5. Media reports suggested that prior to the September 2012 attack additional security measures at Camp Bastion were denied funding by the MoD on cost grounds. We have seen no evidence that proposals for improved force protection measures were turned down by the UK chain of command. (Paragraph 45)

The MOD welcomes the Committee’s agreement that there is no evidence that MOD withheld authority for force protection enhancement measures on cost grounds.

6. The “burning man” incident in March 2012 prompted a review of security measures around the perimeter of the Bastion airfield. We consider that the decision by the Executive Steering Group to create a ditch and berm defensive obstacle rather than erect additional fencing was a proportionate response to the threat of an insider attack through vehicular incursion onto the airfield from within the base. It is unlikely that additional fencing around the airfield perimeter would have presented a significant impediment to the insurgents on 14-15 September 2012 and altered significantly the outcome of the attack. (Paragraph 46)

The MOD welcomes the Committee’s agreement that an additional fence around the airfield perimeter would not have had a material effect on the outcome of the attack on

Camp Bastion in September 2012, and that the installation of a ditch and berm defensive obstacle was a proportionate response to the insider threat to the airfield.

7. The MoD were wrong to refuse to share the report on the attack prepared by Lieutenant General Bradshaw, in his capacity as Deputy Commander ISAF. As this was the highest level UK report into the attack, its status as an ISAF document should not have prevented its release to us. The MoD has been obstructive and unhelpful to us as we tried to establish the facts surrounding the attack. (Paragraph 48)

The MOD has co-operated fully with the Committee's investigation. Both the Defence Secretary and the Chief of Joint Operations (CJO) have given oral evidence to the Committee and CJO has provided the Committee with a classified briefing on the events of 14-15 September 2012 in closed session. The MOD has also responded in writing to a number of specific questions which the Committee has raised. Furthermore, the MOD facilitated a visit by the Committee to the site of the attack in Camp Bastion where Committee members were briefed by commanders on the ground. The MOD has been as open and helpful as possible whilst maintaining operational security for the force protection of the Bastion, Leatherneck, Shorabak complex. The MOD has also provided the Committee with a redacted version of the RAF Force Protection Wing Operational Learning Account and After Action Report which was produced in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

Deputy Commander ISAF, Lieutenant General Bradshaw, produced his report at the direction of Commander ISAF and on behalf of HQ ISAF, not the UK MOD. This classified report is owned by HQ ISAF and it is not within the MOD's gift to release it to the Committee. It should be noted that this document was not part of the documentation released by the US in the context of their accountability review.

8. We are concerned that the perimeter security and force protection measures in place at the time of the attack were inadequate. We were told that the focus of ISAF commanders had been on security incidents elsewhere in Helmand Province and on threats from insider attack. Insufficient attention was given to the fundamental requirement of defending Camp Bastion from external assault. We believe that this was complacent. Given that the attack took place in the British sector of the camp, British commanders must bear a degree of responsibility for these systemic failures and associated reputational damage. (Paragraph 49)

In September 2012 there were 37 UK bases across central Helmand. ISAF troops still had lead responsibility for security in much of the Province and ISAF troops were heavily engaged in direct combat operations against the insurgents. The operational priority was within Task Force Helmand's area of operations, and the threat to UK forces in that area was assessed to be greater than that in the vicinity of Camp Bastion. Contemporaneous threat assessments did not indicate a direct threat of ground attack on the Bastion, Leatherneck, Shorabak complex. Commanders in the field constantly review the resources and range of assets under their command against the threats and react appropriately to these assessments. It is however, important to understand the nature of the insurgency in Afghanistan; not least the Taliban's proven ability to adapt tactics and techniques. Faced with such a resourceful enemy no defensive system could eliminate our exposure to risk entirely.

Notwithstanding the above, in the 12 months prior to the September 2012 attack, a total of 21 infrastructure projects had been completed at Camp Bastion, including installation or modification of protective walls, CCTV, additional fencing, and a range of other enhancements. A concertina wire barrier, a ditch and berm (an artificial ridge or embankment) obstacle and a boundary chain link fence were in place around Camp Bastion at the time of this attack. The number of UK force protection personnel had increased from 110 in 2009 to 293 in September 2012 and this number was judged sufficient when set against the assessed threat at the time. Force protection measures at the time of the attack were coherent and applied to the same standards across the Bastion, Leatherneck, Shorabak complex.

The UK MOD is not complacent and always seeks to capture and learn lessons from current operations. There was no one single causal factor in this incident. This was confirmed by CJO during his appearance before the Committee, when he said “the causal errors evident in the aftermath contributed to that vulnerability. That vulnerability cannot be put down to a single item that failed”.

We are confident that we have identified all significant lessons and acted upon them. Consequently, we are content with our earlier assessment that no further UK action is required. Force protection at Camp Bastion is kept under constant review and is adjusted to provide appropriate levels of mitigation for the assessed threat level.

9. We note the acknowledgement by the MoD that errors were made which, collectively, created the vulnerabilities which were so devastatingly exploited by the enemy. From the evidence we have received, we are satisfied that as far as possible, these vulnerabilities have now been addressed. (Paragraph 50)

The MOD welcomes and agrees with the Committee’s conclusion.

10. We recommend that the MoD capture the lessons identified from this extraordinary attack as part of its wider efforts to learn lessons from Afghanistan for future operations. It should explain how it intends to do so in its response to our Report. (Paragraph 51)

Lessons have been identified and captured following numerous UK, US and ISAF reviews in the year following the attack on Camp Bastion. As a result of these extensive efforts, there have been further significant enhancements to force protection at the complex: additional personnel have been deployed, command and control arrangements improved and base surveillance measures enhanced.

As we are still committed to ongoing operations in Afghanistan, we have yet to agree plans for a detailed lessons learned exercise beyond those already conducted on a routine basis by all three Services. The MOD has already provided extensive information on the Defence lessons process¹. Lessons identified following individual instances such as the attack on Camp Bastion are included in these processes as a matter of routine business.

¹<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defencecommittee/afghanistan/written/8957.pdf>