

FDI Feature Interview

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Nation-Building in Afghanistan: Australia's Contribution to PRT Uruzgan

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Key Points

- PRT Uruzgan reconstruction and capacity-building initiatives have made progress since operations began. There have been noticeable developments in areas such as health care, education and infrastructure, the latter emphasising the construction of roads, bridges, schools and government buildings.
- Although significant resources have been injected, more donor support and resources are needed for the development of Uruzgan Province.
- The persistence of the Taliban insurgency has continued to hinder PRT reconstruction and capacity-building programs that would otherwise bring additional benefits to the people of Uruzgan Province.

Summary

The concept of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) first emerged from US experience in Iraq, and was later transferred to Afghanistan as a necessary capability to facilitate district and provincial-level reconstruction, development and capacity-building programmes. For a number of years Australia has maintained a battle group in Uruzgan Province and has made an important contribution to its PRT mission. Recently, Australian diplomat **Bernard Philip**, who led the Australian element from August 2010 to August 2011, spoke to FDI's **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about the role and composition of PRT Uruzgan, ongoing programs and capacity-building initiatives and the future of the PRT's mission in Uruzgan.

Commentary

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Q: Describe the role and composition of PRT Uruzgan?

Bernard Philip: The PRT mission has four core roles. First, to provide mentoring support to provincial and district officials to improve the capacity of the Afghan Government. Second, to engage with community and tribal leaders to support conflict resolution, promote co-operation, and pursue reintegration opportunities by way of traditional grassroots diplomacy. Third, to identify and manage short-term stabilisation activities, especially in areas which have been insecure and where a security presence might have only just been established. The fourth and final core role is to identify and manage large-scale development activities. In Uruzgan we have focused on the health, education and infrastructure sectors and, to a lesser extent, water and agriculture.

The PRT leadership is multi-national and we have an Australian Foreign Affairs Officer (myself) as the Director. The Commanding Officer of the PRT is a US naval officer. We took over from a Dutch-led PRT on 1 August 2010, although some Dutch staff still remain with the PRT. It now is mostly US and Australian in its composition. The US contribution makes up the largest component, with just over half of our personnel. Presently, there are 175 personnel from Australia in the PRT and also several officials from Slovakia.

The PRT's diversity is a challenge because it means that you have to comply with many different rules and regulations in accessing funding and to integrate different cultures. On the other hand, there are also many strengths that come with different stakeholders such as the ADF, AusAID, USAid and the US military, all of whom we can approach to obtain funding and resources to proceed with a particular project.

The head of our development in the PRT is an AusAID officer. In terms of the composition within the PRT, we have around 20 civilians as political advisors and development advisors. The political advisors are from DFAT and the US State Department and the development advisors are from AusAID, USAID and the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs. We also recently had a slight expansion on the civilian side, with the deployment of officers from the Australian Civilian Corps who primarily focus on district level engagement.

In addition to the main PRT team in Tarin Kot, we have 10 to 14 person PRT district teams in Chora, Deh Rawud and Shahidi Hasas. Although these teams are led by US civil affairs officers, we also regularly rotate through US and Australian civilian advisors. We have also sent mobile teams from the PRT out on extended missions in other parts of Uruzgan. For example, in the Mirabad Valley we have done week-long missions where our people have gone out and engaged with civilians. More recently, we have started to upgrade our engagement with the outlying districts of Gizab and Khas Uruzgan.

On the military side, the core components are 10 US civil affairs personnel who are focused on engaging with local community and district leaders and undertaking small infrastructure projects such as repairing rural roads, digging wells and building retaining walls. We also have an Australian Army engineering team that is responsible for managing large infrastructure projects. Previously, this was a capability assigned to the ADF Mentoring Task Force but was later transferred to the PRT. They provide us with an effective project

management capability and are directly responsible for managing some of our larger projects, such as building or repairing roads, bridges, schools and mosques.

A particular feature of our PRT is that we have a force that provides for our transport and mobility, whereas other PRTs throughout Afghanistan are heavily reliant on military task forces. We have our own security enablers consisting of a 100-strong contingent of Australian and US troops, which has given us an independent capability to operate in many different parts of Uruzgan Province. Our operations officer, who is in charge of our combined US-Australian Security Force, is an Australian Army Major. The overall enabling capabilities, like logistics and communication, are being provided mostly by the US military part of the PRT, but we also rely on the intelligence support from Combined Team Uruzgan.

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Q: Tell us about the programs and capacity-building initiatives that have been rolled out throughout your tenure in Uruzgan?

Bernard Philip: In many ways we have replicated the Dutch effort but with some adjustments. The Dutch PRT had a strong presence at the district and community level through its mission teams that were composed of military civil affairs personnel. It is incredibly helpful having that district level presence and it seems to have worked well. In Afghanistan, you realise just how important it is to go down as far as you can, because there are disconnects at so many levels, to understand the environment and know where to deploy your resources.

In terms of development, our programmes are focused on enhancing the capacity of the Afghan Government to deliver services and, over the past eighteen months, we have expanded our political and development engagement. Our PRT has played a supporting role over the past year in terms of political engagement and provision of security to the road construction. Also through the PRT, the Australians are constructing a bridge across the Dorafshan River to the entrance to the Baluchi Valley, which is an important direct Australian contribution to the project.

Only recently have we had a reliable air connection between Tarin Kot and Kabul, which was a significant breakthrough. The Dutch PRT subsidised the Kam Air Service to one of the local providers and, as a result, Uruzgan has, over the past few years, had a couple of flights per week into Tarin Kot. This has really opened up opportunities and improved connectivity between Tarin Kot and Kabul. These efforts have also been supported by major upgrades to the Tarin Kot runway and we are supporting the governor and others in their efforts to attract more providers to the province.

Geography is critical in Uruzgan. A measure of connectivity exists between Tarin Kot and the other district centres, which has further improved over the past year as a result of the Coalition operations. The situation we now face, with the exception of the road to Khas Uruzgan, is that the roads between Tarin Kot and other districts are open for business. There has been improvement in road security and that has reduced the price of goods in the bazaars. But it still is a very isolated province. When you go below the district community level, connecting remote valleys even to the district community centre is difficult.

The effects of the past three decades of conflict permeate society at all levels. Just about every family has suffered loss. In some cases, quite a few of their sons and daughters have died. This has weakened social trust and caused people to fall back on their more primal

loyalties to family and tribe. It has also meant there are one or two lost generations, especially with regard to education. We have noticed this from engaging the leaders here in the 30 to 40 age group – they either missed out on an education, received a few years of primary school education at best, or went to schools where the teachers were not properly qualified.

There is also a major challenge on the social and economic side of things. Uruzgan has some of the worst indicators in the country and probably the most important figure to mention is the literacy rate, which is lower than 10 per cent for the province as a whole, and significantly lower for women. It also has very high infant and child mortality rates. We are really working with one of the poorest provinces in one of the poorest countries in the world, notwithstanding the progress the Dutch were able to make in those sectors.

We have been successful in strengthening the administration between Tarin Kot and Kabul. The people in Uruzgan Province feel they can be ignored in the larger scheme of things, which is why we put in a lot of effort into facilitating and supporting visits by ministers. We have had about ten ministerial visits over the past year, which is a significant increase. In a society like Afghanistan, having senior leaders visit from Kabul is often the best way of getting them up to speed on Uruzgan's issues. We try to get them to recruit the right people and assign resources, and also encourage them to direct some of the large national programs and the international community funds to Uruzgan.

On the political side, we have developed close and productive relationships with a wide range of key leaders in the province from all of the tribes. It is no secret that there has been a relative power imbalance in Uruzgan over the past 10 years. This is why we have maintained a focus on tribal balance and inclusivity - and seeking to bring a more diverse range of tribal leaders into the government - while at the same time adopting an 'engage with all' approach.

We have a governor, Omar Shirzad, who has been in place now about ten months and is a capable leader. A lot of our efforts are focused on supporting his initiatives to improve the provincial administration and reach out to leaders and communities in all of Uruzgan's districts. Our core mission is not to deliver services, but to improve the Afghan Government's capacity, or in some cases the Afghan NGOs' capacity, to deliver services. That is our priority; it is very difficult and slow work, but it is something that will start to pay dividends.

On that governance side, there has been an increase in what is called the *Tashkeel*, or the number of positions filled in the provincial government, from around 30 per cent to 50 per cent. Some of that is directly attributable to an internship program for young public servants that AusAID has funded. We helped the governor to identify some qualified people to take over key public service positions. For example, the director of electricity and power, the director of public works, the mayor of Tarin Kot all have new and well qualified incumbents, which is an important building block in our ability to ensure the success of our programs. We would like to do a lot more to support the municipal development of Tarin Kot, but so much of that depends on having good administrators in place to work as your partners.

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Q: What will be the focus of the PRT mission over the next 12 months and beyond?

Bernard Philip: In terms of the PRT, our focus, particularly over the next twelve months, will be similar to before, investing effort in bigger programs and try to improve in health, education, roads, agriculture and water, and mentoring the provincial government and promoting political objectives.

There will come a point before transition where we will pull back our effort just like the ADF at some point will probably focus its efforts on the higher level of the Afghan National Army. There will come a point where, with the completion of transition in Uruzgan, the PRT will focus less on district level engagement with local communities and proportionally on building the provincial level of government. There is obviously going to be a focus from the Afghan Government on how the PRTs might evolve before and after transition.

One of the aspects of transition is the Afghan Government taking more of the lead and the PRT doing less direct service delivery and more capacity-building. There has been genuine progress in Uruzgan in the 14 months that I have been in Afghanistan. Although we are very vulnerable to setbacks, at this stage we are on course to be able to achieve our primary goal of transition. From a strategic point of view, transition in Uruzgan is about making sure that this province does not present a source of instability that will ultimately benefit the Taliban.

Working in the PRT is very enjoyable and rewarding, and a day in the life of a development or political advisor is never dull, whether it's organising a *shura* for 500 tribal leaders, mediating local disputes over land, trying to get the water and power turned back on at a hospital or prison, or attempting to persuade local leaders to reintegrate young fighters back into their communities.

The PRT experience in Uruzgan does present lessons for Australia in how we conduct whole-of-government interventions. Australia will look to be a long term security and development partner for Afghanistan as a whole and will maintain a strong residual interest in Uruzgan well beyond 2014.

BIOGRAPHY:

Bernard Philip has served overseas as Senior Civilian Representative in Uruzgan province in Afghanistan (2010-2011) and Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Washington (2006-2009). In Canberra he has worked in a range of positions in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence. He was born in Brisbane and educated at the University of Queensland (BA, LLB) and as a Chevening Scholar at the University of Cambridge (M Phil in International Relations).

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