

ISAF VIII Reviewed

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Great Game Over: HQ NRDC-Italy completes its first operation, 9 months in charge of NATO's ISAF Mission.

After more than a year's preparation and nine long months deployed in one of the World's most testing environments, HQ NRDC-Italy has completed its first operational tour and demonstrated its value to the Alliance by commanding the priority NATO mission during a testing and historic period.

The Build-up

Preparation for the mission began in 2004, with the NRDC-Italy Command Group and the operational planning group outlining the training package that would be required to make the Headquarters ready. Training proper began in January 2005, with a series of lectures and seminars delivered by experts in all areas of the Afghan theatre, mission analysis and discussion within branches and working groups, and the Corps reconfigured to the structure of HQ ISAF to prepare to take on the challenges the mission would present.

The HQ-sponsored training culminated in Ex Eagle Action, held in Solbiate Olona and designed to "beat up" the staff in preparation for the test exercise, sponsored by the operational command J F C - Brunssum, which would take place in NATO's Joint

Warfare Centre in Stavanger, Norway. Here, the HQ met and trained with some of the key NATO augmentees, advisers and staff officers, who would bolster the ISAF VIII complement in key roles in Kabul.



The overall training package represented the most complete preparation any NATO HQ had undergone to assume command of the ISAF mission; and rightfully so, because the Italian-led mission would be faced with considerable challenges and have to be immediately effective in support of the Afghan Government on arrival in Kabul.

Hitting the Ground Running

Deployment into Kabul, using leased American C17s out of Ramstein Airbase, was phased over four weeks for the elements of the Corps HQ, Signal Brigade and Support Regiment who would each take their place in the ISAF structure. The staff took over their roles from their counterparts in NRDC-Turkey who had been the framework for HQ ISAF VII, and with a change of command ceremony on 04 Aug05, attended by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Italian Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini and Commander JFC Brunssum General Gerhard Back, ISAF VIII was ready to face its first challenges; its mission, to assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in providing a safe and secure environment within its area of operations (AOO), which will assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.



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The Italian Corps' Support Regiment played an important role throughout this period, both within HQ ISAF and in providing the backbone of the Italian contingent operating in Kabul since 2002; completing eleven rotations of ITALFOR, tasked to provide the Kabul Headquarters' Force Protection Company and to carry out

humanitarian and civil-military cooperation projects in Kabul and its surrounds.

Along the Road to Democracy

The immediate test facing the HQ, even while coming to terms with the daily challenges of the mission, was to

support the looming National Assembly and Provincial Council Elections, scheduled for 18 Sep 2005. Organisation of the poll was the responsibility for the Joint Afghan Government and United Nations Electoral Management Body, or JEMB. The event was seen as crucial to the future stability and prosperity of the country as an Islamic democracy

and followed the successful presidential elections in 2004 which saw President Hamid Karzai brought to

power. ISAF, along with the US-led Coalition Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), committed to provide third tier support to the Afghan Security forces and was allocated more than 2000 extra troops, equipment and aircraft from ten nations to bolster the security presence in its AOO. To ensure the most complete support, ISAF embedded liaison officers in the JEMB centres, followed developments of the poll and counting and assisted with moving Afghan security forces to best position them to protect the vote.



Election Day passed very smoothly with 6 million Afghans across the country turning out to vote for the some 5600 candidates, with no significant security or organisational challenges, and after recovering the ballots and completing the counting process, the country was able to announce the members of its new parliament and provincial councils.

The completion of the process was to see the inauguration of the new parliament, with upper and lower houses installed in their chambers in Kabul and the historical opening ceremony of Afghanistan's first democratic parliament in 28 years. Again ISAF was intimately involved, as the parliament building is located in Kabul within the ISAF AOO. A comprehensive security



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operation was coordinated by the police and Army, with ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom resources in support, and the inauguration on 19 December 2005 passed smoothly, attended by international VIPs including US Vice President Dick Cheney.

An Ever-Expanding Mission.

With ISAF's assistance, two daunting hurdles had been successfully cleared by the country's fledgling security forces, but now the NATO Headquarters turned to face its own challenge; the future of the mission.

During 2005, the ISAF AOO was expanded to comprise the Kabul, Northern and Western Regions of the country. In the capital, home to ISAF HQ and Kabul International Airport, the capability was centred on the Kabul Multinational Brigade. In the Northern and recently created Western Regions, nine PRTs were under command of ISAF with assistance from regional area coordinators and the backing of forward support bases in each of the regions.

In October 2005, during a visit to Afghanistan by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and the NATO's decision making body the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO looked at the plan to restructure the ISAF chain of command and expand the ISAF mission beyond its current areas of operation into the South and eventually Eastern regions, to take over from OEF and provide security assistance to the Afghan Government throughout the whole of the country.

The visit, which involved comprehensive briefing, political discussion and reces of ISAF PRT structures and the southern region, allowed the NAC on 08

December 2005 to sanction the next phase of expansion, "Stage 3" for ISAF to operate in the four southern provinces during 2006. In preparation, Canada, UK and the Netherlands agreed to deploy some 7000 extra troops into provinces of the Southern Region in 2006, initially under command of the US-led coalition, taking over PRTs and support bases which will return to NATO command later this year. This will take the eventual strength of ISAF to some 15,000.

The Constant Struggle for Security and Stability.

Despite a strategic atmosphere of democratic progress and positive political support, Afghanistan remains a desperately poor and fragile country, with regional pressures, significant security challenges from crime and terrorism and the all-pervading influence of the narcotics trade. Within this environment, ISAF troops from 36 nations patrolled in support of Afghan security forces, engaged with communities, undertook humanitarian projects and dedicated themselves to supporting the international agenda to assist Afghanistan. Elsewhere, commanders and staff officers were engaged



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in the political and diplomatic struggle to move forward the agenda of rebuilding a shattered country and economy; centred around the security

sector reform "pillars", ISAF maintained a prominent role in supporting the growth of an effective Police and Army, the creation of an potent justice system, the disbandment of illegal armed groups and most importantly the tackling of the narcotics trade, which touches every layer of society and prevents real progress in any area.

The mission was not without its casualties. During its tenure, ISAF VIII saw an increase in incidents throughout its AOO, especially in Kabul, including greater use of

roadside bombs and an indication of increased sophistication in such attacks. Accidents were an ever-present danger in a country where the terrain and weather are so hostile, and the crash of a Spanish helicopter near Herat on August 16, with the loss of 17 soldiers, gave the mission a harsh early lesson, constantly reinforced by a number of smaller



tragedies. During the tenure of ISAF VIII, altogether 25 troops from 6 nations were killed, 4 from hostile action. Their loss was mourned by their nations, the Afghan people and all serving in ISAF, but the commitment to the mission and its importance was reinforced each time.

Looking to the Future

On 05 May 2006, General Del Vecchio returned the ISAF flag to General Back of JFC Brunssum, who duly handed the baton of the mission to General Richards of the ARRC, commander of ISAF IX. The incumbents had already helped the incoming officers in their preparation at the Joint Warfare Centre, and hosted them for reconnaissance missions where they learnt, among other hard lessons, the difficulties of transport in winter over the Hindu Kush! Since taking command, ISAF IX has already seen the change of regional area coordinators to assume command status over their PRTs.



Though its first mission is complete, HQ NRDC-Italy's ISAF role is doubtless not yet finished; with new commands to train and advise as they prepare for NATO's most important mission, the officers and soldiers still have a part to play in assisting that most worthy cause; providing security assistance to the Afghan Government and people.

