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UK Defense Minister Foresees Difficult Road in Afghanistan

"Let us be under no illusion," Ainsworth told the Royal Institute for International Affairs. "The situation in Afghanistan is serious, and it is not yet decided. The way forward is hard and dangerous. More lives will be lost and our resolve is going to be tested."

The Royal Institute for International Affairs (also known as Chatham House, after its residence on London's St. James's Square) is a powerfully influential internationalist policy organization, the sister institute to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

Seven British soldiers have died in the past week in southwestern Afghanistan's Helmand River valley, where British forces have joined nearly 4,000 U.S. Marines and 650 Afghan troops in a large-scale offensive operation against the Taliban. A total of 176 British troops have died in Afghanistan since 2001.

Reuters news service reported that Ainsworth, who visited Afghanistan last week, praised the resilience of the troops fighting in Helmand, but spoke about the challenges of the operation, and the difficulty of tackling the Taliban's use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). "We are engaged in a war against a dangerous and highly adaptable foe whose tactics and capabilities evolve as quickly as ours," he said. "We strive to provide our troops with the support they need but the nature of the fight means we will take more casualties before we succeed."

The British cabinet minister said that Afghans would eventually take over the defense of their own country, using the 170,000 Afghan soldiers and police now in uniform, but that victory would take time.

"This is not going to happen tomorrow, nor in a few short weeks or months," said Ainsworth. "If we are to succeed, we will need both the courage and the patience to see it through. There is no defined end date — only an end state."

In an interview with the BBC before his address, Ainsworth said: "We have to have patience; we've got to get behind our people who are doing the job on our behalf. It's not going to be sorted out within the next few weeks or the next few months — Afghanistan has been wrecked."

The British defense minister also said that there were "compelling reasons" for Britain's commitment to operations in Afghanistan, asserting: "For Britain to be secure, Afghanistan needs to be secure."

Secretary Ainsworth's remarks parallel similar statements made on June 2 by Army Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S and NATO commander in Afghanistan. Press TV reported that





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McChrystal also predicted that U.S. casualties would likely rise but the war could still be won, although not easily. "With the appropriate resources, time, sacrifice, and patience, we can prevail," said McChrystal. Interestingly, McChrystal is a member of the CFR, the U.S. counterpart to Chatham House, where Ainsworth just delivered his talk.

While 176 British troops have died in Afghanistan since 2001, the corresponding U.S. figure is much higher. According Defense Department figures as of June 30, at least 641 members of the U.S. military had died in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan as a result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. With the planned deployment of as many as 30,000 additional troops to the nation this year, total U.S. troop strength should top out at around 60,000. Our NATO allies supply a combined total of about 30,000 troops.

In contrast, Britain plans to increase its combat presence in Afghanistan by 25 percent this year, sending 2,000 additional troops to the embattled nation, bringing its troop strength to 10,000. NATO members Canada, Germany, France, and Italy have supplied between 2,800 and 3,800 troops apiece.

As the level of U.S., British, and other NATO troops in Afghanistan is increased, casualties, including deaths, can only be expected to rise correspondingly. Ainsworth said as much, noting: "More lives will be lost and our resolve is going to be tested."

"Resolve" is certainly a praiseworthy character trait, when employed to some productive end. As to whether the end result in Afghanistan will be productive — or only another in a long succession of pointless "no-win wars" — only history can judge.

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