

Gov. Mangal remembers sacrifices on historic day

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Afghanistan security forces take control of Helmand capital

British military hands over responsibility of Lashkar Gah as part of transition to end Nato combat duties in Afghanistan by 2014

Nick Hopkins in Lashkar Gah

One of Afghanistan's most important cities is formally back under the control of local security forces, after a symbolic ceremony that passed responsibility from the British military.

Under heavy security, the governor of Helmand province, Gulab Mangal, on Wednesday thanked the UK and other Nato nations for their commitment to fighting the Taliban, but said it was now time for Afghans to take control of the capital, Lashkar Gah.

In an open letter, he also said he would never forget meeting Lucy Aldridge, the mother of the youngest British soldier to die in Afghanistan since British forces came here six years ago.

William Aldridge was 18 when he died in 2009. He was killed in an IED blast in Sangin. The number of UK soldiers killed in Afghanistan in the last six years stands at 377.

Mangal met Lucy Aldridge in England last year and has promised to bring her to Helmand to "see what your son made possible".

He still wears a wristband of the charity she set up after her son died.

"The sacrifice of coalition forces will never be forgotten by our people," said Mangal.

"We owe all of this to the sacrifice of the soldiers and civilians from the US, UK and Denmark who have left their homes, and their families and sometimes given up their lives for this peace."

In one of a series of speeches at his official residence in Lashkar Gah, Mangal read out the names of some of the British soldiers who have died in Helmand.

"We shall try to spread this transition process to other districts so that by the end of 2014 they have all gone through it," he said.

Speaking to a room full of tribal elders and senior figures from the British and US military, Mangal said Afghanistan would never have peace while Taliban leaders in Pakistan could easily cross the border.

The room erupted in spontaneous applause when Ashraf Ghani, Afghan president Hamid Karzai's special representative, said Afghanistan was reclaiming its sovereignty, and that the nation's flag would soon be flying over the whole country once again.

General John Allen, the new head of all coalition forces in Afghanistan, said he was often asked whether the deaths of so many troops and civilians had been worth it.

"Those of us who wear this uniform have one answer – yes."

Not all of the Afghan guests were confident that local forces would be ready to take full control of the country's security by the end of 2014 - the end date for Nato to have a combat role.

Colonel Amin Jan of the Afghan national army said: "Three years is a very short time. It is too short. We don't have enough equipment."

After the official speeches, a brief military ceremony culminated in six British military vehicles with troops from the 4th Scots and US marines on board leaving the parade ground to symbolise the transfer of power.

The soldiers were given flowers as they left.

Helmand province was a centre of the insurgency and Lashkar Gah became a violent battleground between the Taliban and Nato.

Security there has improved enough for Karzai to make it one of the first - and most significant - places to enter the "transition" process.

British forces will slowly draw down from the province between now and 2014, though the UK will retain a mentoring role for the Afghan police and army.

British forces will only enter Lashkar Gah if the Afghan police ask them for help.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/20/afghanistan-control-helmand-lashkar-gah>

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