

Falkland Islands Defence Review

1.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the Falkland Islands defence review.

Safeguarding our citizens and their way of life remains the most important responsibility of Government and of the Ministry of Defence. In March 2013, the Falkland Islands referendum reaffirmed the islanders' overwhelming wish to remain British. Of the 92% who voted, 99.8% voted in favour of maintaining their political status as an overseas territory of the United Kingdom. We will always defend the right of the Falkland islanders to determine their own political future.

The Ministry of Defence retains responsibility for the external defence and security of British interests in the South Atlantic, and, to that end, undertakes regular assessments to ensure that we have in place the appropriate defensive capability. In autumn 2013, my predecessor asked officials to undertake a thorough review of the forces we hold on the Falkland Islands and our contingency plans for their defence. The objective was to ensure that our enduring commitment to the defence of the islands is sustained effectively. That review has now been completed.

The review's conclusions remain operationally sensitive in the light of potential threats, and I hope the House will understand that I cannot disclose much of the detail. However, I can tell the House that we have updated our assessment of any threat to the islands. This includes a consideration of the changes that may arise from the islanders' plans to develop their economy, including the potential for development of an oil and gas industry. We continue to discuss these issues with the Falkland Islands Government.

I have endorsed the assessment of the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Commander of Joint Forces Command that the current military presence is broadly proportionate to the threats and risks that we face. Our forces in the South Atlantic are entirely defensive, and are at the level required to ensure the defence of the Falkland Islands against any potential threat. However, I have also agreed a number of measures designed to ensure our resilience for the short, medium and longer term. Those measures will include the return of military support helicopters, which were removed in 2006 to support operations in Afghanistan. On current plans, this will involve the deployment of two Chinooks, which will be operational by the middle of next year. This is a significant capability that will provide reactive, 24/7 tactical mobility in order to allow a swift and decisive response to any emerging incidents. The helicopters will also bring a heavy-lift capability and enhance the training opportunities available to the resident infantry company.

We also have plans in place to deliver enhanced operational communications for the headquarters at Mount Pleasant to better enable the sharing of real-time operational data. I can confirm that we will be renewing the ground-based air defence system when Rapier comes out of service at around the end of the decade. We will maintain our commitment to provide a Falkland Islands patrol vessel, currently HMS Clyde. In addition, we intend to carry out a number of projects to replace some of the ageing infrastructure—for example, the

refurbishment of Mare harbour and the replacement of the existing power generation systems at Mount Pleasant airfield. A major modernisation of the fuels infrastructure is under way and now nearing completion. In total, we expect to invest up to £180 million in improving and modernising our infrastructure on the islands over the next 10 years.

In addition to the operational improvements I have mentioned, we are taking action to improve the quality of life of those who serve in the Falklands, including planned improvements to accommodation and a new primary school. Although there will be some changes in personnel numbers as the Sea King helicopters are withdrawn and the Chinook force stands up, I have decided that for the foreseeable future we will keep our numbers at around their current levels of about 1,200 personnel, military and civilian. I know the House will want to join me in taking this opportunity to pay tribute to our brave men and women, military and civilian, who leave behind their families and friends for months or years at a time in order to ensure the right of the Falkland islanders to remain British. We will always remember the bravery of the 255 British servicemen who gave their lives for that cause.

I am aware of the close interest that the Defence Committee takes in the Falkland Islands, and of the Committee's most recent visit there earlier this year. I am grateful for its insights, some of which echo the findings of the review. I wrote earlier today to the Chairman of the Committee.

The review we have undertaken confirms our commitment to the Falkland Islands. We will continue to defend the right of the Falkland islanders to determine their future and maintain their way of life against whatever threats may arise. The review ensures that we will continue to have the right mix of people, equipment and infrastructure to deliver that commitment in the years ahead. The Government are not complacent and we will continue to remain vigilant. However, on the basis of the review and the follow-on measures that I have established, I am satisfied that the Government can be confident in their continued ability to defend the South Atlantic islands. I commend this statement to the House.