

# REBUILDING URUZGAN PROVINCE

Since the Dutch withdrawal from Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan, specialist Australian and US civil-military teams have been deployed to sustain the programs that the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) mission had implemented. In September 2011, Australian diplomat **Bernard Philip**, who spearheaded Australian PRT operations from August 2010 to August 2011, spoke with **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about the role and composition of PRT Uruzgan, the sustaining of development and capacity-building programs and the future of the PRT's mission in the province.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Why is Uruzgan Province important in the larger scheme of things?

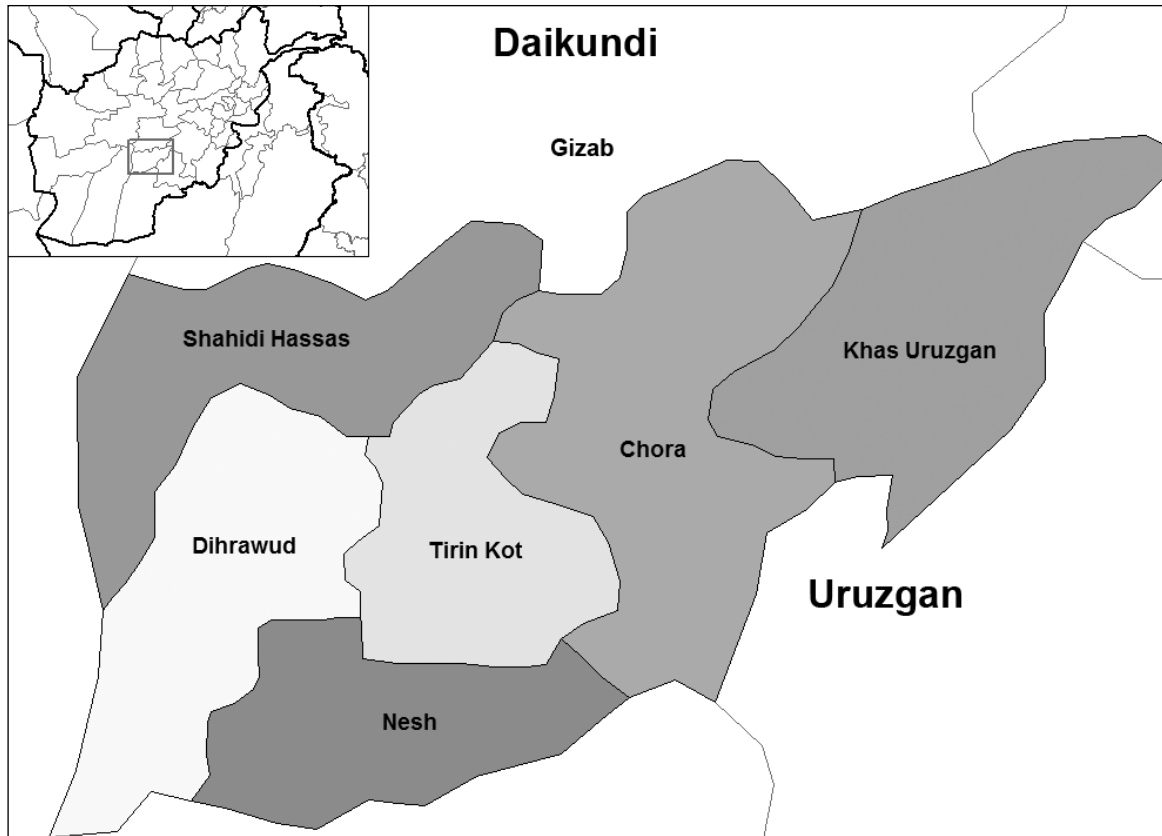
**Bernard Philip:** Uruzgan Province is isolated from the outside world and within Afghanistan itself. The main connection with the outside world has always been the road to the regional hub of Kandahar, which is now functional, but the locals are still reluctant to use it. Besides, the valleys and the districts are quite distant from one another, and this continues to provide an environment conducive for insurgent havens. Uruzgan in many ways is a traditional stronghold of the Taliban. From that point of view, Uruzgan has played a role disproportionate to its population and economic strength in the developments in Afghanistan over the past couple of decades. Mullah Omar came from or grew up in the Deh Rawud district in Western Uruzgan, and a number of other Taliban leaders have Uruzgan associations. The province has been a significant contributor to the Taliban movement.

Uruzgan has also made contributions to Afghanistan's national leadership. For instance, President Karzai has strong connections to Uruzgan and made his march to power in

late 2001 from Deh Rawud and Tarin Kot. Obviously, Uruzgan is not as significant as the larger southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, but its politics, insurgency and security are intimately linked to those provinces. An unstable Uruzgan would undermine the gains in Helmand and Kandahar, which are critical to Afghanistan as a whole.

As collecting demographic data is very problematic in Afghanistan, population estimates for Uruzgan tend to range between 300,000 and 500,000, but the locals will tell you the figure is much higher. The composition of Uruzgan Province is primarily ethnic Pashtun. There are Hazara populations mainly in the northern districts of Gizab and Khas Uruzgan. There was a larger Hazara presence in what is now Uruzgan, but Pashtun encroachment through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has made it primarily Pashtun. Uruzgan is dominated by the Durrani tribal confederation; the Ghilzai represent less than 10% of the population.

Uruzgan Province has six districts. The provincial capital Tarin Kot, which is also a municipality, has direct control over the Greater Tarin Kot area or Tarin Kot Bowl. Deh Rawud district is to the west, and north of that is



**Source:** Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Oruzgan\\_districts.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Oruzgan_districts.png)).

Shahidi Hasas district. North of Tarin Kot is the Chora district and further north of that is Gizab district. East of Tarin Kot is Khas Uruzgan at the border with Zabul.

What counts as a district can also be problematic. Gizab district is often counted as part of Daikundi Province or Uruzgan Province. But in terms of our engagement and the Afghan government's engagement, Gizab district is part of Uruzgan. To the southeast of Tarin Kot on the road to Khas Uruzgan is a temporary district called Chenartu, which is yet to be recognised as a permanent district by the Afghan government. Across Afghanistan are hundreds of areas that would like to be granted district status because of the resources it brings, but there is no quick or easy process to make it happen.

Uruzgan has four distinct seasons, not unlike Canberra in some respects. It is very dry and the desert or Dasht is the province's main topographical feature. Nearly everyone lives in what we call the 'Green Zone.' Some of the

valleys are larger and more fertile than others. In 'The Triangle' around Deh Rawud district centre or the greater Tarin Kot Bowl, the Green Zone is spread over a large area. In other more remote valleys, there are only very small pockets of settlement, tiny slivers of green, with what seems like zero connectivity to the outside world. Being able to sustain themselves in this environment underlines the resilience of the locals.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What has been the legacy of the Dutch PRT mission in Uruzgan?

**Bernard Philip:** The Dutch achievements were very significant in Uruzgan and the legacy is a very positive one. In terms of political engagement, the Dutch identified the importance of tribal balance and inclusivity. Uruzgan is still a very traditional society, where tribal identity is strong and tribal rivalries have a significant impact on security. A core objective of the Dutch was to pursue tribal balance, whereby all the tribes represented in the Afghan government saw

themselves as having a stake in Uruzgan's future and having access to development opportunities. This was the right political judgment as tribal balance and inclusivity remain very important, and it is an approach that our PRT has continued.

The Dutch were successful in increasing the confidence of tribes that had previously felt under-represented. They were able to promote their association with the government, and in some cases, brought back tribal leaders who had gone into exile outside of the province to return and play a leadership role in their communities. The Dutch enabled developmental activities to be pursued and created greater stability, which was vital in reducing opportunities for the insurgency.

In the area of development, the Dutch PRT made steady progress in the health and education sectors, albeit from a very low base. For example, the number of health care centres increased from nine to 17, community health posts increased to more than 200, and schools increased from 30 to around 160. The Dutch also contributed in the agriculture, water and justice sectors in many ways.

One of their flagship projects is the 42km Tarin Kot to Chora Road, which once completed will connect Tarin Kot with the Chora district centre. The Dutch have managed to get the local leaders to take responsibility for security in the areas through which the road is being constructed. The first phase to Dorafshan, around 16 kms of road, was completed in mid-2010 just before the handover occurred. The second phase is nearly complete and passes through the Baluchi Valley, which has been a very unstable area. This project will make a significant long-term improvement to the stability of that area.

Given the low capacity of the Afghan government, the improvements in recent years owe much to the Dutch programs, but this is slowly changing as the Afghan government assumes greater responsibility for development. Stabilisation programs and projects at village level were effective in many parts of Chora, Deh Rawud, and Tarin Kot in strengthening local support for the Afghan government and also for the Afghan and coalition security presence.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What development and capacity-building programs have been implemented during your term?

**Bernard Philip:** Although we have worked hard to improve governance at the district level, this has been difficult because most districts don't have permanent governors. Nearly all the districts have only temporary district chiefs, which has had significant flow-on effects to attract support from government and set up a functioning government at the district level.

At the district level, a USAID program called the Afghan Social Outreach Program has been very effective in revitalising traditional Shura structures, which are the traditional form of Afghan governance with leaders coming together in a fairly democratic fashion and working through particular problems. The Australian officers in the PRT have mentored these Shuras in all the districts of Uruzgan Province and provided some of the back-end support in training and funding assistance.

Our strategy is to provide employment and infrastructure to reduce the appeal of the insurgency.

At the district level, the 'representative level of government' is very important. In some of the districts, the executive arm of government is always going to be, in effect, modest because it is such a poor place; but if leaders come together and agree on basic rules for resolving conflict and allocating resources, they could make significant contributions to promoting stability in those areas.

We have put considerable effort into rolling out the National Solidarity Program in Uruzgan. That has been one of our more successful programs over the past five years, involving small community-level projects such as wells and small-scale infrastructure in villages and managed by local communities. We have expanded the program to some of the outlying districts. We are also developing a program of activities through the National Area Based

Development Program, which funds large infrastructure projects like bridges and roads. The future of development assistance in Afghanistan lies in working through the national ministries and getting them rather than the PRTs to manage the programs.

Australia has spent around \$2 million in Uruzgan since 2009–10. In 2010–11, funding has increased to more than 20 million and will probably increase to \$30 million this year. There are absorption capacity issues in a society as small as Uruzgan, and which development efforts need to be sensitive to. Health and education are key priorities. We have continued to support ‘Equip,’ the national program for school reconstruction; more recently, former foreign minister Stephen Smith announced a four-year \$37 million program with Save the Children, a very credible NGO with experience in Uruzgan.

That program will continue to focus on school building, but equally, we are going to intensify its human side and expand the existing teacher training programs; mobilise communities in support of schools in those areas; expand the ‘Accelerated Learning Programs,’ where children who missed out on particular years of education can re-enter the education system; and continue adult education classes.

In health care, the focus will be on maternal and child health because of the weaknesses in those sectors: We will expand the midwife training that we have been carrying out and intensify our capacity in the Department of Education and the Department of Public Health. A large part of this will be at the community level and health education. In our past programs, we have found that basic hygiene and sanitation education can deliver rapid results if rolled out effectively. We will try to expand the health centre network across the province. In all of this we are cognisant of transition timelines.

The ‘cash for work’ programs have involved small-scale infrastructure projects that we have been working on over the past year. USAID has made a strong contribution in this area. Typically, it will involve improvements to drainage, footpaths, bazaars and municipal infrastructure. AusAID has taken on a similar role in Chora and embarked on a large casual work program in the Chora district centre.

We are building walls, footpaths and drains, and making the municipal environment more of an economic hub with serviceable infrastructure. This also involves employing upwards of 1,000 mostly young men from the local community in Chora. Our strategy is to provide them with employment and infrastructure to reduce the appeal of insurgency.

We have directly managed casual work programs in some areas like the Tangi Valley, which is a very insecure area that links Deh Rawud and Tarin Kot. The ADF and the US forces have done a remarkable job over the past eight months in clearing the area and expanding their security presence. The PRT, in this case mostly the US military (although DFAT is also helping us with political engagement), have worked intensively with leaders from the Tangi Valley. Most of them were in exile but we lured them back to the valley and put them in charge of small-scale road improvement projects—each oversees the employment of 30 people from their villages. This has really improved stability in the Tangi Valley and we hope to roll out more such projects further east over the coming months.

The other contribution we have made is through the engineering team of the PRT, who have been here for a few years now. They have a rigorous approach in mentoring and developing a reasonably good local contractor base. They have taken a best practice approach to project management and visit their project sites once every week or at least once every fortnight. That’s enabled them to avoid many of the pitfalls in Uruzgan, which doesn’t have a strong oversight presence. The team has just built a large girls school in Tarin Kot and a large and beautiful mosque in Sorkh Morghab, which will help bring that community together.

The PRT’s engineering team has stabilised a major bridge over the Helmand River in Deh Rawud and built other smaller bridges. They are also about to embark on sealing key main roads in Tarin Kot town centre—this will not only improve opportunities for commerce but also have a symbolic effect. Tarin Kot has grown a lot in recent years to become a provincial capital. We hope it will improve economic activity and ultimately perceptions.