

Ministry of Defence
Exercise Saif Sareea II



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
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executive summary

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- 1 Exercise "Saif Sareea" II (Swift Sword II) was the largest deployment of the United Kingdom's military forces since the Gulf War. Over 22,500 personnel, 6,500 vehicles and trailers, 21 naval vessels, 49 fixed wing aircraft and 44 helicopters were deployed to the Sultanate of Oman in September and October 2001 to exercise with Omani forces.
- 2 The Exercise was designed to demonstrate key elements of the United Kingdom's ability to conduct expeditionary warfare. In particular, it was a test of the progress that is being made in drawing together the capabilities of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces (a number of well trained and equipped Units and capabilities across the three Armed Services held at a high state of readiness from which a single force can be drawn and sent quickly to any area of the world where the United Kingdom might be expected to fight). The Exercise was also intended to identify lessons, provide training, and to support foreign-policy objectives.
- 3 This Report examines whether the Exercise was successful in meeting all these objectives. The methodology we adopted is set out in Appendix 1.



- 4 We found that the Exercise successfully demonstrated key elements of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces concept. The United Kingdom projected and recovered, over a distance of 5,000 miles, a medium-scale task force. The ability of men and equipment to perform in desert conditions was severely tested, which led to lessons being identified where things worked well and where improvements can be made. The conduct of the Exercise at the time of preparation for operations in Afghanistan, while coincidental, provided advantages, although it limited some of the training aspects of the Exercise. Nevertheless, the Exercise helped to advance British national interests in Oman. Complexities in the scoping, costing and funding of the Exercise led, however, to difficulties in planning.

Saif Sareea II successfully demonstrated key elements of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces concept

- 5 The Department successfully demonstrated key elements of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces concept. A medium-scale joint task force was generated and projected over a distance of 5,000 miles. While communications were stretched in the austere environment, the command and control structure deployed on the Exercise worked. Logistic support was demonstrated with personnel and equipment being successfully moved to, from, and around a large theatre of operations. Overall, the Exercise has shown that the United Kingdom is capable of mounting a balanced, coherent force over a strategic distance. Amongst its allies, the United Kingdom is the only country, other than the United States, that has demonstrated this.
- 6 A number of key elements of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces concept were not chosen by the Department for demonstration. For example, the Exercise was planned over three years and did not set out to demonstrate readiness and rapid deployment. Medical facilities were not scaled to cope with casualties that may have arisen from an actual operation. Because of funding constraints half, rather than a complete, armoured brigade was taken. In addition, full war stocks of munitions were not taken on the Exercise. If they had been, it would have increased substantially the, already large, logistic challenge.

The Department identified a number of lessons across the whole range of the Exercise

- 7 The Department had comprehensive arrangements for identifying lessons and over 2,000 observations were recorded on its database.
- 8 A number of positive lessons emerged from the Exercise about things that worked well. Much equipment performed to a high standard, including Warrior armoured fighting vehicles, the C17 strategic lift aircraft and the Personal Role Radio. A number of non-warfighting elements also functioned successfully. For example, the Operational Welfare Package (which includes making available mail and telephone facilities) was generally well received in the main camps



although it was not possible to provide the same services to those on detached sites or those who were on the move. The standard of food provision on the Exercise was generally excellent. The recovery of the bulk of 16,000 Army personnel from the theatre was completed on time in mid-November with the remainder being recovered by February 2002 as planned. Each of the three Services concluded that the majority of their objectives for the Exercise had been achieved despite the redeployment of some elements to concurrent operations.

- 9 One of the purposes of the Exercise was to identify areas where there is room for improvement. These are set out in more detail in paragraphs 2.14 to 2.50 of this Report. Key areas include:
- The Exercise fully extended the Department's dedicated strategic lift assets. Even with the capability offered by the new C17 aircraft, future deployment will be heavily dependent on the use of chartered civilian sea and air assets. Guaranteed access to sufficient civilian strategic lift resources in a crisis, to supplement military lift, is necessary. The Department considers this to be a manageable risk.
 - Manning shortages among key personnel such as engineers, signallers and medical personnel manifested themselves during the Exercise, though within these constraints each of these elements performed very well.
 - Some equipment did not work well in the hot and dusty conditions and some was kept going at a much higher than expected logistic cost. Problems with the Challenger 2 Main Battle Tank had the biggest impact on the Exercise in that its need to be sustained with more than expected air filters, road wheels, and track pads impacted on the supply of spares to other equipment. There were also complaints from personnel about a failure to supply personal equipment and clothing suitable for desert conditions. In principle, equipment belonging to the very high readiness elements of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces ought to be suitable for operating in any of the climatic areas in which it might be expected to fight. Either robust equipment is needed or it must be operated within a controlled environment. Equipment must be suitably modified, or be capable of being modified within the readiness period. Similarly, adequate stocks of suitable clothing and personal equipment need to be kept if they cannot be procured within the readiness period.



- Previous operations have identified the importance of being able to track supplies and equipment as they are transported so that they can be delivered to the right place at the right time. The unreliability of asset tracking systems meant that there were periods when it was not possible to track items sent from the United Kingdom to the Exercise theatre.
- 10 Some lessons identified during previous operations were re-learned. For example, the lack of reliability of some vehicles in the desert had already been demonstrated during the Gulf War. This example illustrates a tendency that suggests that experience gained on medium-sized operations such as the Gulf War dissipate over time, as do skills as people move on. There is a strong argument that exercises of the size of Saif Sareea II need to be conducted regularly in order to keep skills and experience up to date and to check that lessons identified previously have been implemented.
 - 11 The Exercise provided valuable training experience in the sort of environment in which future deployments might occur. The Department was able successfully to practise joint operations with land, sea and air forces, and to prepare all forces to participate in a combined joint task force with the Omanis. There were, however, some limitations on the training that took place. Conditions, and the absence of Tactical Engagement Simulation, affected the tempo of the training.



Complexities in the scoping, costing and funding of the Exercise led to difficulties in the planning process

- 12 Uncertainty about the scope and funding of the Exercise had an impact on military planning and cost-effectiveness. Planning went through several iterations regarding size, location, and budget until the Department finally settled on the deployment of a medium-scale joint task force to Oman within a budget of £90.3 million. There was uncertainty as to which Top Level Budget holders would be responsible for the additional funds that were needed because of changes to the budget. Apart from making planning more difficult and tying up those responsible for doing the planning, it also acted against the achievement of maximum value for money. As the Department's First Impressions Report of the Exercise makes clear: "The knock-on effect of these events ... resulted in us paying an additional premium for some facilities and detracted considerably from the planning." Some cancellation fees for chartered aircraft also resulted.

- 13** Normally, before the Department's equipment or works projects are approved, an investment appraisal is carried out. This is not done in the case of exercises, although options are informally costed. There were no formal option appraisals of certain elements of the Exercise, for example, on whether equipment transportation should be provided from the United Kingdom or sourced locally. It is therefore hard to be sure that the most cost-effective design was chosen for the Exercise.
- 14** The final outturn cost of the Exercise will not be known until July 2003. The estimated outturn cost of the Exercise in July 2002, however, is around £83 million. It is longstanding Departmental policy, agreed with the Treasury, that when costing operations the net additional costs, such as additional fuel and transport costs directly attributable to the operation should qualify for additional funding. Other costs, for example the salaries and wages of personnel taking part in the operation, do not. This is on the basis that military capability represented by the Armed Services, if not deployed on an operation, would be deployed elsewhere and be paid for from existing budgets. The Department extends this argument by analogy to exercises. The National Audit Office considers that there is a case, however, for basing decisions on a knowledge of the full cost of an exercise, not least because the real scale of the resources consumed by any activity is generally a key factor in deciding whether it should take place or not. The Department's view is that such a practice would be time consuming and costly and would not provide useful management information to justify the effort. In the case of Saif Sareea II, full costs have not been calculated but they are likely to be significantly more than the figure of £83 million representing the additional costs.
- 15** In calculating additional costs, there were inconsistencies in terms of what was regarded as additional. The advent of Resource Accounting and Budgeting was unable to resolve this problem. The Department has issued a policy paper to address shortcomings in this area and templates to describe and identify cost drivers have been implemented. While these proposals will not completely eradicate the problem, they do represent progress.

The Exercise met foreign-policy objectives

- 16** The Exercise had clear foreign-policy objectives to demonstrate the United Kingdom's commitment to the Gulf region and to advance British interests in Oman. The Department, together with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, had to ensure that the Exercise passed off without incident. While there were no explicit objectives to promote defence or civil exports, the potential for enhancing the United Kingdom's position as a trading partner with Oman was recognised.
- 17** The Exercise demonstrated the United Kingdom's ability to conduct operations with allies in the Gulf Region. The presence of United Kingdom forces in Oman, while a coincidence, was beneficial in allowing the United Kingdom to contribute to concurrent operations in Afghanistan. The Exercise did not lead to any friction with the local population while its impact on trade is difficult to quantify and will tend to show up only in the longer term. There was, however, a significant contribution to the local economy as a direct result of the Exercise.

Recommendations

18 The Department should:

- a) Consider, given the success of Exercise Saif Sareea II and the number of useful lessons identified, whether further large exercises of this type might have a place in its exercise programme.
- b) Consider how to demonstrate, through exercises or other means, as yet untested aspects of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces.
- c) In taking forward lessons learned from the Exercise, in particular, address:
 - how key staff can be retained;
 - whether, even with the additional assets planned, there will be sufficient strategic lift to meet the requirement of a real medium-scale operation;
 - whether the Department holds, or can modify or procure within the required readiness timescale, equipment able to operate in all the climatic conditions that the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces might reasonably be asked to face; and
 - the extent to which asset tracking can be improved.
- d) Ensure that the scope and funding of future exercises is clear and agreed at the outset.
- e) Ensure that all costs are captured, and that an investment appraisal is carried out when planning exercises of this size.
- f) Consider whether it should move to identifying the full cost of resources consumed by individual exercises.

