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Dutch troops in Uruzgan till December 2010

The Dutch government has extended the Netherlands' military mission in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan by two years. The last troops are to pull out by 1 December 2010. Originally the mission was to end in August 2008. NATO has put intense pressure on the Netherlands to lengthen its stay. No other NATO country was prepared to take over the country's role.

Four months later than expected, the cabinet finally managed to come to a decision. With around 1400 troops, the Netherlands will remain the lead nation in the ISAF mission in Uruzgan until August 2010. France, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary will contribute 300 troops at most.

Destruction of capital

The extension of the mission comes as no surprise, even though August 2008 had been planned as the final withdrawal date. But the other NATO partners' refusal to replace the Dutch put both NATO and the Netherlands in a difficult position.

Justifying the extension, Defence Minister Eimert van Middelkoop said:

"It would have been a destruction of capital to leave after two years. The decision would have been incomprehensible in Afghanistan. The mission is aimed at strengthening security, improving governance, of the army and the police in Afghanistan. If we leave after four years in 2010 it will make sense."



Hearts and minds: Dutch soldier and local Afghan boy have a good chat in Tarin Kowt

Benchmarks in the democratisation process

Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende stresses that the Netherlands will still be in Afghanistan for the 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections - two key benchmarks in the process of democratisation and strengthening governance.

Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen said he believed the Dutch presence was vital to increasing security in Afghanistan and preventing the Taliban from regaining power. The minister added that radicalisation among Muslims also had to be resisted. He illustrated this with a comment by an Afghan soldier, who told him "he would prefer to fight the Taliban than have them in his front garden".

Stone Age

Mr Verhagen went on to say that human rights were "one of the cornerstones of Dutch foreign policy". He said this included the rights of women and children, and to education and healthcare, adding "Afghanistan mustn't be allowed to return to the Stone Age".

This fear is not entirely without justification. Despite the Dutch presence, since 2006 the strength of the Taliban in Uruzgan has increased. Only around the provincial capital Tarin Kowt and the village of Deh Rawod is it relatively safe. Large areas of the province are under Taliban control.

This makes it dangerous for the population to support the ISAF troops openly. In spite of the Dutch military presence, the construction of schools and healthcare facilities, and new agricultural projects, uncertainty and fear predominate among the village elders.

Wide support

Wim van den Burg, president of the Dutch association for military personnel AFMP, is resigned to the decision: "First we were going to stay till 2008, now it's 2010. But the arguments for staying now will still be valid then."

Parliament is expected to approve the cabinet's decision before the end of this year. The parties of the governing coalition (the Christian Democrats, Labour and the Christian Union) and the conservative VVD party are sure to vote in favour. What's more, the left-wing Green Left party is likely to join them.

* *RNW Translation (mb)*

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