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Dutch troops: two more years in Uruzgan

Analysts expect that the Dutch cabinet will decide on Friday to extend participation in the NATO mission to Afghanistan until August 2010. Originally, Dutch troops were supposed to withdraw from the Afghan province of Uruzgan on 1 August 2008. NATO was supposed to find troops to replace the Dutch but that hasn't happened. The Hague has also been unable to find anyone willing to deploy their soldiers in Uruzgan.

It is now a given that the Netherlands will stay in Uruzgan. The details will be released on Friday, including the number of troops who will remain after the original pullout date of 1 August 2008. Defence analysts expect it to be 1400, a reduction of just 249. France, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have all agreed to supply a limited number of soldiers to plug the gap.



Dutch soldier resting on the overwatch during Operation Spin Ghar in Uruzgan (November 2007). Photo: Dutch Defence Ministry

The number of soldiers expected to remain, 1400, is still 200 more than the **Defence Ministry** had planned to send to Afghanistan in the first place. However, it is still far too few to fulfil their task creating a secure and safe province so that reconstruction work can begin. The insurgency is far more resilient and effective than had been expected.

Jihadis

In comparison to the neighbouring provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, it was relatively quiet in Uruzgan for quite some time. But at the beginning of this year, the calm came to an end. Well-organised and well-armed Taliban units, supplemented by foreign Jihadis, began to create serious problems for the undermanned Afghan security forces and the Dutch-Australian Task Force Uruzgan. The increase in attacks made it impossible to expand the secure zone around the provincial capital Tarin Kowt and the village of Deh Rawod.

Air support

In June, the NATO forces just managed to prevent Chora, an important town, from falling to the enemy and NATO forces almost lost control of Deh Rawod in September. In both cases, the ground troops had to call in air support, which is usually supplied by the US. The Dutch battle group, consisting of just 500 troops, is not much more than a drop of water in the ocean. Large parts of Uruzgan are no-go areas, completely controlled by the Taliban and local warlords.

Shortages

The entire NATO operation in Afghanistan is suffering from a shortage of troops. The NATO-led force consists of less than 40,000 troops. In comparison to other NATO operations, that number is a new low.

In a recent interview with Radio Netherlands Worldwide, Ambassador Daan Everts, the most senior civilian NATO representative in Afghanistan, compared the Afghan mission to the NATO missions to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, "if you were to translate troop numbers from previous missions to this one, then NATO would have 800,000 troops in Afghanistan now".



Map of Uruzgan. [Click for a large version.](#)


There is positive news on the horizon; Kabul is now able to deliver the troops it promised long ago. In January, an entire brigade, numbering between 2,200 and 2,500 soldiers, will be in the field.

Predictions

After the cabinet makes its' decision, there will be a debate in the lower house of parliament and a hearing. The government says it hopes to be finished with the matter before the Christmas recess. However, it is easy to predict that the difference between a combat mission and a reconstruction mission will be the subject of numerous debates.

In a December 2005, the previous cabinet said, " It will be many years before the Afghan government can take complete responsibility for security and stability. It is not realistic to expect that after two years in Uruzgan, safety, security and promising economic developments will be able to exist without outside help". A prediction that will still hold true after August 2008.

Tags: Afghanistan, Dutch cabinet, Kabul, NATO, Taliban, Tarin Kowt, troops, Uruzgan

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