

20071130 DUTCH GOVERNMENT WILLING TO RETAIN SUPPORT URUZGAN

Informal translation

On 29 June 2007, you were informed by letter (Parliamentary Papers 27 925, no. 264) of an investigation into the desirability and feasibility of a Netherlands contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the period after 1 August 2008. In accordance with article 100 of the Constitution, we hereby inform you of the outcome of the investigation. This letter reviews the results so far of the mission in Uruzgan, as promised to the House in the explanatory memorandum attached to the yearly budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the debate on the annual financial report of the Ministry of Defence. In addition, on the basis of the 2001 Terms of Reference for decision-making on the deployment of military units abroad, this letter examines the grounds and mandate for participation; the Dutch objectives and the possibility of attaining them; the political dimension; the scope for reconstruction, including the Dutch contribution to improving governance; the drugs issue; the military dimension, including the military capability required, the concept of operations, cooperation with other participating countries, the security situation and the risks; the duration of the Dutch presence; and financial issues.

First of all, the government would like to express its great appreciation for all those in the Netherlands armed forces and in the service of the Kingdom who have been working in extremely difficult and dangerous conditions to make the current mission a success. Our troops, diplomats, development workers, entrepreneurs and others have been making great efforts to improve the situation in Afghanistan. By now, over 6,000 Dutch men and women have taken part in the Afghan mission. Their professionalism, dedication and commitment have helped give the Netherlands an good reputation among the local population, Afghan officials and our international partners.

Since the beginning of the mission, twelve Dutch soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan. Our most important partner, Australia, has also suffered losses. These victims gave their lives for our common interests and ideals. They will be remembered by their families, colleagues and by the members of the government. Those who have been wounded also earn our attention and respect.

Main points of the decision

ISAF is an operation under a mandate from the UN Security Council, aimed at supporting the Afghan government's efforts to maintain security so that the authorities and development organisations can work in a safe environment. This mandate was renewed for an additional year in September 2007.

On 1 August 2006, ISAF expanded its operations to Southern Afghanistan. In this framework, the Netherlands shares the lead responsibility for the southern region with the UK, the US and Canada for the period from August 2006 to August 2008, and has the main responsibility for helping the Afghan government to promote security and stability in Uruzgan. It is also responsible for supporting the Afghan government's governance and reconstruction efforts. The Dutch government has always stressed the complications and risks entailed by this mission.

Now, after almost a year and a half, an initial assessment can be made. This is a very demanding mission, for personnel and materiel alike. Some aspects of the mission have proved disappointing; others have gone better than we initially expected. Local Afghan capabilities in particular have not matched our expectations, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively. The Afghan army is a positive exception: at the end of November 2007 there were over 950 Afghan soldiers in Uruzgan (of the 1,200 that the Netherlands had been promised). In other respects the security situation has diverged to some extent from our expectations, while remaining within the parameters of the estimates we made before beginning operations. On the other hand, the number of projects launched, the progress in implementing Afghan programmes and the degree of acceptance of ISAF by the population have exceeded our expectations.

Reconstruction and security efforts are reaching more than 50% of the population of Uruzgan. However realistic the objectives were that the government put forward in its 'Article 100 letter' of 22 December 2005, the current overall picture is mixed. In some respects it is more difficult than anticipated, but clearly there are prospects for lasting improvement in the situation in Uruzgan.

In the summer of 2007 NATO requested its member-states, amongst others The Netherlands, to make a military contribution to Uruzgan. On the basis of its own responsibility NATO requested The Netherlands to formally stay on as a lead nation after 1st August 2008. Furthermore the UN and the Afghan government have requested the Netherlands to continue its activities in Uruzgan and make a new contribution.

As part of the Netherlands investigation into the desirability and feasibility of a new contribution to ISAF after 2008, the Netherlands asked for visible NATO solidarity. The military contributions that were politically announced are more limited than we had hoped, but the assistance by our NATO allies France, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic are welcome. The contribution of these partners is of a high quality and can be well integrated into the Task Force Uruzgan. In addition to these NATO allies, Georgia has also promised to make a military contribution. Many of our allies have committed their armed forces to activities in Africa, Lebanon, Kosovo or other parts of the world. We expect that additional offers may be possible in the run-up to the new mission. As a result, the Netherlands military presence can be reduced after 1 August 2008.

In its final decision the Netherlands government has weighed the following aspects: the contribution by other partners, the public support in Afghanistan and the solidarity with the Afghan people, the importance of safeguarding the comprehensive approach and the perspective of achieving sustainable progress. After weighing all the different factors, the Dutch government is willing to retain the main responsibility for supporting the Afghan authorities in Uruzgan, both militarily and in the fields of reconstruction and governance, for an additional period -restricted in time- of two years: that is, from 1 August 2008 to 1 August 2010.

Considerations of international and NATO security, solidarity and credibility have played a role in this decision. Most of all, the need to support the Afghan government, a sense of solidarity with the Afghan people, and concern for human rights and poverty reduction have motivated the government's choice. These are the factors that justify an ongoing Netherlands military and diplomatic presence and ongoing development cooperation efforts in Afghanistan and Uruzgan, especially now that the Netherlands has gained so much knowledge and experience there. Finally, the government believes that this decision serves the interests of our national security.

Whatever happens, The Netherlands will end its leading military responsibility in Uruzgan as of 1st August 2010. By then The Netherlands will have borne the burden as a NATO partner. As of 1st August 2010 the redeployment of the Task Force Uruzgan will start as soon as possible, so that it will have been completed by 1st December 2010. The Government underlines that NATO is responsible for a timely filling of the existing requirements for ISAF, including Uruzgan.

The new mission will be complicated. The danger of Netherlands casualties will remain.

The emphases in this new mission will change in the following ways:

- More resources will be invested in supporting and promoting reconstruction efforts by the Afghan government and NGOs. Support and guidance for the development of effective governance will also be intensified.

- Training and monitoring of Afghan security forces will be intensified, with the aim of ensuring effective control by the Afghan army and police of the main populated areas and connecting roads.

This is a stabilisation and support mission aimed at transferring responsibility to the Afghans themselves. Security and development objectives thus go hand in hand. Development cannot be placed on a solid footing in an insecure environment, and security improves when people see prospects for development and are governed fairly. The Dutch motto remains: reconstruction where possible, military action where necessary.

In view of the military contribution by partners (mentioned above), the government considers the new mission in Uruzgan to be militarily feasible. The Netherlands will continue to contribute military forces in the form of the Uruzgan Task Force (TFU), consisting of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), a Battle Group and logistical support, divided between the two bases in Tarin Kowt and Deh Rawod. The Netherlands will also provide two Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) to help train and guide the Afghan army. We will continue to contribute five Apache combat helicopters and four F16 fighter planes to ISAF. In this way the security chain will remain in Dutch hands. The PRT's current civilian staff will be expanded further; depending partly on the progress made, the PRT may eventually come under civilian leadership. From the autumn of 2008 the Netherlands will supply the commander of ISAF's Regional Command South for nine months.

Over 1,300 of the 1,665 troops that the Netherlands is currently contributing to ISAF for the longer term are based in Uruzgan, with the rest in Kabul and Kandahar. The deployment of forces from other partners will enable us to reduce the number of Dutch troops in Uruzgan over the course of the new mission to roughly 1,000-1,100, a decrease of 15-20%. The total may fluctuate as a function of specific military requirements. As a result, the total number of Dutch troops in Afghanistan under this new mission will be between 1,350 and 1,450.

In deciding on this mission, the government took into account the planned activities of the Afghan government – presidential elections are planned for 2009, parliamentary elections for 2010 – and with international agreements on Afghanistan. The current Afghanistan Compact (the set of agreements between the international community and the Afghan government) expires in December 2010. The international community will make new decisions on its role in Afghanistan in the post-2010 period in consultation with the Afghan government. The new Dutch mission's nature and duration therefore correspond as much as possible with the Afghan and international calendar in 2010. Various aspects of these decisions will be discussed and settled in a NATO strategic political-military plan, which is meant to be adopted at the April 2008 Bucharest summit.

To achieve the objectives of this mission and the reconstruction process, the international community will have to remain involved in Afghan reconstruction for many years. Afghanistan is the world's fifth-poorest country. An average annual growth rate of 8% would only raise it to the current economic level of countries like Cameroon or Bangladesh after 15 years. Development cooperation will continue to be important in this process. External security assistance to Afghanistan is also expected to remain necessary after 2010, though to a decreasing extent. The government expects NATO's post-2010 role to develop gradually towards a military support mission focusing on training, equipping and advising the Afghan army (ANA) and, partly, the police (ANP). This will also be subject of discussion at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.

The mission can be successful if the Afghan government and the Afghan provincial authorities become more legitimate, corruption is tackled, human rights play a larger role and the peace dividend become visible for the population.

The expectation is that by steadily building up the Afghan army and police, ISAF can turn responsibility for security in Uruzgan's populated areas step by step over to Afghan security forces in the spring of 2010. This makes it very important to make genuine progress in the coming period in building and training the ANA and ANP. This is a task for NATO and its member states as well as for the European Union Police

Mission EUPOL, which, after a difficult start, will have to steadily improve its effectiveness.

President Karzai made a number of commitments about efforts that his government will make. These include commitments regarding the numbers of Afghan troops and police units in Uruzgan, support from Kabul for the local administration and the rollout of national development programmes in Uruzgan. Supplementing agreements made in September 2007 with the Afghan Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Minister for Development Cooperation Koenders has fleshed out a number of agreements about education in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that he and the Afghan Minister of Education signed in November.