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Dutch Debate on Afghan Force Is Test for NATO

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To Dutch lawmaker Bert Bakker, a plan to send 1,700 of his country's soldiers into one of Afghanistan's most dangerous provinces looks like an operation "with a high risk of exploding in our face."

He fears Dutch soldiers being tarred like American troops for sending captives off to secret prisons, he said in an interview. He worries that the Afghan mission could agitate restive Muslim immigrants at home. And he is convinced his country's soldiers are being dispatched on a mission impossible.

On Thursday, Bakker will lead a fight in the divided Dutch parliament to keep his country's troops out of the force that NATO plans for southern Afghanistan.

An overwhelming defeat in parliament could bring down the Netherlands' coalition government. But the debate is more than a Dutch political brawl; it has become a test of the transatlantic alliance's efforts to find new missions and credibility in the post-Cold War era, and a referendum on President Bush's war against terrorism.

U.S. officials consider the vote a crucial measure of allies' willingness to share the risks and costs of stabilizing troubled nations and combating terrorism.

"It has been a long debate, but I think there's a growing awareness in both the public and the parliament about how important this mission is not only for Afghanistan but for NATO and all of us," said Chat Blakeman, charge d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy here.

"If NATO takes itself seriously, we need to be an organization that's relevant," said Gen. Dick Berlijn, the Netherlands' top military commander. "We need to be able to respond quickly to any crisis without 11/2 years of long debates."

In London, delegates from nearly 70 nations and international bodies pledged \$10.5 billion to help Afghanistan fight poverty, improve security and crack down on the drug trade, officials said at the end of a two-day conference on the nation's future, the Associated Press reported.

The Dutch debate comes as NATO is attempting to assemble a new rapid-reaction force drawn from member nations for deployment to international trouble spots.

In signs of the importance of the Dutch decision, high-level lobbyists came calling in The Hague this week: U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan met with Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. U.S. Marine Gen. James L. Jones, the top NATO military officer, met with members of parliament in a closed session. Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Defense Minister Rahim Wardak were among a score of witnesses Monday at a day-long hearing before a key parliamentary committee.

Senior Dutch government officials who favor participation in the NATO mission were encouraged Wednesday when the leader of the country's biggest opposition party, the Labor Party, hinted that he was softening his opposition to the deployment.

NATO has about 9,000 troops in Afghanistan, operating as the International Security Assistance Force. Most are in relatively stable northern and western areas of the country, where they conduct peacekeeping patrols and take part in reconstruction. Now the alliance is proposing to send 6,000 additional soldiers to parts of the south where the Taliban and al Qaeda insurgency is focused.

The plan is for those troops to operate separately from the primarily U.S. combat units fighting in Uruzgan and other southern provinces under the name Operation Enduring Freedom. More than 250 Dutch special forces personnel now work with American counterparts fighting insurgents.

If the deployment is approved, the Netherlands would send 1,500 to 1,700 troops for the NATO mission. That would include the forces who would take part in reconstruction projects, as well as airmen and crews for Apache helicopters and F-16 fighter jets assigned to help protect the reconstruction teams.

British, Canadian and Australian forces are also scheduled to participate in the NATO-led reconstruction effort in southern Afghanistan.

As the Netherlands debates the proposal, suicide bombings and other attacks have rocked rugged Uruzgan province, where Dutch troops would be deployed. It is a stronghold of the Taliban and the home ground of its leader, Mohammad Omar.

Critics of the mission say that even if the Dutch force's primary mission is reconstruction -- the building of schools and digging of wells -- it will inevitably be drawn into combat with the insurgents.

Opponents also express concern that Afghans will not make a distinction between U.S. forces fighting Taliban insurgents and NATO troops whose primary mission is meant to be humanitarian.

"The two operations will always be blurred," said Bakker, a leader in the left-of-center D66 party, which is part of the governing coalition but opposes the deployment.

"There were some unfortunate incidents," said Berlijn, the Dutch military chief, referring to abuses of prisoners at U.S.-run prisons at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in Afghanistan and Iraq. "We all have to deal with some of that negative fallout." But he added, "If we don't join the operation, it will give the Taliban another year to regenerate."

Dutch officials have imposed major conditions for taking part in the operation: No prisoners captured by Dutch soldiers would be sent to Guantanamo Bay, and Uruzgan Gov. Jan Mohammed Khan would be removed from office. Dutch officials allege that Khan, a militia leader, is corrupt and an obstacle to security.

Abdullah, the Afghan foreign minister, said here Monday that Afghanistan has agreed to the demands concerning prisoners. During the parliamentary hearing, however, Afghan officials provided no specific answer about Khan.

The Dutch debate is driven as much by internal politics as international military concerns. A majority of Dutch citizens oppose the deployment, according to opinion polls, though the gap has narrowed slightly in recent weeks.

The Dutch government and military remain in the shadow of the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, where in 1995 lightly armed Dutch troops acting as U.N. peacekeepers stood by as Bosnian Serb forces rounded up and massacred as many as 8,000 Muslim men and boys.

The Dutch government collapsed over the ensuing scandal, and subsequent governments enacted laws that encourage the kind of debates now underway over Afghanistan.

As the Netherlands approaches elections in 2007, Bakker's D66 party has led the opposition to the deployment. "It's a mixture of concern and party politics," said Rudy Andeweg, a political scientist at the Netherlands' Leiden University. "The party needs to do something to attract attention."

At various points in the debate, D66 has threatened to pull out of the government if it sends additional troops to Afghanistan. The loss of the coalition member could force the government's collapse.