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TAGS: PGOV, PREL, NATO, AF, NL
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: EXTENSION REVIEW
OFFICIALLY BEGINS

Classified By: Ambassador Roland Arnall, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: The GONL sent a letter to the Dutch Parliament on June 30 noting it will decide this summer whether to extend its ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The decision will follow an exhaustive review of all options, including staying in the mission's current capacity, reducing its contribution or moving to another location, or even withdrawing altogether. Cabinet officials have stressed that "all options are on the table," while public statements by Defense Minister Eimert van Middelkoop in favor of remaining in some capacity may have tipped the hand of the GONL and temporarily unsettled the political process. Dutch officials are cautiously optimistic that the conditions are in place to arrive at a positive extension decision, but stress that sequencing is vital: first the review of options, then consultations with Allies, followed by a decision and subsequent debate with Parliament. End summary.

Important First Step

2. (C) Following its June 29 meeting, the Dutch Cabinet sent a letter to Parliament stating that the GONL will decide this summer whether it will extend its ISAF mission in Afghanistan beyond August 2008, and if so, in what capacity. The letter notes that the Cabinet will investigate the "options and

desirability of continuing to make a contribution" to ISAF. The review will be conducted in accordance with the set criteria required for parliamentary consent prior to deploying Dutch troops abroad ("toetsingskader"). The letter formally begins the Article 100 process -- more importantly, it means the GONL can formally solicit contributions from other NATO Allies to team with the Dutch in Uruzgan province.

3. (S) In a July 2 meeting with Ambassador Arnall, Pieter de Gooijer (MFA Director General for Political Affairs) confirmed that issuing the letter represents an important step toward a possible extension. Although, for political reasons, the GONL remains restricted from expressing support for a particular option, de Gooijer said it "was fair to say" that the Cabinet appears to be quietly moving in that direction. He stressed, however, that there is not yet a firm consensus within the Cabinet, and some members are still holding out for significant concessions (e.g., more money for Defense, a significant mission in Africa for Development). De Gooijer noted that the six key ministers (the Prime Minister, two Deputy Prime Ministers, and the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Development and Defense) will meet on July 12 to consider next steps and hopefully steer the process in a positive direction.

One Step Beyond

4. (C) Following the June 29 Cabinet meeting, Cabinet ministers emphasized to the press that "all options were currently on the table," and that the GONL would decide whether to extend once the review of options had been fully completed. During one of the press interviews, however, Defense Minister van Middelkoop seemingly tipped the hand of the GONL by noting that "the political intention is to stay, be it in a more modest form." He explained that other Allies should take more responsibility, and that some tasks could be phased out to Allies, thereby leading to a trimmed-down Dutch extension. Van Middelkoop acknowledged that ending the mission was an option, but "the intention is to continue in some form."

5. (C) Van Middelkoop's remarks prompted a firestorm of criticism from both supporters and critics of the current mission. Supporters lamented that van Middelkoop hamstrung the extension review before it started as critics will argue that any such review will be subjective in nature as the GONL attempts to achieve van Middelkoop's stated desire to remain in Uruzgan. Critics worried that van Middelkoop's remarks might send the wrong signal to NATO and Washington, thereby

lifting them off the hook by telling them it was not necessary for military planners to initiate contingencies should the Dutch opt not to extend.

6. (C) Following van Middelkoop's remarks, Prime Minister Balkenende clarified the GONL "official position" -- the Dutch will investigate whether to continue, and if so, "how and in what way." But in no sense had the GONL made any decision on an extension. He emphasized that "matters should be done in the right order," and declined to acknowledge any current political intention to extend. Balkenende added that the decision should be made with careful consideration of all arguments -- "all options remain on the table." He said the GONL's decision would be made this summer, perhaps as late as September, following a "very intensive process."

... And a Step Backwards

7. (C) Van Middelkoop began the July 2 parliamentary hearing on Afghanistan by backtracking on his earlier comments. He characterized his remarks as a "slip of the tongue," and emphasized that the GONL would first review all options prior to making any decision to extend. Van Middelkoop reiterated this clarified position on July 3 in a meeting with Ambassador Arnall. He stressed that "all options were on the table" and that his suggestion that the Dutch remain in a limited capacity was "a mistake," and not a case of "being too honest." Van Middelkoop said his remarks required an apology to Parliament, for which he was "beaten up for 15 minutes," and then the Afghanistan debate continued as it had previously.

8. (C) In his meeting with Ambassador Arnall, van Middelkoop commented on the Dutch participation in heavy fighting around Chora in the previous few weeks. He said the Dutch had been "very lucky" that the Dutch commander on the ground had made the right tactical decision to stay and fight. Van Middelkoop also praised the Afghan security forces, noting that they had "fought well." He said there was still some fighting and instability in the region, which was one of the major reasons why he was visiting Afghanistan on July 5-6.

9. (C) Van Middelkoop also commented on prospects of persuading the Dutch Parliament to support an extension. He said part of his challenge with Parliament involves the position of his predecessor and current parliamentary member Henk Kamp, who has adamantly stated that the Dutch deployment in Uruzgan should last for two years, and "only two years." In order to overcome Kamp and others, van Middelkoop said the GONL must present sound arguments -- "the military, political, and financial lines of reasoning all must be convincing." Ambassador Arnall commented that van Middelkoop has more flexibility on the ground than Kamp, to which the Defense Minister smiled.

10. (C) Officially, the GONL does not yet have an opinion on any particular option. But in private, van Middelkoop said the best option to extend in Afghanistan probably involves a more modest contribution with the support of additional partners. He characterized the partnership with Australia as good, but said more help was needed from other Allies in order to convince Parliament. He said the next step was for he and Foreign Minister Verhagen to travel to NATO and make the case for additional assistance. He assessed the political situation on a possible extension as typical "coalition politics," and repeated previously made remarks that "we are still in the fog" regarding an extension, "but we are moving in the right direction."

Parliamentary Hearing

11. (C) In a three hour parliamentary session o July 2, parliamentarians from both sides of the political spectrum raised concerns regarding the heavy fighting around Chora and subsequent civilian casualties. They initially lambasted van Middelkoop for his comments regarding the political intent to

extend, but later seemed to accept his apology. Parliamentarians from the left, including Socialist Harry van Bommel and Green Left Mariko Peters, said van Middelkoop's comments will send NATO and Washington the "wrong signal," especially as NATO is "responsible" for finding an Ally to

replace the Netherlands -- "now NATO will think that the Dutch will extend and plans to replace us will not commence," said van Bommel.

12. (C) No new arguments were raised during the hearing. While all members of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee raised concerns about civilian casualties, all comments made were reasoned and emotionally restrained. Both Verhagen and van Middelkoop noted four on-going investigations (the Dutch military, the UN, ISAF, and Human Rights Watch) following the fighting in Chora, and promised to deliver results of the investigations as soon as they become available. Separately, MFA Task Force Uruzgan Coordinator Pieter Jan Kleiweg de Zwaan told emboffs July 3 that they expect the Dutch military investigation to be completed on or around July 10. Privately Kleiweg was worried that the investigations might contradict one another, further muddling an already confusing situation.

13. (C) Other concerns voiced by parliamentarians included the cost of the deployment, poppy eradication, and relations with Pakistan. Both Verhagen and van Middelkoop said it was "too simplistic" to classify the Dutch deployment as either a military or reconstruction mission -- both are necessary in order to be successful. Verhagen argued that intense fighting in Chora did not mean that reconstruction in Uruzgan was impossible. Development Minister Koenders began to lay the foundation necessary to make the argument later in the summer and fall that reconstruction was not only possible, but in fact working in Uruzgan. In response to a question from Labor Party (PvdA) spokesperson Angelien Eijssink, van Middelkoop refuted claims made in the Dutch periodical Elsevier that the Dutch military had released a senior Taliban leader. He explained that Afghan authorities had initially made the arrest, and the Dutch offered to hold the individual briefly before returning him to Afghan authorities.

Government Strategy

14. (S) While cautiously optimistic, the working level continues to emphasize PM Balkenende's message that the GONL "check all the boxes" during its review prior to making an official extension decision. Kleiweg told emboffs July 2 that the six ministers most responsible for making a decision to extend (Balkenende and Verhagen from the Christian Democratic Alliance, Deputy Minister/Finance Minister Bos and Koenders from the Labor Party, and Deputy Minister/Minister for Youth and Family Affairs Rouvoet and van Middelkoop from the Christian Union) have already met on several occasions, and dynamics among the ministers are "good." Kleiweg characterized the ministers as "moving in the right direction," and deflected suggestions that Finance Minister Bos might be problematic. He said "The Six" will meet again on July 12 prior to the summer break to discuss various extension options.

15. (C) Kleiweg noted that the Dutch have yet to formally solicit contributions from other NATO Allies to any Dutch extension in Uruzgan. He said the GONL first will identify options and possible tasks that could be filled by others prior to approaching Allies. Kleweg acknowledged that the Dutch are "picky" when it comes to the question of which Allies to approach -- any potential partner has to "speak the same language" and possess a "similar outlook" when it comes to reconstruction efforts. He also noted a certain reluctance on the part of the Dutch military to incorporate elements from yet another military -- but such hesitancy will

need to be overcome should the review determine the best chance for an extension involves teaming with another Ally.

16. (C) Once tasks and partners are identified, Kleiweg said

the USG and SACEUR could be helpful in persuading these Allies to team with the Dutch -- provided the government opts for an extension. When asked about possibly teaming with U.S. forces, Kleiweg said the Dutch "have no problem" with U.S. forces under ISAF command. He noted, however, that OEF/ISAF deconfliction continues to be a sensitive issue in the Netherlands, especially as the dividing line between the two becomes more blurry.

17. (C) Low public support for both the current mission and any extension continues to be a problem. Kleiweg said the GONL is looking at respected "international voices" to enlist to try and influence public opinion. He noted that the GONL had arranged through NATO the visit of several Afghan parliamentarians to the Netherlands. While the trip was a success, Dutch and Afghan media considered the visit "NATO propaganda," Kleiweg said. He noted that the individual with the most power to change Dutch public opinion was Afghan President Karzai, but acknowledged even that might have changed in recent weeks given Karzai's criticism of the Dutch military action in Chora. Kleiweg said Karzai intends to visit the Netherlands in December -- "hopefully long after the Dutch have made a decision on extending," he added. Uruzgan Gov. Monib might be another option, although Kleiweg said GONL relations with Monib are no longer that strong as Monib appears more interested in events in Kabul than in Uruzgan, while Monib's travel ban remains problematic. Other international respected voices might include individuals such as UN SYG Ban Ki-Moon, Kleiweg said.

Detention Policy

18. (C) Kleiweg told emboffs July 3 that the GONL has circulated a draft letter among RC-South contributing nations to the Afghan government requesting greater access for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Council to detainees held in Afghan prisons. The draft letter was an action item derived from the latest RC-South conference held in The Hague in June 2007. According to Kleiweg, the GONL, as well as the governments of Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Australia have all approved the draft letter. He inquired if the USG had reviewed the letter and had any comments; emboffs said they would check with Washington.

Inter-Governmental Dynamics

19. (S//NOFORN) Working level contacts describe the relationship between Verhagen and Koenders as "contentious but not outright hostile." Instead of direct confrontation, the two often wage battles through their staffs at the working level, said MFA Security Affairs Chief Robert de Groot. That said, when the two ministers agree, the resulting decision has added weight and is often "ironclad." Van Middelkoop is described as "the third wheel," or the "inexperienced junior partner" by working level contacts. While substantively knowledgeable, his inexperience in the government is obvious, and he often defers to Verhagen and Koenders.

20. (S//NOFORN) According to working level contacts, Koenders has a "voracious appetite" for information on Afghanistan -- "he want to know how many grains of sand are in Uruzgan,"

said Kleiweg. While he has an almost equal status to Verhagen on Afghanistan behind closed doors, Koenders resents being viewed as subordinate to the other two ministers in public. "He cannot stand waiting for two hours to speak during a parliamentary hearing, and then be restricted to only ten minutes of speaking time," said Task Force Deputy Coordinator Dewi van de Weerde. Working level contacts also describe him as incapable of making decisions, which could play into extension considerations.

Comment

21. (S) Van Middelkoop's comments -- while seemingly positive

from our perspective -- temporarily unsettled the political debate on extending. Cabinet members were reportedly incensed by van Middelkoop's blunder, but his public mea culpa seems to have appeased naysayers in Parliament. Despite it, the GONL once again appears to be on the same page in its efforts to create the conditions necessary to arrive at a positive extension decision. There is a process -- an exhaustive review followed by consultations -- that must be followed in order for this to work, and Balkenende is shepherding it through. Finance Minister Bos could still prove problematic, but working level contacts suggest he will be reasonable. As the Dutch are fond of saying, "do not disturb the brooding hen" -- which we will no doubt hear often over the course of the summer and into the fall.

ARNALL