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2009-12-21 16.28

Embassy The Hague

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 THE HAGUE 000759

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2019
TAGS: PREL, PGOV, NATO, AF, NL
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: CABINET DELIBERATING -
LABOR PARTY LINES DRAWN

REF: THE HAGUE 726

1. (S) SUMMARY: Dutch cabinet deliberations on Afghanistan are stalled going into the holiday break, with no clear indication when the impasse will be broken. Dutch post-2010 commitments to Afghanistan are being held hostage to the Labor Party's (PvdA) uncompromising stance. Ambassador's engagement with key leaders reveals few new assessments: Dutch will likely stay in Afghanistan focusing on training, enablers and development - outside of Uruzgan. END SUMMARY

CABINET MEETINGS SIGNAL NEW LOW IN DELIBERATIONS

2. (S) A sextet of ministers devoted their "mini" cabinet meetings to Afghanistan December 09 and 15. The sextet consists of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (Christian Democrats (CDA)), Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen (CDA), Finance Minister/Deputy Prime Minister Wouter Bos (Labor Party (PvdA)), Defense Minister Eimert van Middelkoop (Christian Unie (CU)), Development Cooperation Minister Bert Koenders (PvdA), and Youth and Families Minister/Deputy Prime Minister Andre Rouvoet (CU).

3. (S) The cabinet has not released any public information following the meetings. Verhagen's private secretary told the Embassy Balkenende, for the first time in a cabinet meeting, made a "heartfelt pitch" for staying in Uruzgan on December 9. The private secretary was not optimistic, however, about the future of the Uruzgan mission because the PvdA's political "stranglehold" was still in place. The cabinet reviewed three options: a substantially reduced Uruzgan presence, a training mission outside Uruzgan, and a PRT outside Uruzgan. Chief of Defense Staff apparently

provided broad outlines of these scenarios at the December 15 meeting.

DUTCH KEY LEADER ASSESSMENTS

4. (S) PvdA - Bos has completely shunned the diplomatic corps, relegating Afghanistan discussions to Koenders who has categorically said the Dutch will not be in Uruzgan after 2010 except for development efforts. The Australian Ambassador met with PvdA Foreign Affairs spokesperson Martijn van Dam who was even more unyielding on the Uruzgan departure. He stated that if Dutch security was needed in Uruzgan for development efforts after 2010, then the Dutch would simply stop those efforts as well. The PvdA defense spokesperson opined that it would not be of any benefit for U.S. leaders to engage either Bos or van Dam as they were not "open-minded" on Afghanistan. The PvdA is a party in disarray; their December 12 party congress was very mixed. Although there was no formal party statement made on Afghanistan, Labor's position remained clear - it was standing firm on withdrawal of all troops from Uruzgan in 2010. Bos has stated he wants a Cabinet decision around January 8, before the Davids Commission issues its report about the political support the Dutch Government gave the U.S. decision to attack Iraq in 2003. Press commentary after the party congress heavily criticized Labor for failing to recognize: (1) any positive developments in Uruzgan over the past two years; (2) the importance for the Dutch to support the new NATO strategy and mission; and (3) the lives lost needlessly and effort wasted if the Dutch withdrew from Uruzgan.

5. (S) CDA - Verhagen told the Ambassador December 11 he thought the cabinet planned to have a decision prior to the late January London Conference on Afghanistan. Verhagen did not provide any new insight on what a final cabinet decision will entail. He and CDA parliamentary floor leader Pieter van Geel told the Ambassador the CDA MPs were not enthusiastic about continuing in Uruzgan past 2010, but would support any decision by the cabinet. Verhagen was not optimistic about what the cabinet would ultimately decide but he remained committed to serious Dutch involvement in Afghanistan.

6. (S) CU - Van Middelkoop told the Ambassador that discussions within the cabinet had been "frustrating." The

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military leadership do not want to leave Afghanistan and are clearly concerned about being the "odd man out" within NATO as many other countries are stepping up their commitments. Van Middelkoop appears to support a serious commitment but does not see a way around the impasse caused by the intransigence of the PvdA.

7. (S) Opposition parties - Anouchka van Miltenburg (Liberal Party - VVD), Chair of the Defense Committee, told the Ambassador that the debate has everything to do with local politics and almost nothing to do with statesmanship. She said the PvdA will clearly put the government into a crisis over the decision if pressed by CDA. She sees no way to avoid that other than to compromise on a mission of some nature outside of Uruzgan. VVD party leader Mark Rutte told the Ambassador December 14 his party would support staying in Uruzgan. He speculated that if the cabinet went to a crisis

over the issue the end result may be a coalition of VVD, CDA, D-66 and CU resulting in more serious support of NATO-led operations. Alexander Pechtold, D66 party leader, told Ambassador December 16 his party would support retention of a PRT and force protection in Uruzgan. He suggested a cabinet crisis was not in any of the coalition partner's interest. Pechtold believes the cabinet decision will be delayed as long as possible to distance a decision from the recent public comments to give them room to maneuver. In a meeting with POL/ECON Counselor, Mariko Peters, the GreenLeft party spokesperson for defense and foreign affairs (and former DCM at the Dutch Embassy in Kabul), said her party would support continued Dutch involvement in Afghanistan if it focused on community policing, even if Dutch police trainers needed Dutch troops to provide force protection to do their job. Geert Wilders of the Freedom Party (PVV) told the Ambassador December 10 the Labor Party had painted itself into a corner with no way out. It was in a lose-lose situation. It would probably agree to stay in Afghanistan someplace other than Uruzgan, but that would not placate its followers. Wilders supports the NATO mission in Afghanistan and praised the President's new strategy, but his party wants all Dutch troops to be withdrawn, "it is time for others to step up and assume their responsibilities. The Dutch have done enough."

JOINT EFFORTS

8. (S) The results of the Ambassador's meetings with the party leaders are the same as those undertaken by the British, Australian and Danish Ambassadors. Comparing notes reinforced the overwhelming support of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister for a continued Uruzgan deployment, but frustration as arguments fall on deaf ears in the PvdA. The PvdA shows no realization of the impact a lack of significant commitment by the Dutch will have on their international stature. They also fail to grasp the overall costs and loss of credibility from leaving a successful PRT and establishing a completely new mission in a new location as Labor has proposed as an alternative. The British embassy has forwarded a suggestion that Foreign Secretary David Miliband, a Labor leader, contact Bos on a party-to-party basis to discuss Afghanistan. The Danish Ambassador believes that as a small country with the same issues as the Dutch she can argue a different angle that may be helpful in urging the Dutch forward.

COMMENT

9. (S) Karel van Oosterom, the Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs and Defense Advisor (NSA equivalent), told visiting EUR/WE Office Director Maureen Cormack the cabinet was faced with finding consensus between the PvdA's absolute refusal to countenance an additional military mission in Uruzgan and the CDA's insistence that the Netherlands make a significant contribution to NATO's mission in Afghanistan. He recognized it was in no one's interest to bring the cabinet to crisis because of the important work the cabinet still needed to do. While mindful of Bos's Jan. 8 date, Verhagen's eye on the London Conference and Parliament's desire for a decision by March 1, van Oosterom said the Prime Minister will take whatever time is necessary to achieve the best result. PvdA Minister Koenders told the Australian Ambassador that Labor, with Bos's blessing, could support continued development

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efforts through the PRT in Uruzgan (leaving 12 or so civilian development officers behind in Tarin Kowt with force protection provided by some other country), enablers, a force of as many as 500 soldiers deployed elsewhere in Afghanistan, and an increased financial contribution for development and training efforts. Given Labor's refusal to consider other options, that may be the best we can hope for. END COMMENT.
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