

Employment of the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan Extended



Henning Bartels, Editor-in-Chief

The Federal Government has presented a proposal to the Bundestag (Federal Lower House of Parliament) for an extension and expansion of the Bundeswehr's Afghanistan mandate. A respective resolution of the Cabinet was discussed by the Bundestag in a first reading in the first week of October. During the debate only the Left-wing Party expressed its basic objections to the presence of the soldiers in Kunduz, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kabul. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens expressed their consent with reservations regarding the mission aimed at achieving political stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan in which Germany has been involved since the beginning of 2002.

Demands to limit the duration of the mandate and to plan the withdrawal from Afghanistan were rejected by Federal Chancellor Merkel (Christian Democratic Party — CDU) and Foreign Minister Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party — SPD). A government spokesman in Berlin said that there was "agreement" between Mrs. Merkel and Vice Chancellor Steinmeier "that it would be more than negligent to discuss now a date for a pullout or an end of the mandate". The government and the people in Afghanistan should and must be sure that "our word can be trusted" said the spokesman of the Federal Government. He continued by saying that it would be in Germany's "very own interests" to bring about an improvement of the situation in Afghanistan. After all, the attacks of 11 September 2001 had been planned from out of Afghanistan.

The German mandate for the ISAF International Afghanistan Support Mission provides for a deployment of up to 4,500 soldiers. That is 1,000 personnel more than have been assigned to it up to now. The total German ISAF contingent will be employed with main effort

in the northern region as well as in the Kabul area in future, too. The raising of the personnel cap for the German ISAF contribution is required to retain the necessary flexibility with regard to additionally assumed tasks — above all training support for the Afghan Army and, if need be, assumption of tasks of the allies in the northern part of the country — and to be able to react to sudden changes in the security situation and to secure and watch over the 2009 presidential elections by providing additional forces. The exceptional extension of the mandate by 14 months has been requested to allow the Bundestag to be newly elected in 2009 to make the decision on another prolongation of the mandate. The Federal Government stated that the augmentation was to guarantee more flexibility and will not lead to a current increase. In addition, the Air Force operates transport and reconnaissance aircraft in Afghanistan. Another decision will have to be made by the Bundestag on an employment of NATO AWACS aircraft in Afghanistan and the participation of German soldiers in these aircraft, as this necessitates an additional mandate of the parliament. This example of reconnaissance by AWACS aircraft alone shows how complicated the whole strategy is in respect to the employment of troops and means in Afghanistan. Some Members of the Parliament fear that the reconnaissance results would be used to provide e.g. American aircraft with target data for air raids against Taliban fighters; others, on the other hand, see the necessity in the fact that the civilian air traffic over Afghanistan, for instance, and its boundaries to terror attacks from the ground will be better protected.

After the Cabinet's resolution, the Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan was also positively decided on by the Bundestag in the following week for the duration of 14 months (hitherto twelve months). It is going to cost about 50 million euros per month. Together with the expenditures for the civilian reconstruction of 170 million euros and the buildup of the police force in Afghanistan, a total amount of nearly one billion euros is currently being annually spent for the Afghanistan aid. The resolved extension of the Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan by 14 months combined with an augmentation of the soldiers stationed there is considered to be sound and correct. But for many Members of Parliament it was certainly not easy to approve of that. Because this mission is not very popular with the population. This might also result from the fact that there is too little information and explanation given by the political side on this mission and the necessity of the participation of German soldiers. This cannot only be the tasks of the Federal

Minister of Defense or the Foreign Minister. Here, a lot more needs to be done in public relations — more downward communication on the successes that have undoubtedly been achieved in Afghanistan. Less helpful here were the doubts lately expressed by American and British generals as to whether the country was possible to be militarily pacified at all. No one has ever claimed, however, that political stability in Afghanistan could be achieved with weapons alone. The whole approach of the mission with its reconstruction aids and a great variety of civil-social projects are proof of that. And this approach of "networked security", which has been pursued particularly by Germany from the very beginning and for which Germany was much criticized at the outset of the mission, is the only possibility to help the Afghan population to lead their country to a somewhat stable future. The sentence of the former Defense Minister, Mr. Struck, that Germany's security is also being defended at the Hindukush is just as true today than it was in 2002. Intelligence information of the secret services prove that the traces of almost all attacks and of almost all Islamic suicide bombers and fighters lead to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. The al-Qaida command located there continues to be the ideological source of the Jihadism and a magnet for supporters of terroristic acts from all over the world, also for sympathizers from Germany.

However, not everything is going well in Afghanistan. The restrictions under which almost every national military contingent is deployed there effect in the aggregate that the NATO-led ISAF is more or less fighting with one arm behind their back. It is an unacceptable deficiency that NATO is not capable of equipping the soldiers with the necessary materiel such as helicopters, for instance. And it is correct that the coordination between military, UN, and civilian relief organizations must be improved and that there are many corrupt and incompetent members in President Karzai's government. After all, there exists indeed a political process which is intended to accompany the military commitment and to replace it some day, but it is still in its initial stages. The talks of the Kabul government with some of the Pashtun chiefs who are regarded as "moderate" Taliban, are a first step. Now, conferences must follow which include the mediators and neighboring states, but Pakistan above all. To achieve all this, provision of aid as well as international pressure, including the military one, will continue to be indispensable for years to come. Speaking of a strategy to the end the ISAF mission is much too early. ■

By Henning Bartels, Chief Editor.