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Embassy The Hague

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TAGS: PREL, PGOV, MARR, AF, NL

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: DUTCH FIGHTING ON THE
GROUND AND IN THE HAGUE

REF: THE HAGUE 978

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

1. (C) Summary: Dutch troops in Uruzgan have faced their first serious military challenge in Uruzgan and, by all accounts, acquitted themselves professionally. Prime Minister Balkenende, CHOD Berlijn, Defense Minister Kamp, Foreign Minister Bot and other senior Dutch officials have all reaffirmed the Dutch commitment to the ISAF mission and forcefully dismissed speculation that the GONL might rethink its plans in light of the changing security situation. At the same time, public support for the mission is weak, and the government is likely to face critical questions from parliament when it is briefed on the mission on June 13. D-66 minister Pechtold -- whose party opposed the deployment

-- appeared ready on June 6 to reopen debate on the mission within cabinet, but was slapped down by Balkenende, Bot, and Kamp, and even criticized by opposition PvdA spokesman Bert Koenders. Dutch officials have expressed concern, however, that Dutch views on staffing key ISAF positions and other critical issues are not being taken seriously by the U.S., complicating their efforts to build and maintain political support for the mission at home. End Summary.

Deployment on Track, and Dutch Already Fighting:

2. (S) An upbeat MOD Director of General Policy Affairs Lo Casteleijn told Ambassador Arnall June 6 that "all is on track" regarding the deployment of Dutch troops to Uruzgan under ISAF. There are now approximately 900 Dutch troops in the province; this number will grow to 2,000 personnel in the near future to prepare for the Dutch assuming control, before dropping back down to approximately 1,600 troops. According to Castelijn and others, Dutch special forces also were involved in efforts to retake the town of Chora (29 km north of Uruzgan's capital Tarin Kowt), which had fallen to the Taliban on May 30. Dutch commandos exchanged fire with Taliban forces on June 1; Dutch Apache helicopters and coalition F-16s were called in to support the Dutch troops. The Dutch sustained no casualties. During a press conference following the incident, Dutch CHOD Gen. Berlijn could not rule out the possibility of upping the number of Dutch troops deployed to the region, but dismissed speculation that Taliban actions would make the Dutch rethink their commitment.

3. (S) Hugo Siblesz, MFA Director General for Political Affairs, told Ambassador Arnall separately on June 6 that the level of Taliban activity in the province was not beyond the capabilities of Dutch forces to handle. While he anticipated some tough questioning from parliament when it is briefed by the Government on June 13, Siblesz predicted the discussion would focus on three questions: is the level of violence in the province within expectations; can Dutch forces handle it; and will the GONL reconsider the mission? The answers, he stated unequivocally, would be "yes, yes, and no".

But Politics Threaten to Reemerge:

4. (C) Kingdom Affairs Minister Pechtold said in response to a question during a June 6 interview on Dutch television that he could envision the Cabinet reassessing the deployment decision as a result of the worsening security situation. (Comment: Pechtold, a member of the minor coalition party D-66 which opposed the deployment, is currently involved in a bitter power struggle for control of his party, and

apparently felt such a stand would enhance his standing within the party.) PM Balkenende immediately called Pechtold following the interview and demanded that he publicly retract his remarks; Pechtold complied. Balkenende, FM Bot, and DM Kamp also made several strong statements in the press reaffirming the Dutch commitment to the two year deployment. NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer also said Pechtold's remarks were "unhelpful" and cast doubt on the Dutch Cabinet's commitment to the mission.

5. (C) Several Dutch parliamentarians reacted in exasperation to yet another instance of apparent mixed messages from the Cabinet. VVD Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Hans van Baalen said "loose cannon" Pechtold's comments were inappropriate, especially in conjunction with the confusing remarks made by DM Kamp in May that were "taken out of context" by the Dutch press (reftel). Even Bert Koenders, foreign policy spokesman for the largest opposition party in parliament, the PvdA, publicly condemned Pechtold for seeking to reopen an issue on which Parliament had already voted. In a meeting with POLCOUNS on June 7, Koenders added that remarks like Pechtold's, he said, "stir the pot" and make it very hard for either the Dutch public or foreign leaders to take the GONL's decisions seriously. PvdA, he stressed, supports the mission, although it continues to have concerns about maintaining a "firewall" between OEF and ISAF and other issues related to the deployment.

Upcoming Parliamentary Hearings

6. (C) Parliament will hold hearings on June 13 to discuss the status of the deployment. MFA Task Force Coordinator for Uruzgan Pieter-Jan Kleiweg told polmiloff June 7 that the hearings will focus by and large on the deteriorating security situation. Kleiweg expected "no problems" but added that parliamentarians might be more contentious given Pechtold's comments. He said it was a shame that the hearings were not held earlier in May, when they were delayed due to the Hirsi Ali debacle. Now, parliament has "more to chew on" he said, including the rise in cost of the deployment and the inability to remove Uruzgan governor Monib from the UN 1267 sanctions list.

Dutch Concerns: ISAF Composite HQ and Senior Civilian Rep

7. (C) In the meeting with Ambassador Arnall, Hugo Siblesz expressed frustration that Dutch concerns regarding ISAF -- many of which reflected political commitments made by the government to secure parliamentary support for the mission -- did not always appear to be given the serious consideration

owed to the mission's third largest troop contributor. In this regard, he cited specifically the long-standing Dutch view that giving all senior command positions to the U.S. created an uncomfortable political situation for the Balkenende government. Keeping a firewall, or at least the appearance of one, between OEF and ISAF was a red-line for the Dutch, and the logical way to achieve this would be to staff the Deputy Commander (DCOM) for Security position in the proposed composite HQ with a non-American; i.e., a Brit. This issue was raised specifically by Dutch CHOD Berlijn in a May 15 letter to DSACEUR and has been discussed at the political and working levels, but has not been resolved. Although Siblesz acknowledged that the U.S. was entitled to both the ISAF Commander and DCOM positions as the largest troop contributor, he stressed that showing flexibility on this point would make it much easier for the GONL politically while highlighting the international nature of the mission. Lo Castelijn and MFA Director for Security Affairs Robert de Groot made similar points with the Ambassador and POLCOUNS respectively on June 6 and 7.

8. (S) Similarly, Siblesz and de Groot expressed concern that the U.S. did not appear willing to be more flexible with regard to staffing the position of NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) in Kabul. Siblesz noted that both the Dutch and U.S. had put forward qualified candidates for this position, and that allies were split over whom to support. While the U.S. candidate clearly had very strong qualifications for the position, this was not the only consideration. Again, having the U.S. hold this position in addition to the ISAF Commander and DCOM positions would create the strong impression that this was a U.S.-only mission -- not an allied effort. Allowing at least one of the three key positions to be filled by a non-American would make future participation by allies in this or similar missions more attractive. Separately, de Groot informally told POLCOUNS that having the Dutch candidate placed in the SCR position was a higher priority for the Dutch than filling the DCOM position with a Brit; in his view, having at least one of the top three positions staffed with a non-American should be enough to satisfy Dutch concerns.

COMMENT:

9. (S) While the GONL and Dutch military remain firmly committed to the ISAF III Uruzgan mission, it is unfortunate that, at the very moment Dutch troops are starting to see combat, dissatisfaction at the way Dutch interests are being addressed within the ISAF mission appears to be growing in The Hague. One of Balkenende's key arguments in favor of

deployment was that only by participating in such missions could the Dutch influence Alliance decision-making and ensure that the Dutch retained a credible voice in NATO. Even if it is not possible to meet specific Dutch demands in this instance, serious thought needs to be given to finding ways to shore up the message that the Dutch are a valued and important partner.

ARNALL