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Commentary by RNW Security and Defence specialist Hans de Vreij*

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Panic measure?

Dutch parliament wants Defence Minister to visit Uruzgan

Dutch Minister of Defence Eimert van Middelkoop or Deputy Defence Minister Jack de Vries should go to the Afghan province of Uruzgan as soon as possible to calm the mood among the Dutch troops based there, and to give them a sign of support and encouragement. That, at least, is the opinion of a majority of the members of the Dutch parliament.

Although no parliamentary motion obliging either minister to do so has been submitted so far, the parliamentarians have made their views known quite clearly via the media. With a ministerial working visit to a military mission outside the country apparently never before having been forced in this way, the level of desperation among the Dutch forces in Uruzgan must indeed be extremely high. Or could this be a panic measure?

The reason for the commotion is the reported level of unrest amongst the Dutch troops following the investigation into the death of two Dutch and two Afghan soldiers during fighting in the vicinity of Deh Rawod on 12 January this year.

Investigation

Armed Forces Commander General Dick Berlijn launched the investigation into the events that took place on that fateful day, and the resulting 25-page confidential report has been made available to the public prosecutor's office in the Dutch city of Arnhem, which is also carrying out its own investigation into this "friendly fire" incident.

A summary of the report has been sent to parliament and also made public. It concludes that it is "very likely" that the two Dutch soldiers were killed, and a third seriously wounded, accidentally by "friendly fire". Moreover, it is "certain" that the two Afghan government soldiers were killed by Dutch fire.

Doubts

Publication of the summary of the report came at an unfortunate moment, just as colleagues of the dead soldiers were starting out on a new operation in Deh Rawod, codenamed 'Patan Ghar'. However, all those affected, not least family and friends of the fallen soldiers, naturally wanted certainty about what actually happened as soon as possible.

But instead of certainty, there has been confusion. The NOS Journaal, the news programme of Dutch public TV, and newspaper *de Volkskrant* had reporters at the Dutch base in Afghanistan and they reported that the troops on the ground had some considerable doubts about the report's



findings.

However, the final straw for the MPs appears to have come with a report on Monday's NOS Journaal that spoke of "tensions between the officers in Uruzgan", and a ban on speaking to the press for everyone below the rank of the Commander of Task Force Uruzgan: Colonel Richard van Harskamp.

The colonel decides.

This ban isn't as strange as it might appear. The official spokesperson for the mission in Afghanistan is normally someone in The Hague rather than in Uruzgan itself anyway. This 'rule' is naturally applied even more strictly when there are exceptional circumstances such as a fatal "friendly fire" incident. Furthermore, Colonel van Harskamp is the boss in Uruzgan, as Minister Eimert van Middelkoop has pointed out, and therefore - according to the defence minister - whatever he decides is, by definition, correct.

Confusion

Be that as it may, the information provided on behalf of the minister and General Berlijn leaves something to be desired, as evidenced by the published summary of the investigative report, which contains fewer details than those which later became public - in the days following its publication - through media reports and even in a personal column written by General Berlijn and published on the intranet site of the ministry of defence. Moreover, further confusion may have arisen because the summary itself makes mention of 'further in-depth analysis' of possible underlying reasons for the shooting incidents. So, is this the final, definitive report or just an interim one? And why weren't the officers involved able - or allowed - to see the actual investigative report until this past weekend?

The ministry of defence announced on Tuesday that the report to the public prosecutor and the letter to parliament of 19 February 2008 marked the completion of its investigation. The 'further analysis' as mentioned now appears to refer to matters such as procedures and training. As to whether the minister now plans to grab a plane and rush off to the troops in to Uruzgan? The answer is... no.

* *RNW translation (as)*

Tags: Afghanistan, Deh Rawod, Eimert van Middelkoop, friendly fire, General Dick Berlijn, Uruzgan



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