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Elections 'vital': new NATO chief south Afghanistan

By RNW Security and Defence specialist Hans de Vreij*
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The new Dutch commander of international forces in southern Afghanistan says the most important measure of success is not fighting the Taliban but ensuring that next year's general election is free, fair and peaceful. Major General Mart de Kruif will take over as commander of NATO forces on 1 November.

Major General De Kruif will spend a year devoting himself to a range of tasks including stopping the armed insurgency against the central government in Kabul, helping to set up reconstruction projects and ensuring good governance in the region.

He will have about 20,000 military personnel under his command, including US forces in Zabul province, the Dutch in Uruzgan, the Canadians in Kandahar and British forces in Helmand.

Taliban still active

Since 2006, Canada, Great Britain and the Netherlands have been rotating command of the NATO troops in southern Afghanistan. US troops, fighting under the banner of the anti-terrorism operation Enduring Freedom, have been stationed in the region since 2001.

The Taliban are still active in the area although NATO and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have managed to push them out of some places.

In an interview with Radio Netherlands Worldwide, the new NATO commander in southern Afghanistan says he does not see fighting the Taliban as his chief task. According to Major General De Kruif, his main priority is making sure that the 2009 elections pass off peacefully:

"We are a NATO force, but we're not fighting the Taliban, that is not our mission. Our mission is to secure Afghanistan so that we can set the conditions for good governance and development. Vital to good governance and development is a democratic (general) election in which most or, hopefully, all the different parties in Afghanistan are involved."

ISAF takeover

Another important measure for success is whether NATO troops are able to train and supervise the Afghan army and police so that they can take over from ISAF forces.

"Based on the training we do now, we see that the Afghans get more capabilities, they are getting better in the job that they are doing all the time. And you will see over the next year, hopefully, that the Afghan National Security Forces will be able to take the lead in security in certain areas."

Major General de Kruif refused to comment directly when asked whether he believes there should be



Mart de Kruif: free elections a priority

negotiations with the Taliban as he views it as an issue for the Afghan government. However, he added:

"From a different perspective, you could say that the end state of a counter-insurgency operation as we are doing now, is of course that there will be political solution, with as many parties negotiating at the table as possible. But it should be done from a position of strength, by the Afghan government.

*RNW Translation (jc)

Tags: Afghanistan, ISAF, Mart de Kruif, NATO, Taliban



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