

Berlin Rejects U.S. Request for More German Troops in Afghanistan

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Feb. 1 (Bloomberg) — The German government rejected a U.S. request to provide more troops to combat Taliban insurgents in southern Afghanistan, saying that ministers were “surprised” by the demand.

“The letter came as a surprise to us,” Ulrich Wilhelm, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s chief spokesman, told a regular news conference in Berlin today. “The government has made clear that the existing mandate provides the basis for our engagement.” The government “has no plans” to change the mandate as approved by the lower house of parliament, or Bundestag.

Germany has explained to its partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that its mandate limits military involvement to northern Afghanistan, Wilhelm said, adding that the terms of German involvement in the country is “not negotiable.”

Wilhelm’s comments follow a report in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper today that U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates wrote to his German counterpart, Franz Josef Jung, last week asking for additional combat troops and helicopter support in southern Afghanistan.

“I keep to the view that we should continue and fulfill our mandate in Afghanistan,” Jung said today in a televised statement. “I believe our focus should continue to be in the north.”

Seeking Help

NATO allies such as the U.S., U.K., the Netherlands and Canada, whose troops are stationed in the more violent south, have stepped up calls to other alliance members to send in more combat troops. Last month eight countries with troops in the south met in Edinburgh to discuss getting more contributions from other nations.

“I’m not here to name countries who aren’t pulling their weight — I think people know who they are and they know who they are and I’d rather leave it to others to identify them,” Australian Defense Minister Joel Fitzgibbon told reporters after the meeting, adding Australian forces wouldn’t leave before 2010.

Germany’s presence in Afghanistan hinges on parliamentary mandates on the troop presence in the north under the command of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force, the deployment of six Tornado surveillance jets and a special-forces unit to assist the

U.S.-led counter-insurgency operation.

New Mandate

Any alteration of Germany's presence would require a new or an adjusted mandate by lawmakers in the lower house at a time when most Germans reject sending more soldiers to the country.

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the U.S. request for troops was made in some form to all countries involved in the conflict and was not specific to Germany.

Steinmeier said that he briefed U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last week on Germany's actions to enhance its forces in northern Afghanistan.

"We have accentuated and expanded our civil and military engagement once again," Steinmeier told reporters after meeting with Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt in Berlin. "I believe that will be recognized in the U.S. and so I have no concerns about the way the current discussion is being carried out."

Jung will explain Germany's position to NATO defense ministers meeting in Vilnius Feb. 7-8, Wilhelm said.

"The chancellor, in all her meetings in parliament and with partners, has made clear that for us the existing mandate is the basis for action," Wilhelm said. "We're carrying out an important job there that is demanding a lot of us."

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