

Afghan mission likely to dominate Munich security conference

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MUNICH, Germany, Feb. 8 (Xinhua) — The disputes among NATO nations over military missions in Afghanistan are likely to dominate a key security conference that opens later Friday in the southern German city of Munich.

The annual three-day meeting, to be attended by high-profile diplomats including NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates this year, is scheduled to discuss a range of the world's most thorny security issues.

Germany, the host nation, has bluntly rejected a request from the United States to offer more troops to volatile southern Afghanistan.

Gates wrote a strongly-worded letter to German leaders last week to ask for additional combat troops in southern Afghanistan, sparking grave concerns in Germany over a potential shift of the German missions, which are mainly responsible for reconstruction, security and training tasks.

German soldiers should continue to focus their missions in the northern Afghanistan, said German Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung, who is expected to deliver a speech at the meeting. However, Germany has decided to follow a NATO request to send a combat unit to northern Afghanistan to replace a 350-strong Norwegian contingent as a quick reaction force.

NATO has reportedly been struggling to plug holes in the military missions in Afghanistan where security concerns have intensified recently.

Canada has threatened to withdraw its soldiers unless European allies such as France and Germany send additional troops to southern Afghanistan. Some 3,000 German troops are currently deployed in relatively peaceful north Afghanistan under the 43,000-strong NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

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