

German Military Offensive in Afghanistan

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KUNDUZ, Afghanistan: The German military, long criticized by its allies as too passive in the face of a growing insurgency, plans to go on the offensive in Taliban strongholds in northern Afghanistan — despite the risk of a political backlash back home.

Acting on instructions from Berlin, senior officers have ordered two 600-man German battalions to team up with Afghan soldiers in the coming months and clear Taliban fighters from districts the insurgents now dominate.

Germany has portrayed its role in the war as more humanitarian than martial, but with security deteriorating in the north, Berlin has ordered a new, 'aggressive' mission. Two 600-man German battalions will team up with Afghan soldiers to combat Taliban fighters from districts they now dominate.

The new German commander of the battalion in Kunduz province expects to begin a series of attacks in October. "This is a new mission," said Lt. Col. Christian von Blumröder, who took command this month. "My orders are to get this done."

For the Germans, shifting to what Col. von Blumröder calls a more "aggressive" posture is politically controversial. Germany's military presence in Afghanistan, its first major combat mission since World War II, is deeply unpopular among the German public, and Berlin has presented the endeavor as more humanitarian than martial.

That image was shattered last year when a German officer called in a U.S. airstrike on two fuel tankers hijacked by Taliban in Kunduz. It turned out that the hijacked trucks had gotten stuck at a river crossing, and civilians had gathered around to steal fuel, when the jets attacked. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization concluded in a confidential report that more than 140 people died, including many civilians.

In the uproar that followed, the German army's top officer, a senior Ministry of Defense official and the labor minister, who had been defense minister at the time of the airstrike, lost their jobs.

Last month, the military faced fresh criticism after documents released by the Web site WikiLeaks showed that German troops had helped identify targets for coalition special forces.

The new strategy doesn't imply an increase in German forces in Afghanistan, though in December Germany's parliament raised the maximum troop level to 5,350. Instead, German commanders are splitting the two battalions off from the 4,400 troops currently in Afghanistan that until now had largely conducted small-scale operations, reacted to

emergencies or secured economic-development efforts.

The second German battalion, based in Mazar-e-Sharif, will take on its new role at the end of October, according to a Ministry of Defense spokesman in Berlin. The new battalions will have enhanced capabilities, such as reconnaissance technology and combat engineers, along with access to artillery support.

German government officials hope the public's desire to see Afghan forces take control of the country — and therefore allow Germany to withdraw — will temper resistance to steps that could put German troops in greater jeopardy.

Since 2004, Germany has been in charge of NATO operations in northern Afghanistan, an area that was relatively peaceful until two years ago.

In recent months, security in the outlying districts of Kunduz has deteriorated, with a spate of suicide attacks, roadside bombings and ambushes hitting Afghan, German and American troops.

The new offensive is intended in part to address the declining security situation in the north and to move toward a handover of security tasks to Afghan forces.

The German government informed parliamentarians of the new strategy in April. Ministry of Defense officials downplay the notion that the new strategy represents a radically more aggressive approach.

"It's more dangerous today than one year ago or two years ago," said Lt. Col. Paul-Georg Weber, a German spokesman in Kunduz.

Yet the German troops operate under strict rules that require them to remain close to their base hospital at all times, or travel with a doctor. Those rules have limited the ability of German forces to range deeply into Taliban strongholds outside of the provincial capital, Kunduz city.

Many members of the 47-nation U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan work under such national rules that restrict when, where and how they can fight.

Some German officers chafe against the rules that limit their mobility and the sense at home that they are on a charity mission instead of fighting a war.

In private conversations, American soldiers and Afghan police officers complain that the Germans are too passive in the face of an enemy who shows no such reluctance to use violence.

Asked recently whether the Germans have done enough to secure Kunduz, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Razaq Yaqubi, the provincial police commander, just shrugged. "Look at the past seven years," he said.

A German spokesman in Mazar-e-Sharif says that, until now, when German forces have cleared a village, they have typically entered in the morning and left before nightfall, allowing the Taliban to return at their leisure. The new battalions hope there will be adequate Afghan police to stay behind to protect against the insurgents' return, German officials say.

“These battalions will work to establish an enduring presence together with Afghan security forces,” said the Ministry of Defense spokesman. German troops will “go district by district together with the Afghan National Army to ensure that they are effective in the areas where they operate.”

Col. von Blumröder says the availability of U.S. medevac helicopters in the province will allow his new battalion more room to roam.

“There’s a deteriorating security situation,” he said. “I hope to be able to contribute to securing the situation together with the Afghans.”

—Patrick McGroarty in Berlin contributed this article.

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