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By Bashar Al-Khuraibet (with photos) RIGA, Nov 29 (KUNA) -- Leaders of NATO's 26 countries held a meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of heads of states and governments here Wednesday with Afghanistan topping their agenda for being the biggest NATO mission to date.

In the opening statement of the meeting, Secretary General of NATO Jaap de Hoop Scheffer highlighted the current operation of NATO by highlighting that there are now 50,000 men and women currently deployed under the NATO command across the world.

"For decades, they have been the guardians of the democracy and freedom we enjoy," he stressed.

"But this freedom cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, today, they are also defending our security and our values far away from home," the Secretary General said.

He said that the NATO troops in Afghanistan "are putting their lives on the line to bring a better life to the long-suffering people of that country, and to ensure that terrorism never again finds safe sanctuary there." Highlighting the need for more solidarity between the NATO members, Scheffer said "In a time of global threats and challenges, North America and Europe still stand shoulder to shoulder in the unique solidarity that is the hallmark of this Alliance." "Never before has there been a greater demand for the security and stability that NATO can provide. We are here today to ensure that NATO continues its transformation, to deliver 21st century solutions to 21st century challenges." He said that during the working dinner Tuesday the NATO leaders reviewed NATO operations and missions "first and foremost, in Afghanistan." "Contributing to peace and stability in Afghanistan is a just cause, vital to our collective security and to our shared values," he stressed.

Together with other international actors, we will stand with the Afghan people for the long-term, to help them build a democratic country, free from terror and drugs, providing for its own security and at peace with its neighbors, Scheffer said.

He also said that yesterday the NATO leaders reviewed NATO's major engagement in Kosovo, the Training Mission in Iraq, and the anti-terror operation in the Mediterranean Sea. "We discussed ways to continue supporting the African Union in bringing an end to the suffering in Darfur," he said.

Scheffer said that today's meeting will witness taking decisions to make NATO forces better able to address the challenges we are facing. "We will declare the NATO Response Force -- a cutting edge, air-land-and-sea expeditionary force -- fully operational. Our strategic airlift will be significantly enhanced. And we'll move forward on acquiring key new technologies, including missile defenses for deployed forces," he said.

"Doing all this -- making our forces more modern -- needs investment. Defense cannot be assured on the cheap which means we must commit ourselves to devote to defense the resources it requires," he said. (end) bk.