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NATO Chief discusses Alliance's role in Gulf region

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WAM WAM By Jamal Al Majaida ABU DHABI, Jan. 26th, 2008: Discussions are underway between NATO and the United Arab Emirates to establish cooperation in line with the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), disclosed the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

The UAE maintains the tradition of exporting peace and humanitarian and charity works", de Hoop Scheffer said in an exclusive interview with Emirates News Agency (WAM).

"The UAE also takes part in peace-keeping missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan and NATO is pleased with this positive contribution." NATO already has relations with Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar and it is now negotiating with the UAE, he added.

de Hoop Scheffer who is in the UAE for talks with the UAE leadership stressed that it is necessary that relations between the region and NATO be based on trust and confidence so that full understanding could be achieved.

"We do not want to come to the region uninvited, therefore, we have to build relationships based on confidence," he stressed adding that NATO is no longer a Cold War organisation, and is evolving to meet the needs of the current era." NATO is not seeking political or military interests in the region, rather it is looking for is common interest based on common understanding, stressed chief of the 26-member North American and European military alliance.

"As secretary general of NATO, it is my responsibility to make myself known with the UAE authorities prior to any formalities. It is very important that I pay my respect to the leaders of the UAE", he said.

"That is what one does first in diplomatic relations. And that is what I have been doing in the region", he said.

"Many still have the erstwhile concept of war-situation NATO." He added that ICI mandates cooperation between NATO and the region, though Saudi Arabia and Oman did not yet join".

NATO, continued de Hoop Scheffer, is a military and political alliance with 26 democracies in its membership "has 35, 000 soldiers in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to defend Islamic values and integrity." NATO, he added, is present in Afghanistan, Kosovo and in Iraq, training the Iraqi security forces on the United Nations' mandate, indicating that the UAE is the only Asian country involved in Afghanistan in regard to humanitarian work.

de Hoop Scheffer said "NATO has not failed in Afghanistan. There is progress being

made there." "We have succeeded in rehabilitating the Afghan society. We have built schools, roads, hospitals and communications." NATO, he added, is bringing an end to Afghan drug trade and terror-exports to neighboring countries and "this has not happened before." de Hoop Scheffer said the military alliance cannot replace UN, though it works in some volatile areas in the world upon request and mandate of the UN's Security Council.

NATO, he continued, can only play a role in the Arab- Israeli conflict in case a viable Palestinian state is established through a mandate from the UN security council, where the Middle East actors are involved, admitting that NATO has not yet played a role in the Arab-Israeli conflict as of yet.

He said NATO will not make any contacts whatsoever with Hamas in Gaza Strip.

"This will never happen", he stressed.

On Darfur issue, NATO Secretary General said the African Union made a formal request for technical assistance adding that NATO pledged to offer such help.

Speaking about the NATO summit scheduled next April in Bucharest, de Hoop Scheffer said it will focus on marinating the alliance's military operations and peace-keeping missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The summit will also discuss the possible extension of the allaiance's membership to include Croatia, Georgia, Macedonia, Albania and Ukraine, he added.

Energy Security, ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistics Missiles) and NATO's Cyber Defence Programme in Estonia will also be on the agenda of the upcoming summit, said de Hoop Scheffer.

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