

## **NATO FMs to discuss Kosovo, Afghanistan Friday**

By Alia Shukri Hamzeh

Brussels - Foreign ministers of the 26-member North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) attending a regular session here will hold a special meeting Friday with counterparts from Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) countries to discuss ways consolidating the progress achieved and exchange ideas on the way forward in their cooperation, officials said Wednesday.

The Kingdom's delegation to the meeting will be headed by Foreign Minister Salah Bashir, according to Jordanian embassy officials here.

According to NATO spokesperson James Appathurai, the one-day annual session - which will focus on the situation in Afghanistan and Kosovo and exchange views on the alliance's enlargement process - will dedicate a luncheon meeting with foreign ministers of the seven MD countries "to deepen cooperation in a practical sense".

The meeting is the second since 2004 on the level of foreign ministers.

On February 9 this year, NATO defence ministers and their counterparts from Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia met at the occasion of the informal meeting of NATO defence ministers held in Seville, Spain.

The seven countries are members of NATO's MD, launched in 1994. Ten years on, foreign ministers of the alliance decided to take the dialogue a further step towards military cooperation. Officials said NATO had felt that with the present security issues, including international terrorism, dialogue should advance from political cooperation into hard-core partnership.

In 2002, the dialogue was upgraded to security matters of concern and in 2004 NATO elevated its dialogue status to genuine partnerships and an expanded framework of cooperation. It also launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative to promote practical cooperation with Gulf countries.

"We believe this dialogue has to be sustained and we are dedicating a lot of effort to enhance it," said one NATO official addressing reporters from MD countries. But he said, the current dialogue "is not enough". "We strongly believe that we cannot work alone. Security and stability need development and institutional settings," said the official, adding that the alliance is still trying to eradicate the misconception in the Middle East that NATO wants to be the "police of the world".

"We want to build confidence and partnership with other countries. We need to build stability based on common ground, also on the basis that these nations request stability," he added.

According to the official, the overall, activities in the MD work programme have increased from more than 100 activities in 2004 to 720 in 2007 - 660 of which are military activities including military to military contacts, military cooperation training and doctrine and military exercises and related training activities.

The increase in 28 different areas of cooperation, including military activities, civil emergency planning, crisis management, logistics, language training and many others, is a byproduct of a common will by both MD countries and the alliance to achieve a new level of cooperation, one official said.

"All Arab countries have signalled that progress made should go hand in hand with political dialogue," he said one day before the annual meeting of the 26-NATO FMs that will focus on the situation in Afghanistan and Kosovo as well as shed light on challenges facing such as energy security and NATO's possible role on the protection of oil pipelines on the open seas as well as weapons of mass destruction.

The meeting, however, is expected to be overshadowed by developments in Afghanistan and the resurgence of attacks by Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters in the war-torn country. According to news reports, insurgents have launched more than 130 suicide attacks this year against Afghan army and NATO troops - a record number.

A senior NATO official described the alliance's mission in Afghanistan on Wednesday as very difficult saying, the Taliban insurgency was very active in 2006 and carried out a number of attacks. He said these attacks gained momentum again this year, especially in the south and eastern part of the country and the areas on the borders with Pakistan, noting that the insurgents are powerful in areas where the government is weak. NATO has 44,000 troops in Afghanistan, 2000 of which are from 13 non-NATO members.

The official expected NATO's troops to remain there for a while and called on the UN, EU and other individual countries to make concerted efforts to help the war-torn country stand on its feet.

"NATO's mission is not a war mission, it is a security assistance mission...We want to help create conditions that will allow for good governance and improve the reconstruction of the country," said Appathurai, adding that it is a huge struggle to maintain public support for NATO's operations in Afghanistan.

Friday's session is also expected to discuss Kosovo, as well as on the broader region of Western Balkans. They will also meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) to look into cooperative projects undertaken under that framework, including the pilot project on counternarcotics training of Afghan and central Asian personnel and the Russian participation in the naval counterterrorism Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean Sea.

According to Appathurai, the controversial issue of the US proposed missile defence system in Europe may also come up.

In addition to the issue of terrorism, ministers will attend the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission to assess cooperation progress and will also consider issues related to the Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine's membership aspirations and relevant reforms.

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