

## **NATO pledges to keep peace force in Kosovo**

By Alia Shukri Hamzeh

BRUSSELS - NATO ministers pledged Friday to keep their strong KFOR peace force in Kosovo and respond resolutely to any violence as the Serbian province heads towards a declaration of independence.

"We renew our commitment to maintain KFOR's national force contributions, including reserves, at current levels and with no new caveats," the 26 NATO nations said in the final communiqué.

The military alliance also reconfirmed commitment to Afghanistan, saying contributing to peace and stability in the war-ravaged region was a top priority. "We are determined to make sure that the UN-mandated NATO-led International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] has the forces, resources and flexibility needed to ensure the mission's continued success," said the communiqué.

NATO members also vowed to combat all forms of international terrorism, reaffirmed openness to new European members and expressed concern over the continued violence in Sudan's troubled Darfur region saying the alliance was ready - following consultation and agreement of UN and African Union - to continue support.

On Kosovo, the alliance pledged to ensure stability saying "NATO will respond resolutely to any attempts to disrupt the safety and security of any of the people of Kosovo."

The communiqué said that commanders of its 17,000-strong Kosovo peacekeeping mission KFOR would have the flexibility to deploy the troops and have reserves at hand if needed.

Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leaders are expected to declare independence in the coming months after the failure of international mediation - a step seen by politicians as that which could lead to new unrest in the Balkans.

Foreign ministers also maintained that UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which led to KFOR's deployment and established the UN mission that has run Kosovo since 1999, was a sufficient and appropriate legal basis for the force to continue its role there.

"KFOR shall remain in Kosovo on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, unless the Security Council decides otherwise," the communiqué added.

The US and most EU states are expected to recognise a declaration of independence by Kosovo and feel confident its leaders will wait until around late January to enable NATO and the EU to be ready for such a move, according to Western diplomatic sources.

UN Security Council veto-holder Russia, however, did not make it clear whether it will challenge such an application of the resolution. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters Friday following meetings with NATO ministers that only "existing standards of international law must be respected."

Lavrov warned that nations' support to Kosovo's breaking away without agreement from the Serbs would be on "a very slippery downward slope" and a precedent for other separatist regions. "It certainly won't help the stability of Europe," he added.

But US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said failure to move ahead on Kosovo's status was ignoring the reality in the province, where the Albanian majority pledged to declare independence with or without an international agreement.

"We have to move on to the next step," she said after her talks with officials. "It is not going to produce stability in the Balkans to ignore the reality of the situation." She said there was a lot of work to be done to make sure there is "full commitment to the principles embodied in the Ahtisaari plan," in reference to a UN blueprint for Kosovo independence by special envoy Martti Ahtisaari, which has security provisions for Kosovo's Serbs.

A “troika” of US, Russian and European mediators had failed to break the deadlock between Pristina and Belgrade over Kosovo. The report was delivered Friday to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, three days before a December 10 deadline for a deal.

Kosovo has been administered by the UN since a 1999 NATO bombing campaign to halt ethnic cleansing by Serb forces of the 90 per cent ethnic Albanian province, which Belgrade insists should remain under its sovereignty.

NATO spokesman James Appathurai urged a "managed and controlled" transition to decide the final status of the province, while NATO's final communiqué called on both parties “to refrain from making acts or statements that could undermine the security situation.”

#### Commitment in Afghanistan

On Afghanistan, NATO ministers reaffirmed commitment to strengthening various institutions in the war-ravaged country in order to achieve their reconstruction mission - which they say is being hampered by the growing violence.

NATO's Friday morning session was largely devoted to a discussion on the situation in Afghanistan, Appathurai told reporters. He agreed on the necessity to strengthen various institutions in order to achieve the mission in Afghanistan saying “member states of NATO wish to see progress that is being made on strengthening Afghan capacity, not only continue, but to be reinforced.”

”That is both on the political side and military side,” he added.

Currently, NATO is leading an international force that recently swelled to some 43,000 troops in Afghanistan, assisting the Afghan authorities in providing security and stability and helping the Afghan security forces to stand on their own feet.

But the NATO-led ISAF in Afghanistan is facing significant shortfalls in terms of both personnel and equipment, namely aircraft and at least 1,000 more military personnel.

Appathurai said the foreign ministers did not touch on any concrete plan to invite more military contributions from member states, an issue usually left to defence ministers, but they did call for stronger civilian efforts from the international community, especially the United Nations, the European Union and relevant parties to assist in various Afghan issues.

“A number of ministers mentioned the increased number of contributions that they would be making,” Appathurai said, adding that Poland “set out what will be an increased Polish contribution, including attack and transport helicopters and a significant number of troops - more than we had foreseen.”

Appathurai said the Czech Republic would also be setting up a provincial reconstruction team - a civilian-military team helping to foster rebuilding in areas outside the Afghan capital, Kabul.

Foreign ministers also exchanged views on the alliance enlargement and other security topics relevant for the agenda of the 2008 Bucharest Summit.

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