

60,000 German soldiers engaged in military interventions world-wide

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Last weekend the coffins of two German soldiers killed in Kabul landed in Germany to full military honours. In front of the coffins lying in state at Cologne airport, German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping (SPD—German Social Democratic Party) spoke of a tragic accident and emphasised the two soldiers had not died in military fighting.

In contrast, the chairman of the German Army Union, Bernhard Gertz, declared to the press that the death of the two German and three Danish soldiers must be regarded as a “slice of soldiery normality”, that a society which sends its soldiers into action must live with the fact that not all of them will return alive.

The death of the soldiers, who according to information from the German Defence Ministry were killed March 6 while dismantling an old Russian SA-3 rocket, casts a penetrating light on the military policy of the SPD-Green Party government. Although both parties for some considerable time proclaimed their adherence to a policy of anti-militarism and pacifism, the last four years of their government have witnessed an unparalleled speedy and effective dismantling of all obstacles standing in the way of building up the German army.

In particular, the government has persistently refused to inform the public on the world-wide interventions being undertaken by the German army, while parliamentarians are making virtually no use of their right to control or even be informed of such developments. Just a few weeks ago—and only accidentally, via a report by the US military command—did it become clear that German elite soldiers were involved in fighting in the large-scale American offensive “Operation Anaconda” in eastern Afghanistan. The German Defence Ministry was extremely agitated that this information had leaked out and used the argument of military security to cover up for its secrecy in the matter.

While it has been above all the Green Party which has continually emphasised that parliament has the last word and exercises democratic control over the military, in practice the exact opposite has been the case. The German military high command makes its own decisions and then it is left up

to the government and other parties in parliament to misinform the public with military arguments to justify and defend what has already taken place.

Immediately after the September 11 terror attacks the SPD-Green government not only pledged its unlimited solidarity with the American government in the anti-terror struggle. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) also spoke of the “end of the post-war period” and laid considerable weight on Germany’s role in world politics. He explicitly called for an “end to taboos regarding military matters”. In a parliamentary debate at the end of last year, Schröder justified military action by the German army in Afghanistan, declaring: “With this intervention a united and sovereign Germany is measuring up to its responsibility in the world.”

With its decision to undertake international military intervention the government has embarked upon a course which has immense consequences.

At the moment there are approximately 60,000 German soldiers involved either directly or indirectly in military operations world-wide. Defence Minister Scharping revealed this at a press conference where he also pointed out that the actual total of soldiers involved in such interventions is much higher because the posted soldiers are rotated on a regular basis.

There are 7,700 German soldiers involved in operations in the Balkans, including over 5,000 in Kosovo (KFOR), 2,000 in Bosnia-Herzegovina (SFOR) and 600 in Macedonia (Fox). According to Lieutenant General Gert Gudera, an additional 18,000 soldiers are involved in “pre- and post-preparations” for the Balkans. Since 1995, a total of 80,000 German soldiers have been deployed in the region.

In Afghanistan the German army has approximately 1,000 soldiers. Nearly 900 soldiers belong to the international UN peacekeeping troop ISAF (International Protection Force for Afghanistan), of which 126 are stationed at a logistical base in Uzbekistan. The total ISAF contingent is around 5,000 and concentrated in Kabul. The German diplomat and special envoy for the European Union, Klaus-Peter Klaiber, has called for a new UN mandate to allow extended military

action throughout virtually the whole country. It is then expected that the ISAF troop will be increased to 9,000.

Talks are currently taking place at a political and military level to decide upon the conditions under which the German army would take over the leadership of UN troops in Afghanistan. At the moment this role is being carried out by the British, but according to General Carl Hubertus von Butler his military staff is already exercising so-called tactical leadership of the military operation in Kabul. Should the German command receive the go-ahead from April, then the upper limit of 1,200 German ISAF troops laid down by the German parliament will immediately become redundant.

In addition to regular units of the army, Germany's Grenzschutztruppe 9 (GSG 9 Border patrol troop) are engaged in Kabul. Officially it is said they are involved in the protection of the German embassy and government representatives. The GSG 9 has been specially trained for hand-to-hand fighting, characteristic of civil war-type situations, and the fight against terrorism. Decisions regarding their deployment abroad are not dependent on the approval of parliament.

While German participation in the ISAF protection force took place in public and with huge coverage in the press, the participation of German special commandos (KSK) in military action against Al Qaeda and Taliban positions remained secret for a long time. In contrast to the ISAF mission as a whole, the KSK interventions are under the direct control of the US military and not covered by any UN mandate.

Last week the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung*, reported that the KSK units had already been active for many weeks. Following some prevarication, Defence Minister Scharping was eventually forced to confirm this report. Contrary to the parliamentary decision of November last year, which only allowed for a contingent of up to one hundred KSK men for the Afghan war, Defence Committee chairperson Helmut Wiczorek (SPD) confirmed that there are already 200 German elite soldiers involved in action.

The KSK was formed in 1997 and based on the American elite Delta Force and British SAS special units. It consists of 1,000 highly trained elite troops. They are licensed to kill and wherever possible to take no prisoners. One military magazine describes the troop as follows: "No one sees them coming. No one knows they are present. And when their mission is completed, there is no evidence that they were ever there."

These special units are accountable to no one and are not subject to control by any elected body. In a discussion with the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper, Hamburg-based human rights lawyer Norman Paech expressed his fears that the operation of such troops bordered on war crimes. On the

ground US strategy ensures that "the difference between civilians and fighters plays no role". The UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, also raised the charge that the lives of many civilians were unnecessarily put at risk. It is not known what the KSK has done in Kandahar or anywhere else, but exuberant praise for the German troops by the American military over its "really good performance" leads one to fear the worst.

The German army is also active in the Gulf region and Africa; 1,200 naval marines are currently active in the Horn of Africa and the German navy has established a military base with a fleet of 12 ships in Dschibuti. The three frigates *Bayern*, *Emde* and *Cologne*, with a total of 820 crew, patrol the southern flanks of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The official task of the mission is to keep sea lanes free and control suspicious vessels in order to cut off supplies and possible flight paths of suspected terrorist groups.

In the event of an American attack on Iraq or Somalia, German troops would almost inevitably be involved as a support contingent. One hundred fifty marines stationed in Kenya, as well as the three German reconnaissance planes which control the coast of Somalia, are prepared for war. At the moment US forces are carrying out a manoeuvre in Kenya, only 130 kilometres south of the Somali border, and some press reports have said the task of German troops is "to put the screws on Somalia".

Two hundred fifty soldiers from the ABC defence Battalion 7 are currently active in Kuwait on a joint exercise with American forces. These troops are employing Fuchs-type tanks suitable for assisting in the detection of chemical and biological weapons. The parliamentary mandate allows for up to 800 ABC troops. These exercises can only be seen as part of American preparations for a strike against Iraq.



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