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Merkel 'Only Now Realizes the Dimensions of Afghanistan'

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The death of seven German soldiers in Afghanistan this month is likely to fuel public opposition to the Bundeswehr's deployment in the Hindu Kush. German papers take another look at what the country's troops are doing in Afghanistan.

The presence of German troops in Afghanistan has never been popular back home but with the deaths of seven soldiers in two weeks, public opposition to the mission looks likely to grow. Berlin is now facing increasing pressure to justify the eight-year deployment.

Chancellor Angela Merkel is to make a statement to parliament on Thursday, her chief of staff said on Monday. Ronald Pofalla told the public broadcaster ZDF the chancellor wants to make clear her high esteem for the work of the German soldiers in Afghanistan in the light of the recent casualties.

Yet the German government is not only contending with the public's distrust of the mission which began in 2002. There is also increased pressure on Germany from its NATO allies to become even more involved in Afghanistan.

The commander of the US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, [Gen. Stanley McChrystal](#), had been due in Berlin on Monday for three days of talks, but his trip was postponed as a result of the

closure of European airspace resulting from Iceland's volcanic ash cloud. He was expected to ask Berlin to take part in a planned offensive against the Taliban later this year. Germany has the third largest presence in Afghanistan after the United States and Britain. The German parliament, the Bundestag, approved the dispatch of a further 850 soldiers in February when it extended the mandate for the military mission in Afghanistan.

While all political parties apart from the far-left Left Party have backed the mission up to now, there are signs of cracks in the political consensus. Ottmar Schreiner, a left-wing member of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD), told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper that there were growing doubts in the party about the mission. "If things haven't improved in Afghanistan by next year then I don't see where a majority for a new extension of the mandate is going to come from," he said in comments published on Monday.

The SPD, which voted for the latest extension in February, is likely heeding growing public disquiet following the latest casualties.

The deaths of the [four German soldiers last Thursday](#) occurred when ISAF troops escorting Afghan soldiers in the region of Baghlan came under attack from the Taliban. These German casualties came after [three soldiers died on April 2](#) in a Taliban ambush near Kunduz.

Those deaths prompted sharp criticism of the state of equipment and the Defense Ministry announced last week that it was ordering 60 new armored vehicles for use in Afghanistan.

Berlin signed a contract with the Swiss firm Mowag for the Eagle IV armoured vehicles and plans to order another 90 in 2011. Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg also announced that German troops would be supplied with two new self-propelled howitzers, as well as anti-tank missile systems.

On Monday, German papers once again mull over the purpose of Germany's long mission in Afghanistan.

The **Financial Times Deutschland** writes:

"With every dead German soldier in Afghanistan, the calls for an immediate withdrawal grow louder. This reflex shows that the German public is still not clear about the character of the mission."

"The politicians are largely to blame. Since the beginning of the mission eight years ago they suppressed a realistic description of the situation. ... Deaths, injuries, battles and heavy weaponry -- none of these suit the picture that was painted back then."

"However, the competition to describe the situation in Afghanistan in the worst possible terms is just as inappropriate. Only a small part of the Bundeswehr has been involved in fighting, and these have been more similar to skirmishes with partisans than war. They are experiencing a war-like situation but there is no front, no clearly defined opponent and no aims."

"New heavy weaponry is unlikely to do much against the Taliban. They would have done little to prevent the deaths of the German soldiers. They are too imprecise to use against insurgents who operate under the cover of the civilian population. It is only seldom that a situation arises where one can use a self-propelled howitzer that was developed for World War II tank battles. These weapons increase the risk of civilian casualties. And that does not suit US Gen. Stanley McChrystal's strategy of giving priority to the protection of the civilian population. This strategy does not require heavy weaponry ... rather it requires soldiers to be ready to risk not shooting while under fire if the death of innocent civilians cannot be ruled out."

"That is why McChrystal's three-day trip to Berlin to once again explain his strategy is so urgently needed."

"However, in reality McChrystal is four months late. The Bundeswehr's situation has deteriorated since then, because when the parliamentary mandate was being extended Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle was successful in blocking the military's request for 2,000 extra troops. However, the new strategy requires a significantly higher number of soldiers in order to be able to withdraw sooner."

"There are very good grounds for arguing that the entire Afghanistan mission is wrong. However, those who decided to send soldiers have to equip and arm them adequately for such a mission. And anyone who backs McChrystal's concept has to send more troops rather than howitzers. However, politicians find it easier to talk about war and send heavy weaponry than to actually explain what this is all about: a war-like situation, in which there will be a high number of casualties and that will likely not be resolved by just military means."

The left-leaning **Berliner Zeitung** writes:

"Why are German soldiers in Afghanistan at all? ... As the chancellor and her government are still sticking to the military mission there it is their duty to explain it. But she has failed to do so. ... This can be explained by her basic attitude: It is only worth talking about problems when they become virulent. In the case of Afghanistan this is particularly catastrophic. Because the government has failed to make its case in what is the biggest foreign policy and security policy challenge in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany."

"It is only now that Merkel is taking up the debate, now that she sees the virulence. She only just seems to have realized the dimensions of the Afghanistan mission. Its acceptance and its outcome will decide Germany's future security role in the world. If it all ends in disaster then a large part of the public and the political parties will conclude: never again! That won't suit a German government that is loyal to NATO and that wants to preserve Germany's foreign influence."

"What are the chancellor's arguments? That the 'new' challenges posed by the Sept. 11 attacks require new answers, against attackers who don't fear death. That is why Germany's security must be defended in Afghanistan, she says, adding that this is the goal German soldiers have died for. That is simply not enough. Islamic terrorists are also being trained elsewhere, in Yemen, in Congo, in Pakistan. Should the Bundeswehr march in there?"

"If it is just about somehow creating stability in Afghanistan so that terrorists can no longer plan attacks on the West from there -- is that not meager for a Federal Republic and an alliance that has proudly understood itself to be a democratic community of values, which is committed to freedom and human rights? A dictatorial regime could easily be established in Kabul, in fact that may be preferable. The deployment of German soldiers and the sacrifice of their lives deserves better reasons. Much better."

Former German government spokesman Thomas Steg, a member of the SPD, writes a guest editorial for the **Handelsblatt** business daily:

"A debate about whether to use the term war will not awaken enthusiasm for the mission. ... The collective mourning for the dead German soldiers is linked to hopelessness and bitterness because the Germans doubt the reason and aims of the ISAF mission. ... Politicians have been too preoccupied with securing the parliamentary majority for extending the mandates. The political debate in society was given too little attention."

"The majority of Germans cannot see what the purpose of the mission is. ... For a few weeks a new argument has gained weight. The government has turned the ISAF mission into a question about the survival of NATO. A premature withdrawal would damage NATO credibility, and that of Germany within the alliance. The warning that Germany may isolate itself must be taken very seriously. If political responsibility demands sticking with the mission, in order not to damage the country as a member of the alliance, then further extension of the mandate will also be justified. That will hardly impress the public and the Afghanistan mission will remain unpopular. However, a government that acts in the national interest and to maintain Germany's status as an internationally dependable partner can hope for respect for its position and its resolve."

"There is no doubt, however, that the Afghanistan mission has to be limited. A lasting presence of international troops is impossible. Afghanistan cannot be allowed to turn into a NATO protectorate."

The center-left **Süddeutsche Zeitung** features a profile on US Gen. Stanley McChrystal:

"The troop increases this year are his work, as is the change in strategy toward more training and a reduction in air strikes. The Kunduz bombing infuriated him and he bawled out the German commanders. McChrystal knows that there will be no victory in Afghanistan if new enemies are made every day. The unprofessional behavior of allies has irritated him. In Kabul he banned all entertainment at the ISAF headquarters and had Burger King and Pizza Hut closed down in the US camp at Kandahar."

"This week he will be presenting the case for his strategy to the German parliament's experts, in which foreign soldiers will fight alongside the Afghans. Just as he walks through the markets without a helmet or flak jacket, so he expects more openness from his subordinates. That means, however, that there will also be more casualties. That does not go down well in Berlin."