

Afghanistan reconstruction teams meet in Vilnius

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By Kimberly Kweder

VILNIUS - More than a hundred representatives from 23 countries and four international organizations attended a two-day workshop in Vilnius to examine how each nation integrates its military and civil operations in Afghanistan. The conference, "Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Today and Beyond," held on Nov. 25 - 27, was organized by the two countries leading the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lithuania and Canada.

"This meeting was about sharing experiences between the different provinces, what has worked, what doesn't work in our provincial team, and implementing projects in other provinces when it's more stable," Ambassador Ginte Damusis, coordinator for Afghanistan at the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told The Baltic Times. Some of the conference topics included shaping up definitions for PRT structure and operations in the months ahead, its relationship with NATO-ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), and its relationship with the Afghan government.

Since 2005, Lithuania has been leading a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Chaghcharan, the capital of the Ghor Province.

The Lithuanian government has allocated 3.6 million litas (1.04 million euros) to civilian projects in 2007 under the authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Still, basic provisions are not being made for the people in Ghor and other provinces said delegates at the meetings.

Speaking by telephone from his office in Kabul, Aleksandras Matonis, Head of the Special Mission of Lithuania to Afghanistan, said there is "a lack of commitment" from the international community in terms of development. He noted that there are no local civil service centers such as courtrooms or prosecutor's offices, nor is there training for judges and police officers.

"We face a complete absence of local government rule and an absence of infrastructure," Matonis said.

The number of military troops in the province far outweighs the number of civil personnel.

Over 1,000 Lithuanian Armed Forces have been deployed to Afghanistan under the supervision of NATO and Operation Enduring Freedom since 2005. Six other countries have PRTs working in Afghanistan.

However only 10 to 15 Lithuanian civilian personnel – police trainers and political advisors – are working in the country.

Damusis said civilian personnel from the six other PRTs, relief organizations, contractors, and embassies have also provided assistance to the Ghor Province.

At the Nov. 27 conference, Damusis said that road transportation was the big concern. Since there are no roads linking the provinces, it's difficult to manage civil projects, she said.

"Access is a big problem. There has to be a core development approach and the government of Afghanistan has to have a strategic view," she said.

"We're building from scratch ... It takes time, and we have to wait for the results," Matonis said.

The Lithuanian parliament has mandated that Lithuania will maintain a role in Afghanistan until 2010.