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Japan mulls Afghan medic mission

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The Japanese Ministry of Defence (MoD) is looking to circumvent its constitutional ban on deploying defence personnel in war zones by sending Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) medical officers to Afghanistan to provide training.

The decision to send an investigative team to Afghanistan comes after NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen last month called for the alliance's global partners to do more to help the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

"As the handover of power in Afghanistan is already under way, what can Japan do?" Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa said at a House of Representatives national security committee meeting in Tokyo on 11 November. "Judging from the intelligence we've received, the only requests for Japanese assistance have been in the field of medicine."

The Kyodo News agency had reported that around 10 JSDF medical staff would go to Afghanistan by the end of the year to provide training. Denying that report, Kitazawa said "a high-level inspection team" would discuss the deployment with the Afghan government and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The MoD would make a final decision after receiving a briefing on the team's return to Japan, Kitazawa said, adding that medical officers would only be deployed if their safety could be assured and they did not work in a conflict-affected region.

Article 9 of Japan's Constitution renounces the use of force and bans the maintenance of armed forces. Under pressure from the US to provide more than financial help, JSDF personnel have deployed to southern Iraq to help with reconstruction and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force has provided logistic support for Operation 'Enduring Freedom' by providing refuelling facilities in the Indian Ocean.

Opposition parties opposed both missions and opinions polls showed public support was low. Deploying JSDF members to Afghanistan - even medical staff - would thus be a controversial decision for the government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan, which is already facing falling public support over a series of diplomatic rows with China and Russia.

Citing government sources, local media have reported that Prime Minister Kan will float the proposal with US President Barack Obama during bilateral talks that may take place on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in Yokohama, which runs until November 14.

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