

# Europe NATO expands to act 'anywhere'

By Brian Kenety

PRAGUE: NATO's two-day summit ended on Friday with a decision to drop its former reluctance to act "out of area". The Western defence alliance also signalled its readiness to strike against terrorist and "rogue states".

NATO secretary-general Lord George Robertson said that NATO would remain "the embodiment of trans-Atlantic security".

NATO members agreed also to fight terrorism by cementing stronger ties with former Soviet republics.

After admitting seven new members on Thursday, NATO leaders devoted the final day of the summit to talks with leaders from the 27 members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EPAC) on joint strategies to combat terrorism and halt the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

EPAC members include nations seeking to join NATO such as Croatia and Albania, traditionally neutral countries like Sweden and Finland, and former Soviet states such as Kazakhstan.

The allies agreed to create a 20,000-member rapid response force to deal with terrorist

threats to members. The force would be available for deployment at seven days notice. Drawn from top air, land and naval units from Europe and North America, it will be up and running from 2004.

Central to the new military strategy is the Prague Capabilities Commitments — a set of "capabilities pledges" intended to improve the alliance's military preparedness and close the military gap between the United States and its European allies.

"Linked fundamentally to capabilities is NATO's capacity to deal with new threats, such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction," Robertson said on Friday. "No one is immune from these dangers, and the alliance has a major role to play in defeating them. NATO leaders have, therefore, put the seal on a comprehensive package, which will dramatically improve our ability to do so."

European members pledged to modernize their armed forces to narrow the gap in firepower with the US NATO members will consider major investments, including stockpiling precision-guided weapons, developing electronic

jamming equipment to knock out enemy radar or communications, and agreeing a new ground surveillance system.

European members have failed to honour pledges made at the last summit in 1999 to increase defence spending. The Prague Capabilities Commitments seek to make good that shortfall.

"NATO's presidents and prime ministers have each made a firm political commitment — the Prague Capabilities Commitment — to deliver specific essential military enhancement from heavy transport aircraft through air tankers to precision-guided weapons and protection against chemical and biological weapons," Robertson said. "These are decisions, not just declarations."

There are now eight priority categories: strategic airlift; air-to-air refuelling; deployable command-and-control and communications systems; deployable combat support; defence against attacks from nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; precision-guided weapons; and NATO ground surveillance.

The NATO secretary-general said the summit had agreed on areas where the European allies

need most urgently to improve their capabilities. Several NATO countries announced they would increase defence expenditure, including France, Portugal, Norway, and new members such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.

Three former Soviet territories, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were made NATO members at the Prague summit along with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. "The remarkable thing about this is that it has been done in a framework that allowed not just the entry of the seven new states into NATO but the reconciliation of NATO with Russia in the new Russia-NATO Council," said the US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

The view from Moscow is somewhat more skeptical. The government daily Rossiyskaya Gazeta said on Friday: "The idea of turning the alliance into a world gendarme... to allow the Americans to attain global supremacy is opposed not just by Paris and Berlin, NATO's main European 'players', but also, with certain provisos, by London." —Dawn/The InterPress News Service.