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Dispute Over Immigration Throws Dutch Cabinet Into a Political Bind

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

THE HAGUE, Dec. 13 – Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende called an emergency meeting of his caretaker cabinet on Wednesday, seeking a way out of a political crisis that erupted over immigration policy just three weeks after national elections.

The crisis centers on Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk's refusal on Tuesday to carry out a motion by the new Parliament to put a freeze on the deportation of 26,000 illegal immigrants who had applied for asylum before April 2001. "I'm not prepared for a suspension," she said in announcing her decision. "I've said clearly that after this debate, I'm going to uphold the immigration law."

In a debate that stretched into the early hours of Wednesday, Parliament passed a motion condemning her. Normally, a parliamentary censure would lead to a minister's immediate resignation. But the government is somewhat in limbo because the current cabinet is acting only in a caretaker capacity until a new ruling coalition can be installed based on the results of elections on Nov. 22. Under the country's Constitution, caretaker governments are not supposed to make major policy changes.

Ms. Verdonk's V.V.D. Party, the junior partner in the government, threatened that all its ministers would resign if she was forced to quit. And Mr. Balkenende warned that her departure could prompt a constitutional crisis. "We'll look at how the debate went and what there is left for us to do," he said after the motion was narrowly adopted.

The parties met separately Wednesday morning, and the cabinet began meeting in the early afternoon. The country's defense minister and the minister for overseas development rushed back from a curtailed trip to Afghanistan, but it was not immediately clear if they returned in time for the meeting.

It is highly unusual, but not unprecedented, for Parliament to dismiss a departing minister. However, never before has an entire party walked out of a transition cabinet, and it was unclear what the subsequent procedure would be.

Queen Beatrix, who normally has only a figurehead part in politics, could play a pivotal role by refusing to accept the resignations of some or all of the ministers.

Ms. Verdonk's program to deport the 26,000 asylum seekers who stayed illegally has been a pillar of the conservative coalition's policy.

The new left-leaning majority that emerged after last month's elections, advocating a pardon for the asylum seekers, sought to halt the expulsions, fearing months could pass before a new coalition was ready to take office.

Ms. Verdonk has also imposed mandatory citizenship tests for immigrants and the detention of asylum-seekers while their application is processed.