

Opening speech 8ICOAF
National ombudsman of the Netherlands, Reinier van Zutphen
Amsterdam, October 3 2016

Minister, Ombudsmen and Inspectors General – in short, colleagues,

I am delighted to welcome you to Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands and the wonderful city I call my home. Welcome to the Eighth International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces. I am the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands. My job is to assist the entire population of this country in their dealings with administrative authorities, whether that be small municipalities or large government departments. In addition I have a special mandate to act as the ombudsman for military veterans, both young and old. Because there are now many thousands of young Dutch veterans who did not serve in the great wars, but who went on recent peace missions or operations. Not only in Lebanon and Bosnia, but also on current missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Mali.

In 2014, a specific Veterans Act was introduced in the Netherlands. This new piece of legislation enshrines the government's special duty of care towards ex-service personnel. It also stipulates that I, as Veterans Ombudsman, should be an independent party to whom they can make their complaints and express their concerns. Independence is paramount in this respect. I am not part of the Defence establishment. And to ex-service personnel, that makes all the difference. They feel less inhibited about lodging complaints if they can do so to an independent institution. Accommodating the function of Veterans Ombudsman within the office of the National Ombudsman guarantees that independence.

As Veterans Ombudsman, I can assure ex-servicemen that they will be listened to. Veterans often have to fight for years to get government to recognize their claims. Many of them are physically or mentally injured. And they are forced to fight the same government that sent them out around the world, often putting them in harm's way.

In recent years, there have been major advances in veteran support and subsequent care. But I still see vulnerable veterans falling foul of inhumane system behaviour on the part of government. Officials who simply apply the rules and avoid dialogue with individual citizens. Many of the veterans who come to me for help have experienced a lack of respect and appreciation, often accompanied by years of legal wrangling. They feel nobody cares about them and they have lost their trust in government.

I know from experience that some problems can be solved by legislation, but that legislation can't solve everything. For example, the Veterans Act does not speak of the attitudes and skills of government officials or people working for agencies responsible for the care of veterans. Communication skills are one obvious example, but I also mean skills in areas such as de-escalation, dejuridification and informal complaints resolution. All these areas call for important skills on the part of government: skills like the ability to listen, empathize, communicate and maintain dialogue. As Veterans Ombudsman, I keep a critical eye on how veterans' complaints are being handled and I intervene in matters of Parliament, agencies and the armed forces wherever I feel it is necessary.

My perspective is that of the individual veteran, not of the government machine. This country's active and retired servicemen are still badly treated. I need only mention the prevalence of PTSD and suicide. So I would say to you: as ombudsmen, we need to join forces and find out where we can

influence the many current and future missions and this conference gives us the an excellent opportunity to do so.

Given my standpoint, it is all the more extraordinary that I, as National Ombudsman, am hosting this conference hand in hand with the Inspector-General. This fact proves that both the Ministry of Defence and the National Ombudsman's office share a common interest in the proper care for our veterans. And that care needs to be exercised not just during and after missions, but also in the preparatory phase.

This brings us to the topic of this conference: "The role of ombuds institutions for armed forces in international missions". All of us here today have had varied experiences of military missions, whether in the context of NATO or the UN, or even as a recipient country, like Mali, Bosnia and Kosovo. Let us use these days first and foremost to share those different experiences and learn from them. And let us try to agree on guidelines for the work of ombuds institutions with regard to military missions.

I wish you all a pleasant and productive conference,

Thank you.