

Address on behalf of the opening of the 8th International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces by the Dutch Minister of Defence, J.A. Hennis-Plasschaert, October 3, 2016, Amsterdam

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you at the opening of this conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces and welcome you to The Netherlands.

This is already the eighth International Conference since the first such conference was held in Berlin in 2009. And the annual frequency of this conference is evidence of its usefulness.

As the Defence Minister of this country, I am convinced that the quality of our armed forces and the quality of our Ombuds Institutions are two sides of the same coin.

And I have no doubt that there is much that Ombuds Institutions can learn from each other when it comes to exercising scrutiny over the armed forces.

I am sure that by exchanging best practices and experiences and by cooperating in practical ways we can further improve our Ombuds Institutions – and thereby also our forces and the lives of our military. Collectively, we have a responsibility to ensure the rights of armed forces personnel as well as of civilians affected by those armed forces.

We are therefore very glad to be able to follow in the footsteps of the Czech Republic...by hosting this year's conference in Amsterdam. Collectively you possess vast experience in handling and responding to complaints. I therefore encourage you to share your experience. We will do our utmost to foster a dynamic and participatory environment in which this becomes possible.

Though, let me underline, just to be sure, that we did not opt for Amsterdam because it is the capital of complaints, as people in Rotterdam like to think, but because it is a beautiful city which is known for stimulating a healthy exchange of views.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You have chosen to focus your deliberations on the role of Ombuds Institutions in international missions. And from my point of view this is an excellent choice.

You may be aware that the Dutch commitment to the international rule of law goes back many years. It is evidenced in the legal work of Hugo Grotius. It is enshrined in our Constitution. It is embodied by the presence of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court on our soil. And it is expressed in our military participation in many international missions aimed at upholding the international rule of law.

And all of our nations are heavily involved in international missions.

In a less secure world, our soldiers are increasingly being put to the test in these missions in many ways. In total, hundreds of thousands of personnel are currently active in missions throughout the world: UN peacekeeping operations, regional missions led by the African Union, the EU and NATO, as well as various coalition-led operations such as those in the Middle East against Daesh. The enormous number of military involved in missions in itself...makes the topic of this conference hugely relevant.

Of course, this conference will also give ample thought...to the specific nature of the mission context and its implications for Ombuds Institutions. The high operational tempo of the past decade has put much of our personnel under great pressure, giving rise to all sorts of questions about what may or may not be asked of them.

Many of today's missions are also exceedingly complex and this complexity is likely to grow further. Our soldiers are held to very high standards, and rightly so.

They are, *however*, also increasingly faced with 'hybrid' attacks and acts of terrorism. They operate with increasingly powerful weapon systems. Some of these weapon systems are becoming stand-off or remotely piloted. And there is also the entirely new domain of cyber warfare. Ombuds Institutions will need to think about what this new domain for military action means for their own work. How does one scrutinize a virtual army?

In these new and demanding circumstances, Ombuds Institutions are best placed to recognize where things go wrong and what should be done better. They must always stand ready to listen and to respond to complaints and concerns of the military.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The focus of this conference is also important because there is much to be gained by practical, on-the-ground cooperation between Ombuds Institutions in the context of multinational missions.

Without a doubt, the demands and pressures experienced by our personnel are often similar across countries. The same goes for the questions and concerns they have. So, we can learn from each other, share experiences and best practices. Greater cooperation between military Ombuds Institutions will be necessary to improve all this.

Visiting troops together may be one particularly helpful way forward.

Just one week ago, our National Ombudsman, Mr. Van Zutphen, and our Inspector General, Lieutenant General Hoitink visited our troops participating in the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (Minusma), together with the German Inspector General – *Der Wehrbeauftragte des Deutschen Bundestages*, Dr. Hans-Peter Bartels.

It was, *I have been informed*, a meaningful visit, made even more meaningful by speaking with the multinational units at work and learn more about the issues they are dealing with.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Another consequence of the increasing participation in international missions is the rise in the number of veterans.

Clearly, it is of crucial importance that all personnel receives sufficient support. Even after it has left the armed forces. After all, the mental or physical effects of a deployment sometimes reveal themselves many years later. And all of us will agree that this does not absolve us from our responsibility to provide the needed care.

Our armed forces go where they are told to go, no matter how difficult or dangerous the mission. They demonstrate great dedication. They take great personal risk for the sake of our security, prosperity and freedom.

For this, they deserve our acknowledgement, our continuing respect and our care.

Only two decades ago, the Netherlands did not yet have a proper veteran policy in place. Too many veterans did not get the support they needed. Something had to change for the better.

Many people have worked really hard to bring about this change.

Today, our policy towards veterans includes a nation-wide care system for veterans, a Veterans Institute and a national Veterans Day. There is a centralized service point...enabling all veterans to easily access existing care and support services via a single website and a central phone number.

In other words: they can now receive the care that they need, tailored to their individual needs.

So yes, I do believe that we have progressed. But this in no way means that we can rest on our laurels! The services provided need to be updated and improved continuously. And even then, things can go wrong. And when this happens, the Ombuds Institutions – *as independent and impartial institutions* – are a crucial corrective mechanism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We all agree that the Ombuds Institutions of the Armed Forces are of great value.

And I am confident that this conference, *here in Amsterdam*, will lead to more structural cooperation between us and to a greater exchange of ideas, experiences, lessons learned and best practices.

Some say that the world is getting smaller and smaller. It is certainly getting more complex and the challenges are greater than ever before. The need for close international cooperation is clear, notwithstanding the forces of fragmentation.

I therefore wish you a fruitful conference.

Our people are out there to serve and to protect us in an increasingly dangerous world.

They deserve our commitment and support.

Your role in all of this is indispensable.

Thank you.

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