



Daily Summary, 26 October 2020

Session 1: Impact of COVID-19 on the Armed Forces

Shifting tasks and responsibilities

In almost all countries, the armed forces have been deployed to assist in the fight against COVID-19, ranging from logistical and administrative support to enforcing lockdown regulations and transporting critically-ill individuals. Logistical support includes the procurement of medical supplies, the delivery of basic services, creating mobile testing stations, or assisting local authorities in contact-tracing. In many contexts, the armed forces are also employed to ensure adherence with lockdown regulations, conducting foot patrols or bolstering up border security check points. Hereby, the armed forces have not only assumed new tasks and responsibilities but have also been forced to change how these activities are carried out. To that end, military planning systems or the establishment of military command structures may be considered to support civilian authorities in devising COVID-19 response strategies. Given the common challenge faced by all, international co-operation remains a key ingredient in ensuring an accountable and effective security sector.

Impact on training, military exercises and deployments abroad

Ordinary trainings and military exercises have been drastically cut back, or in some cases completely stopped. In some cases, trainings have been cut short without reducing the volume of curricula, adding to the burden of soldiers in adapting to the new COVID-19 reality. Where deployments abroad have been resumed, they often require strict adherence to quarantine and isolation periods, including prior to deployment, upon arrival, and upon return. These practices are taxing upon soldiers and their families, making departures more difficult. It was noted that leadership plays an important role to create a common understanding and establish a collective mission – commanders must communicate their goals clearly and balance regulations with the needs and interest of their soldiers. In contexts where leadership was present, acceptance of regulations is high, and the virus is tackled effectively.

Changing environments – new opportunities and challenges

The changing environment conjures many challenges and some opportunities. Shortages of medical equipment, training or preparation for the new tasks, and lack of health-related data in the contexts of deployment create increased risks for soldiers of infection. Compensation and recognition of the hazards faced within these new environments is an important step in ensuring the needs and rights of soldiers are met. Social dialogue and maintaining a healthy work-life balance are further important in reducing the mental pressure that come with operating in environments that bear personal significance. Hereby, the right to mental health – which is often neglected – is crucial in addressing the challenges of shifting environments. The inability to conduct field visits reduces visibility and presence of ombuds institutions among the armed forces – substituted sup-optimally by video calls and radio call ins. However, opportunities are also present. New impetus is given to accelerate digitalization processes, and new modalities are found to ensure and safeguard operational readiness as well as the needs and rights of armed forces personnel during global health crises of this kind.