



Daily Summary, 28 October 2020

## Session 3: Complaints-handling in time of COVID-19

### Different trends – increasing and decreasing complaints

Participants reported mixed trends of the number of complaints received since the outbreak of Covid-19. Half of all participants indicated that they recorded the same number of complaints as usual; a quarter of them recorded more complaints than usual, while the other quarter recorded fewer complaints than usual. Further, general ombuds institutions – who largely reported a decrease of complaints – contrasted starkly with specialized ombuds institutions which have recorded an increased number of complaints from both armed forces personnel and civilians during COVID-19. Participants surmised that the respective increase and decrease in complaints may correlate to the role the military played in the COVID-19 response – in contexts wherein the armed forces were broadly deployed complaints will have gone up, and vice versa. In addition to complaints regarding the health and safety of armed forces personnel and the official conduct of soldiers enforcing COVID measures, the majority of complaints touched upon conventional issues that were worsened by the COVID pandemic, such as delayed promotions, service dismissal or salaries.

### Modernized workstreams and complaint mechanisms

Across differing contexts and offices, the pandemic has accelerated processes of digitalization and created an impetus to allow for more flexible working environments. Whereas working from home on a part-time basis had already been established in some ombuds institutions, most if not all offices now employ a part-time working schedule. This creates both opportunities and challenges. For instance, ombuds institutions may be required to heavily invest in IT support and cybersecurity to maintain operational efficiency. In addition, the blurring of working hours has also raised mental health issues among ombuds institution staff. However, the need for greater flexibility and more remote access to ombuds institutions has pushed offices to modernize their workstreams, instituting and refining complaint mechanisms that are accessible via smart phone app or social media. Thereby, ombuds institutions are able to reach larger audiences, network with counterparts across the world, and adopt more flexible working rules.

### The importance of civil-military relations

Civil-military interactions increased in many contexts due to the deployment of the armed forces in the COVID-19 response. Herein, participants underlined the importance of maintaining good civil-military relations during crisis situations, particularly those affecting the daily lives of citizens. Thereby, all cases reporting the excessive use of force or the misuse of authority by military personnel should lead to thorough investigations monitored closely by ombuds institutions. Furthermore, the civilian context of deployment for armed forces personnel has wide-reaching implications. Not only is this a novel context for soldiers, but it is also of great personal significance for many armed forces members as the crisis hits close to home. This requires long-term attention to issues such as mental health and civil-military relations.