

International Conference  
of Ombuds Institutions  
for the Armed Forces

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The International Conference of Ombuds  
Institutions for the Armed Forces

**The Armed Forces under  
Pressure | Ombuds Institutions  
and the Duty of Care  
to Service Members**



Deutscher Bundestag  
Die Wehrbeauftragte

**DCAF** Geneva Centre  
for Security Sector  
Governance



# **The 16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces**

## **Session Summaries**

### **Session 1: Understanding Forces – Pressures and Demands on the Military**

The first session examined and contextualized the growing pressures and rising demands faced by the armed forces worldwide. It explored the geopolitical, technological, and societal forces that contribute to the challenges, focusing on how these factors affect military organizations as well as individual service members.

The geopolitical instability of recent years and concomitant volatile security landscape, characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and intensified threats to the rules-based international order, continues to compel governments to re-evaluate their defence priorities and increase military expenditures. Responses have focused on developing new military capabilities against the prevalence of hybrid warfare tactics and rectifying shortcomings of defence-industrial capacities following years of under-investment, neglect, and reactionary as opposed to precautionary measures. Modernization efforts are informed by a realisation that embracing newer technologies cannot be done at the cost of maintaining traditional capacities. Furthermore, the brazen application of military power to pursue claims – most apparent in the Russian invasion of Ukraine grinding towards its third year – has ushered in a new era of insecurity and a concomitant desire by like-minded states for stronger bilateral and multilateral defence ties. Despite attempts of leveraging economic sanctions to curb Russia's aggression toward Ukraine, these measures are increasingly ineffective as some countries have maintained trade relations with Russia. The absence of robust and coherent international sanctions further generates other types of threats such as Russia's shadow fleet of oil tankers operating close to European sea borders risking oil spills with potentially devastating effects, and highlighting the weaponisation of resources for political and military leverage. The interdependence of geopolitical flux and the globalised economy is further evident in Houthi actions in the Red Sea, forcing vessels to divert to the Cape of Good Hope, exacerbating delays, economic strain and endangering the functioning of the global maritime order. As a result, trade has become increasingly securitized, with globalisation itself being weaponized as countries leverage economic interdependence for strategic purposes.

Meanwhile, global armed forces are under growing pressure, grappling with workforce shortages, outdated equipment, and the psychological strain of adapting to new warfare demands – evident in an observed increase of complaints by ombuds institutions. Military systems struggle to keep up with accelerated capacity-building efforts, and individual service members bear the brunt of these demands, e.g., with shortened training spans. This further heightens challenges of armed forces across the globe in the recruitment and

retention of personnel. Ensuring improved conditions of service, including comprehensive healthcare, inclusive workspaces, more attractive salaries, specialised training, and support to families of service members are crucial steps in mitigating these challenges. However, attracting new personnel will also require political reckoning on the increasing scope of deployments for the armed forces today and whole-of-society engagement in understanding that the challenges emanating from geopolitical and technological disruptions cannot be borne by the armed forces alone. Militaries are perceived as a panacea for today's woes, relied upon for both traditional and novel roles, including in domestic deployments and fighting asymmetric threats. Participants highlighted the importance that the armed forces are only deployed in complementarity of other means, as well as the sentiment that challenges of today require a whole-of-society approach, including civil society and the private sector. Such an approach calls for greater cooperation and collaboration, both domestically and internationally.

Ombuds institutions should play a pro-active role in setting the agenda and shaping consequent debates, ensuring the duty of care of military personnel remains a priority and anticipating challenges to support military personnel effectively.

## **Session 2: Support and Care Prior to Deployment – Families of Service Members**

The second session focused on the families of service members who share the burdens faced by armed forces personnel amid rising pressures and demands. Parents, spouses, children, and extended family members encounter unique and diverse challenges as they navigate the uncertainties and potential issues that coincide with serving relatives – prior, during, and after their deployment. Participants recognised the vital role they play in providing critical emotional and logistical support and helping to alleviate the stresses associated with military service. Conversely, participants also noted how family strain can have a significant impact on the well-being and performance of service members. As military personnel face more frequent deployments and greater psychological and physical demands, ensuring adequate and comprehensive support for their families is essential to maintaining the duty of care and strengthening the resilience of the armed forces.

The discussion underlined the importance of adopting a holistic approach to family support – one that encompasses both proactive measures and responsive care for when issues do arise. Topics such as access to information, mental health resources, financial assistance, or emotional support for the families of service members were mentioned as areas that deserve more attention. Moreover, participants explored how ombuds institutions may act as liaisons between the military, government agencies, civil society support groups, and families of service members, ensuring that their needs are met, and their concerns are heard before issues escalate.

It was highlighted that one of the most significant challenges for military families is the lack of timely and accurate information. Whether related to deployment specifics, the status of their deployed family member, or available support services, insufficient information can heighten stress and uncertainty. Providing families with reliable, up-to-date information and ensuring direct communication channels is crucial to reducing emotional strain and enhancing their resilience. Ombuds institutions of countries currently involved in armed conflict regularly meet families of deployed service members, engaging with their needs and sharing available information.

A further challenge is that even when comprehensive support mechanisms exist, they are often inaccessible to family members. Families of military personnel face disruptions to education, careers, and social integration, as well as emotional and logistical difficulties stemming from extended separation. To support these families, ombuds institutions should advocate for improved access to support services, including psychological counselling, family support groups, financial and legal assistance, and logistical help with housing, education, and healthcare.

Participants further observed that families of service members taking part in operations conducted on domestic soil, from anti-terrorist operations and bomb disposals to deployments in support of civilian authorities during natural disasters, are sometimes left without care. This is the result of such operations not meeting requirements of outdated frameworks limiting support to missions involving active combat. Ombuds institutions may advocate to address legislative gaps in such cases, to accurately reflect the broadening scope of deployment contexts for armed forces personnel, and thus expand support services to families.

Depending on their mandate, ombuds institutions can gain significant insights into the well-being of military personnel through the complaints of family members and by engaging with family representatives. In addressing deficiencies in the preparation and support systems focused on families, these institutions can strengthen the resilience of service members and create an environment that better equips them to meet the operational demands of evolving challenges. Finally, the participants noted an untapped potential to cooperate more closely with local authorities in supporting veterans and their families, with a widely held consensus that local programmes of support are highly beneficial. Thus, participants highlighted the need to raise awareness about veteran issues in local communities and within local administration.

### **Session 3: Support and Care During Deployment – Women in the Armed Forces**

Ombuds institutions are essential in ensuring that military personnel deployed on missions have robust access to care and support services. Amidst the backdrop of shifting demographics within the armed forces and increasingly complex operational demands, an ombuds institution's responsibility herein centres on providing redress for grievances



and complaints through reliable, efficient, and confidential reporting mechanisms, as well as by conducting systemic investigations and troop visits.

Challenges persist in extending the duty of care to all armed forces members, including service members from diverse backgrounds, gender identities, and age groups. Women, in particular, encounter specific and a greater multitude of challenges that ombuds institutions should address by advocating for equitable access to care and support for female service members. Ombuds advocacy herein should centre on addressing gender-specific grievances, combating discrimination, and ensuring that policies and practices are both inclusive and sensitive to gender issues and that they empower diversity within the ranks as opposed to eliminate differences among personnel. Herein, participants noted the pitfalls of focusing on gender outputs and not on tangible outcomes in practice, with the danger of creating over-formalised systems that tick certain boxes yet fall short of investing meaningful resources to transform realities on the ground. This sentiment is especially pertinent in the context of discrimination still being widespread and the discussion reaffirmed the need to vigorously fight discriminatory practices.

It was further noted that approaches to strengthening inclusivity and diversity need to be context-specific and communicated effectively, as well as reflect current expectations of service members for a military career. Newer generations have different priorities to their predecessors. While in the past recruits may have been attracted to job stability, younger people today seek safe and inclusive work environments which maintain a work-life balance and provide diverse career paths. The armed forces must find new ways of attracting recruits by recalibrating military service incentives, especially for groups of recruits they conventionally struggle to attract, including women and other minorities. Once they are in the system, service members need to be granted with visible, accessible and independent grievance mechanisms, as an essential part of the state's duty of care. Safeguarding complainants, especially those from marginalised and vulnerable groups, against reprisals and negative repercussions is furthermore a critical aspect of the complaints handling process. Complaints by female service members are often proportionately higher than their relative numbers within the military, and ombuds institutions should foster and strongly encourage the use of grievance mechanisms by female service members. This particularly applies to sensitive contexts, such as those when deployed abroad.

The discussion also reiterated that gender diversity in the armed forces contributes to operational effectiveness and the ability to adapt to different scenarios during military operations. It was noted that this should be voiced and shared more prominently within the ranks, to decision and policy makers, as well as to society at large. Diversity within ombuds institutions was also recognised as essential for fostering a more nuanced understanding of the unique circumstances of respective complainants. Further concrete initiatives to combat gender-related discrimination were raised, such as mixed dormitories at barracks or gender-neutral conscription.

The discussion noted the need for more research, bringing comparatively useful, yet nuanced and detailed information. Whereas some countries have developed a sound evidence base over the past decades on the positive effects of integrating women in the armed forces to inform policymaking, others struggle with insufficient data to adequately inform effective policies. Select ombuds institution representatives noted the value of conducting thematic investigations on gender issues within the military as a proven and fruitful way to raise these important issues on the policy agenda.

## **Session 4: Support and Care After Deployment – Veteran Aftercare**

The fourth session explored the role of ombuds institutions in strengthening systems of care and support for veterans, particularly those dealing with physical and mental health challenges. Military personnel face a range of unique risks that impact both their physical safety and mental well-being. These risks include direct exposure to combat and the emotional trauma of witnessing harm, as well as indirect stressors such as misinformation, public scrutiny, and the complexities of working with advanced military technologies. The session emphasised the need for comprehensive support systems tailored to veterans' specific needs.

As military operations become more complex, the associated stress factors for service members are likely to increase, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive mental and physical health support systems accessible to returning personnel. To improve medical aftercare for veterans, ombuds institutions employ various mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of post-deployment care, identify deficiencies, and provide recommendations for improvement. Drawing on feedback from veterans and their families, ombuds institutions are well-positioned to advocate for policy reforms aimed at enhancing veteran support systems.

Additionally, collaboration with military organisations, veterans' associations, and civilian support networks is crucial for bridging the gaps in the existing care ecosystem. This approach requires a thorough understanding of the complex medical and psychological needs arising from service-related injuries, including PTSD, moral injury and the interplay between mental and physical health during recovery. The importance of precise diagnoses was underlined, especially in terms of delineating PTSD and moral injury. Such an integrated strategy is essential to help veterans overcome the multifaceted health challenges resulting from their service and deployment experiences. This is crucial as many veterans face multiple psychiatric disorders, with associated physical disorders (most commonly: hypertension, coronary heart disease, diabetes, rheumatological, elevated morbidity), requiring multimodal treatment. Some participants noted agoraphobia (avoidance disorder) as the most frequent symptom in the veteran population in their countries.

Although the *“there is no health without mental health”* credo is becoming widely accepted, many countries still face challenges in securing comprehensive support for veterans.

Some of these challenges include limited availability of specialised services; stigmatisation of mental health concerns; insufficient specialised health care personnel; geographical barriers; lack of awareness of available benefits; and fragmented care systems. Ombuds institutions have a role to play here, through systemic investigations, as well as training and education. For instance, some institutions created training modules on the rights to mental health for the security sector. Participants further noted the gender dimensions of providing veteran healthcare and recognised the compounding effect of age on health challenges and corresponding needs, thus requiring special attention by ombuds institution for vulnerable groups and long-term aftercare.

Raising awareness about the new roles in militaries and their effect on mental health is another avenue for the ombuds' involvement. To that end, participants noted the lack of experience in treating drone operators.

## **Session 5: Beyond the Uniform – Paving the Pathway to Civilian Life**

The fifth session examined the crucial role that ombuds institutions play in supporting veterans as they transition to civilian life. The discussion focused on best practices in addressing the needs of transitioning personnel, emphasizing the importance of tailored support systems to ensure a smooth reintegration process into civilian society.

Armed forces personnel endure a profession that is demanding, intense, and fraught with danger. Yet, transitioning from military to civilian life poses its own risks and challenges due to the significant shift across all facets of everyday life. Service members may find it difficult to part ways with friends that served alongside them and thereby share a special bond and level of camaraderie unlikely to be replicated or understood by civilian counterparts. Similarly, it can be challenging to re-connect with family members following periods of extended absence or to establish new daily routines without the robust framework structurally embedded into the military chain of command. Adjusting to the new levels of freedom and an environment with more ambiguity requires veterans to create their own structure, and – in the lack thereof – many may struggle in managing financial obligations or basic necessities such as food, clothing, housing, or insurance. Additionally, navigating the bureaucracy and paperwork associated with obtaining benefits or services adds further complexity to the transition process.

Yet, participants also considered the unique advantages when transitioning from military service, for instance, that a person may voluntarily leave and still receive benefits while seeking new job opportunities. Some participants noted the effectiveness of the care ecosystem for transitioning veterans, evidenced by few cases of discriminatory practices against veterans transitioning to civilian professions and lower unemployment numbers within veteran populations. Nonetheless, ombuds institutions still have a crucial role to play in identifying existing gaps, advocating for more effective and simplified processes, as well as offering guidance to ensure veterans receive the support they are entitled to.

Strengthening the duty of care for veterans is made difficult by the accompanying challenge in deeming a transition to have been “*successful*”, that is to say, how ombuds institutions may determine the point at which the care eco system has provided sufficient support. This dilemma is further complicated by the expressed shared sentiment that “*veterans are infinitely deserving, yet resources are finite*”.

One of the primary challenges that remain for transitioning veterans concerned the lack of measures to support them in the identity shift that veterans face on the pathway to civilian life. This gap stands in strong contrast to the multitude of practices that foster an identity shift for new recruits, and the need for novel programmes focused on mitigating the loss of a military identity was widely recognised. Participants further emphasized health issues and new (civilian) employment as concerns for transitioning veterans in their countries. These challenges interact and compound one another: learning novel sets of skills while struggling with health challenges and adapting to new environments generates increased pressures not equal to the sum of its parts

Participants recognized that facilitating a smooth transition to civilian life has broader implications, not only benefiting veterans but also enhancing the attractiveness of military careers. They noted the role of ombuds institutions in promoting policies that support effective reintegration, which can alleviate recruitment and retention challenges faced by the armed forces, ultimately reducing the gap between the military and society.

Ombuds institutions stressed the need to remain accessible to active and retired service members, serving as an effective remedy mechanism. Staff members in ombuds institutions should receive specialized training to effectively handle sensitive cases and support complainants, particularly veterans. This training should focus on building resilience and implementing self-care strategies for ombuds personnel, as they are at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma due to their interactions with individuals who have faced significant hardship.