

DEFENCE FORCES' CHIEF OF STAFF STATEMENT: JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE.

Ar an gcéad dul síos, mar Cheann Foirne Óglaigh na hÉireann, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le baill an choiste as ucht an cuireadh chun labhairt libh ar chursaí a bhaineann le, agus tosaíochtaí, Óglaigh na hÉireann. Táim ag tnúth go mór le caidreamh dearfach libh agus le sibh a chuir ar an eolas faoi na hábhair atá faoi mo chúram.

As Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, may I commence by thanking the members of the Committee for the invitation and opportunity to address you on matters and priorities relevant to the Defence Forces. This afternoon I intend to brief you on current and future focused developments concerning the Defence Forces to include the security environment; my organisational priorities; cultural change; the Commission on the Defence Forces; and retention and recruitment matters. In that context, I look forward to a positive engagement and hope to inform you on any issues you may raise within my remit and responsibility.

I am accompanied this afternoon by Brigadier General Rossa Mulcahy (to my left), my assistant Chief of Staff, and Colonel Rory Sheerin (on my right), the Defence Forces Director of Human Resource Management. Colonel Caimin Keogh and Comdt Gemma Fagan (to my rear) are staff officers employed in the Chief of Staff's Division.

The members of this Committee will be very well aware that we are facing a number of unique and unprecedented opportunities and challenges. I am personally invested in leading the Defence Forces to address the key issues that we face as an organisation, in collaboration with our Departmental colleagues. Since taking up my role as Chief of Staff in September 2021, I have reflected on how Óglaigh na hÉireann can improve and develop, thereby ensuring that we are operationally ready for deployment at home and overseas, and ever-ready to carry out any roles assigned to us by Government.

Nevertheless, despite our very real challenges, some of which I will address in some detail here, it is important to appreciate that this is also a period of great opportunity for the Defence Forces. The Report submitted to Government by the Commission on the Defence Forces [CODF] provides a generational opportunity for Ireland and for Óglaigh na hÉireann. Most importantly, the Government approved recommendations provides a roadmap to design and develop the Future Force out to 2028.

The future structures and capabilities of the Defence Forces will be redesigned in order to respond to developments in both the national and international security environments. The Threat and Risk Environment looking out to 2030 and beyond remains complex and unpredictable. Our overseas deployments remain a priority and are a visible demonstration of Ireland's commitment to International security and multilateralism. The mandated missions or operations where our members deploy are often challenging and in some cases in hostile environments, where tragically some of our personnel have made the ultimate sacrifice as evidenced by the loss of 89 personnel throughout our 65 years of unbroken service with the United Nations.

I'd like to take this opportunity today to remember Pte Seán Rooney, a soldier, a peacekeeper and colleague, who was killed on active service in Lebanon on 14th December 2022 and who remains in our payers and in our thoughts, as do his family and friends.... A dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Security environment assessments inform how we train and prepare our forces so that we can secure our national sovereignty and defend and protect the citizens of Ireland. Reflecting on the number of global challenges that have emerged over the past number of years it can be seen how those developments have informed the current employment of our Forces.

I am immensely proud of the key role that we have played in support of the Health Service Executive and other government departments and agencies during the COVID -19 pandemic. We demonstrated, in a very real and tangible way, the value and benefit that the Defence Forces brings when called upon in times of national crisis in terms of our planning competence, logistical and operational expertise, dual use capabilities, and most importantly, our personnel.

That experience has also informed the Defence Forces' response to other recent Government taskings and requests for assistance to support, for example, Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection and those seeking permanent International Protection. We have enabled the provision of emergency accommodation in a number of military installations and we continue to deliver those supports to the lead agencies within our means and capabilities.

The Defence Forces' planning and cyber defence capabilities were also deployed in support of the HSE when it was subjected to a serious cyber-crime incident in 2021 and we continue to support the National Cyber Security Centre with the secondment of personnel and expertise when required. The Defence Forces Army Ranger Wing (ARW) were also tasked in 2021 to

support, secure and assist a DFA-led Emergency Consular Assistance Team (ECAT) operation in Kabul, Afghanistan. That mission facilitated the evacuation of twenty-six (26) Irish citizens and dependents during that challenging period. All of these examples serve to heighten the public's awareness of the value that a competent and capable Defence Forces delivers in terms of national resilience, for our people and this State.

Of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which occurred after the publication of the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, has worryingly signalled the return of high intensity conventional and hybrid conflict to the European continent. As the Government has reiterated, Russia's war is an assault not just on Ukraine but also on the International Rules based Order.

This new security paradigm emphasises the need for robust planning and preparation of contingent capabilities to meet current and future assigned tasks. This must be achieved while also continuing to contribute to international peace support operations and humanitarian missions. The Government's decision to participate in the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine, will enable the Defence Forces to consider the deployment of up to thirty (30) personnel to provide specialised training supports. This planning consideration is ongoing.

These types of threats and emerging tasks underline the utility of, and a requirement for, a Defence Force that is flexible, adaptable, capable and interoperable as part of a whole of government approach to security and defence.

Following my appointment as Chief of Staff I identified three key priority areas to guide staffing efforts and desired outputs. These priority areas are: *Development & Wellbeing; Internal Communications; and CODF implementation*. They focus on identifying and delivering projects and work strands that can be progressed by the Defence Forces, our policies and procedures. My overall intent is to empower leaders at all levels to improve retention conditions, to implement and progress positive means of internal communication, and to support and enable the modernisation and development of the Force. It is my intent to drive positive change from within in order to realise the 'total package' of benefits associated with being a member of Óglaigh Na hÉireann. Balancing our required operational outputs in tandem with developing our future force design, structures and staffing in line with CODF level of ambition is an ambitious but appropriate objective.

Closely linked, and central to the realisation of my overall intent, is my determination and

resolve to tackle any form of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, misogyny or sexual harassment. Let me assure you that any form of unacceptable behaviour is completely contrary to our values and ethos, and I am determined to tackle this problem in order to ensure the safety and well-being of all our personnel. Any incident of inappropriate behaviour is one incident too many and it will not be tolerated. I am on record as stating that the vast majority of those who serve in Óglaigh Na hÉireann are appalled by the lived experiences and accounts shared by our fellow colleagues, both serving and retired, particularly those that came to light following the Women of Honour documentary. I am grateful for the opportunity to reaffirm that position here today and to state it before this Committee.

I await the publication of the Independent Review Group's Report and I have assured An Tánaiste and Minister for Defence of my intent to work with all stakeholders in order to fully implement the recommendations as approved by his office. I am confident that the IRG's recommendations, in addition to Defence Force work-streams already commenced in this area, will further enable our Organisation to be grounded on best culture, ethos and values, which is no more than our members should expect and deserve.

In addition, as you may be aware, one of the five strategic objectives central to the implementation of the Commission of the Defence Forces Report is concerned exclusively with addressing workplace culture, HR practices and policies for our members. I firmly believe that these progressive initiatives, combined with the IRG's recommendations and the internal steps taken to date, will provide those who serve, with a workplace that is fully aligned with the principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect.

With that, I would now like to turn my remarks to the Commission on the Defence Forces Report. As you are no doubt aware the Commission reported in February 2022 and in July of last year the Government approved a High Level Action Plan (HLAP). The ambition is to now advance, over a six-year period, to a level of Defence Forces' capability equivalent to that required to enable Level of Ambition (LOA) 2, as defined in that report. This will entail multi-annual funding increases, which have commenced in 2023, to reach a defence budget of some €1.5 billion, in 2022 prices, by 2028, and involves increases in personnel numbers of some 2,000, creating a new Defence Forces' establishment of 11,500.

The Commission identified the critical importance of the unbreakable link that must be established between Government decisions on defence policy, level of ambition, capability and approved budget lines. In that vein, the Commission concluded that our current capability

ambitions were inconsistent with the more ambitious statements outlined in defence policy, and that a continuation of that model would leave the defence instrument without a credible military capability to protect Ireland, its people and its resources for any sustained period. Their recommendation, to move to an enhanced level of ambition (LOA 2) by 2028, has been approved by Government, and is now a significant catalyst for change for the Defence Forces.

It should be noted that all 130 of the Commission's recommendations have been categorised under 5 strategic objectives. These Core Areas concern: Transformational change to modernise Organisational Culture and HR Strategies and Practices; the Reform of High Level Command and Control (C2) and the creation of new joint services Strategic and Operational HQs supported by three Service Chiefs; the Revitalisation of the Reserve Defence Forces; the Reform and restructuring of the three Services; and Joint Capability Development.

A joint civil-military Implementation Management Office is currently engaged with external consultants to develop a Detailed Implementation Plan to be approved by Government. That plan will timeline and chart how and when projects will be progressed to achieve its objectives.

During this time, the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence have not stood still and I have progressed a number of initiatives, in collaboration with the Secretary General and her staffs, in line with the HLAP recommendations. Since the beginning of the year, I have designated an Office of Reserve Affairs, led by a Colonel (Naval Capt) Rank. That Office will be tasked with designing a new plan to regenerate our Reserve Forces for the approval of An Tánaiste and Minister for Defence. The Reserve Defence Forces are an integral and valued capability under our Single Force Concept and we welcomed the Defence (Amendment) Act 2021, which provides for RDF Supplemental Military Service in support of the Permanent Defence Force, and the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2020. These legislative Acts and amendment enables the Reserve to contribute significantly to the wider DF effort during the COVID pandemic, while also having the effect of removing the absolute prohibitions within the Defence Acts on members of the Reserve serving overseas. I am also progressing the designation of a Gender Advisor to my Office and pending that appointment, in the interim, I have institutionalised the attendance of a senior female officer to provide a broader perspective at weekly and monthly General Staff meetings and to advise the General Staff on gender specific issues. Women comprise just over 7% of our workforce currently and that is a capability gap. This number needs to grow and we are working on this as part of our recently launched 'BE MORE' recruitment campaign as well as other initiatives.

Work is also well advanced on the HLAP, as published. This plan identified a total of 38 prioritised ‘*Early Actions*’ to progress a number of key recommendations arising from the Commissions’ report. These early actions will also act as the necessary building blocks to support the full detailed implementation plan. An update report is due to be published by An Tánaiste and Minister for Defence in the near future prior to delivery of the Detailed Implementation Plan. I am happy to report that significant progress has been achieved in the areas of pay and allowances; the development of a new Vision Statement for the Defence Forces; on ways to expand our recruitment and induction capacity to include the development of new Joint Recruitment and Induction Training Centre at Gormanston Camp; on the creation of a civil-military Capability Development Branch to deliver new infrastructure, equipment and facilities needed to accommodate, train and operate our forces on land, air and sea; and competitions for the appointment of a new Head of Strategic Transformation and a new Head of Strategic HR who will report directly to me are actively underway.

The progress to date has been briefed to the High-Level Steering Board which has been established to oversee implementation and is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach. In addition, the Implementation Oversight Group, led by the Independent chair Ms. Julie Sinnemon has been established to oversee and drive progress in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission.

This journey of modernisation and force transformation will inevitably involve a level of disruption and will require significant organisational and cultural change. Ultimately, upon implementation, the ambition is to deliver a regenerated and fit-for-purpose force, with an ambitious vision, a larger and more capable workforce, and a greatly enhanced multi-annual budget and resource envelope.

One of my priority considerations, over the last number of years, concerns the recruitment and retention of personnel, our most valued resource. Our capability to deliver the required military outputs in a dynamic threat environment and in times of crisis rests on the sustained availability of sufficient personnel who are prepared physically, intellectually and psychologically. The members of this Committee will be very cognisant of the human resource difficulties that the Defence Forces have experienced in recent times. The full-employment market conditions currently enjoyed by Ireland is the contested space that all employers must overcome when attracting recruits and retaining personnel in service. We are constructively engaged with our Departmental colleagues in this space in order to ensure that we have a competitive edge. In

addition, I am convinced that the future force in its structures and its staffing will have to be agile and adaptable in order to address the security challenges of the future.

Recruitment into the Defence Forces occurs across a number of streams for enlisted and commissioned Ranks. Though levels of induction have been generally robust, it has been challenging over the past number of years to grow sufficient numbers to keep pace with higher levels of exits. Defence Forces recruitment systems are regularly reviewed and updated. The implementation of relevant recommendations arising from the consultant-led review on recruitment continues. In addition, and in line with the CODF recommendations, a new recruitment strategy has been developed with a focus on 4 principal themes: Expanding induction pools; Enhancing marketing effectiveness; Optimising selection and induction methodologies; and Maximising retention in training.

However, we have also long understood that our turnover rate, recorded at 10.72% in 2022, cannot be addressed by recruitment strategies alone. I fully appreciate that a healthy balance between retention and exit numbers must be maintained if the Defence Forces is to remain fit for purpose. We have witnessed heightened levels of exits since circa 2016 and while that dynamic softened during the pandemic years, 2022 figures confirm the resumption of an upward trend in voluntary exits. It remains to be seen if this is an after-effect of career decision-making delayed during the pandemic or whether it points to a more permanent acceleration.

Many aspects of military service have the potential to influence retention rates, including, career opportunities, remuneration, intensity of training and operational missions, work-life balance considerations, infrastructure and equipment developments. The appropriate implementation of the Working Time Directive can play a key role in this, and is positively welcomed by the General Staff. An ECJ ruling from 2021, known as the Slovenian Case, has been very significant to our understanding of this subject and engagements are ongoing to arrive at draft heads of bill for the appropriate amendment to the Organisation of Working Time Act.

In addition, work on a DF cross-functional retention strategy is under development and is relatively mature. The draft strategy focuses on a number of key retention themes including: Culture; Opportunities; Supports; Work-life balance including WTD; Conditions of Service; and Rewards and Recognition.

I am also cognisant of the double jeopardy that a reducing workforce entails. Namely, asking personnel to execute the duties and responsibilities expected of a fully established organisation. I acknowledge that it will take time for the Defence Forces to rebuild our strength levels. In the interim, we continue to review the scope of our domestic framework operations and our overseas commitments. Our intent is to reduce the totality of our current commitments in the short term, in order to enable and progress the regeneration of our force and associated capability developments. Following the provision of military advice, the Government have signalled the intent to withdraw from the UNDOF mission on the Golan Heights and this will facilitate other planned commitments. As a package, all of these initiatives should have a positive effect, and when considered in addition to the ambition and realisation of the CODF implementation plan, will provide assurance to our personnel concerning their career opportunities, their work-life balance, their continued professional and personal development pathways, and the future direction of their respective Services.

Before I conclude, it is important for me to state and acknowledge the extremely positive and collaborative relationship that I enjoy with the Secretary General of the Department of Defence, her staffs, and the full and unrelenting support and leadership of An Tánaiste and Minister for Defence. I can report that we are collectively on the same page, and positioned to grasp this once-in-a generation opportunity to implement the changes that are necessary to build a regenerated and modernised Defence Forces.

Finally, I would like to make mention of the role played by the Defence Forces in support of decade of Centenaries programme since 2012. I am extremely proud of our contribution in this area, which also offered us an opportunity to increase the public's awareness and understanding of our role in the defence and security of the State, while also reinforcing our identity and heritage. Our personnel have carried out many State ceremonial activities, most notably the 2016 Easter Parade, and more recently when making the centenary handover of Dublin Castle, adding a sense of pride, solemnity and dignity to these great moment of State. Our contribution to the decade has also reached into the cultural and societal spaces by the coordination and execution of the Flags for Schools Programme in 2016 and in various other collaborations and exhibitions with academic partners and our national cultural institutions. Such efforts, including our recent commemoration of the handovers of the barracks through the contested Civil War commemorations, have demonstrated that Óglaigh na hÉireann is a mature, reflective organisation, capable of respecting in an inclusive manner the totality of our shared history.

I am immensely proud of our Organisation and the people that serve in it, past and present, and I am confident we will stand firm for another 100 years and more.

I thank the Chairman for giving me the opportunity to address the committee and I am happy to take any questions that you may have within my scope and area of responsibility.

Go raimh míle maith agaibh.