



An Roinn Cosanta
Department of Defence

Statement by Micheál Martin TD, Tánaiste, Minister for Defence at the Oireachtas Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, seeking approval for the Report to Dáil Éireann regarding service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations in 2023

02 July, 2024

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

I am pleased to report to the Committee on Irish Defence Forces participation in United Nations missions in 2023. This report was laid before Dáil Éireann on 3 May 2024.

The following Motion was placed on the Order Paper for Dáil Éireann and has been referred to this Committee:

“That Dáil Éireann approves the report by the Minister for Defence regarding service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations in 2023, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 3 May 2024, in accordance with Section 13 of the Defence (Amendment) Act, 2006”.

In commending the motion, I will briefly outline some of the key aspects of Ireland’s involvement with the UN in 2023. At the same time, I will also touch on some of the current developments ongoing in the region.

Irish troops were first deployed on UN peacekeeping operations in 1958 and since then, have had a continuous record of participation in UN peace support operations. This is a unique record and one of which this country is rightly proud.

Defence Forces personnel have served in peace support missions all over the world in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and South America, completing over 73,000 tours of duty to date.

This commitment to international peacekeeping is a very practical expression of the values which we hold dear as a nation, and of our commitment to international peace and security and to multilateralism.

As of 5th June 2024, there are some 430 Defence Forces personnel serving overseas in eight different missions around the world. The main mission in which personnel are currently deployed is the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). We also have other postings in the Middle East and the Balkans.

For all these Irish men and women of the Defence Forces deployed on these operations, service with the United Nations is rightly regarded as a noble and important contribution in supporting Ireland's place in the world and our international and foreign policy objectives.

Commitments during 2023

Moving to the Report for 2023, the subject of this Motion: Ireland's main commitments during 2023 were to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights.

UNIFIL

Firstly, with regard to UNIFIL: this Mission was Ireland's largest overseas deployment during 2023. The current contingent is part of a joint interoperable Irish/Polish Battalion, which also includes a contingent from Hungary and personnel from Malta. Ireland acts as lead Nation, providing the commanding officer and the larger troop and logistics contribution to the joint Battalion.

Since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th of last year and the war that has followed, there has been an increased focus on the crucial work carried out by Irish peacekeepers in the Middle East.

I visited our troops in UNIFIL last month to show Government and the Irish people's support and appreciation for the role our troops carry out in South Lebanon, and saw for myself while there, some of the dangers under which they operate while carrying out their Mission.

I am and remain deeply concerned by rising tensions in that area. The potential for further regional escalation remains high, and a widening of this conflict would have devastating consequences for all in the region, most particularly those living in proximity to the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon.

It is vital that all parties work to de-escalate the situation, and with regard to the conflict in Gaza, we continue to urgently call for an immediate and sustainable humanitarian ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and for full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access. Accountability for all civilian deaths is essential.

In this unstable climate in which our Defence Forces personnel are serving, the health and safety of these personnel remains of paramount concern for both myself and for the Government at this time.

I remain in regular and ongoing contact with the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces on this matter. Both he and my Department are kept regularly apprised of all developments in those areas in which Defence Forces' personnel are deployed.

In terms of protecting our troops on the ground, ongoing threat assessments are carried out in mission areas and we continually review both personal equipment and force assets, to ensure that Defence Forces personnel are appropriately equipped to fulfil their roles and stay safe.

It is important also to note that Defence Forces' peacekeepers are well trained prior to deployment, including anticipating events such as occasions of sporadic fire in their Area of Operations, and including the circumstances in which they find themselves currently, which may require taking shelter in protected positions.

Earlier this year I approved the deployment of an extra platoon of 33 Irish troops to serve as an additional force protection element with the Irish Battalion in UNIFIL and it is intended that they will deploy later this month.

In terms of any contingency planning around this deployment given the instability in the region, I would stress that planning of this nature is part and parcel of all UN and national operational deployments.

Given the ongoing security issues in this region, contingency planning is ongoing should the need for evacuation arise.

I would add however that the Government remains committed to our Missions in the Middle East, including UNIFIL, and the Government has no plans to evacuate our personnel currently.

As members will be aware however, the situation remains highly fluid, and is one that we are continuing to keep a close eye on.

UNDOF

Moving to the UNDOF Mission in the Golan Heights, this was Ireland's second largest overseas deployment in 2023. A contingent of the Permanent Defence Force was deployed in UNDOF since 2013, and as of 31 December 2023, a total of 134 Defence Forces personnel were serving with the mission.

Following a joint assessment by the Department and the Defence Forces of commitments to overseas missions and on the basis of military advice, the decision was taken in 2023 to withdraw the Infantry Group from the Mission with effect from April 2024.

This decision was taken in order for the Defence Forces to undertake a process of consolidation with regard to their overseas commitments and to prepare for future peacekeeping missions.

Notwithstanding the withdrawal of the Infantry Group, the UN agreed that Ireland will continue to hold three Staff Officer appointments with the mission. Ireland will continue to support the UN in its work with the UNDOF mission into the future.

I will take this opportunity to pay tribute the Defence Forces' remarkable peacekeeping record with the mission since they were first deployed.

Over the period of their deployment, our peacekeepers played an important part in improving the lives of citizens on the ground in the Golan Heights, but that torch has now passed to peacekeeping troops from Kazakhstan, who replaced the Irish troops from April of this year.

United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO)

Moving now to UNTSO, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation in the Middle-East.

This mission is responsible for providing trained unarmed military observers to support the work of the two other UN missions in the Middle East – UNIFIL and UNDOF.

The Defence Forces have participated in UNTSO since 1958, supporting the work of the other UN peacekeeping operation by monitoring ceasefires, and supervising armistice agreements.

As of 31 December 2023, a total of twelve members of the Permanent Defence Force were serving with the mission, and I would also like to place on the record my and the Government's appreciation to the efforts of Irish troops in this regard.

Other missions

Other UN Mandated missions in which Defence Forces personnel were deployed in 2023 are:

- the EU-led mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR) with five personnel,
- the NATO-led international security presence in Kosovo (KFOR) with thirteen personnel,
- and the Naval Service EU Naval Mission (Operation Iriini) with six personnel.

Overseas service – Not without risks

Ireland has a strong tradition of principled engagement on development, humanitarian assistance, disarmament, human rights and peacekeeping. These values underpin our commitment to partnership with the UN and its Member States.

I commend all our Defence Forces men and women for their commitment and dedication to overseas service, without which, Ireland's strong tradition of peacekeeping under the auspices of the United Nations would not be possible.

Peacekeeping is not without risks however, and this was brought shockingly home to all of us, in December 2022, with the killing of Private Seán Rooney while serving in South Lebanon. A number of his colleagues from the 121st Battalion were also injured.

A judicial process in this regard is ongoing in Lebanon, and both I and the Government have consistently expressed determination that all of the facts and circumstances of the incident are fully established and that no stone is left unturned to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

I am determined to see that justice is done, and be seen to be done, not just for Private Rooney's family, but also for his colleagues and for Ireland as a whole.

To this end, a central focus of my visit to Lebanon in May was my meeting with the Lebanese Minister for Foreign Affairs at which representatives of the Lebanese Minister for Defence also attended.

I left the Lebanese authorities in no doubt with regard to the absolute determination of the Irish Government in ensuring that those responsible for Private Rooney's death are brought to justice and that lives of Irish peacekeepers are valued.

We should never forget that participation in all these peace support, crisis management training and monitoring missions comes at a personal cost for individuals and their families and friends.

Ár gcoimeádaithe síochána in Óglaigh na hÉireann atá ag fónamh thar lear agus ar fud na cruinne faoi láthair, slán abhaile go dtaga siad níos déanaí i mbliana tar éis dóibh a gcuairt dualgais thar lear a chríochnú.

Táimid ag smaoineamh orthu i gcónaí agus gabhaim buíochas leo as a gcuid seirbhíse. Molaim don choiste go nglacfaí leis an rún.

[I wish all our Defence Forces' peacekeepers currently serving overseas and across the globe, a safe return home later in 2024 on completion of their tour of duty abroad. They are foremost in our thoughts and I thank them for their service.

I commend the motion to the Committee.]

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