

**International Conference  
of Ombuds Institutions  
for the Armed Forces**



**Daily Summary**

Friday, 22 October



## Session 5: COVID-19 and ombuds institutions – The 2021 update

### The new normal

After almost two years since the outbreak of COVID-19, the measures implemented to adjust the work of ombuds institutions to the circumstances of the pandemic have slowly, but surely been normalised into everyday life. One of the most notable changes has been the shift to hybrid working arrangements, allowing staff members flexibility in choosing to work from home or in the office. As a necessary transition to accommodate COVID-19 regulations at the height of the pandemic, experiences have illustrated the challenges and opportunities that have emerged as a result. On the one hand, it has driven and accelerated the digitalisation of the work of ombuds institutions, driving innovative solutions (such as virtual field visits or improved electronic case management systems), allowing for a greater virtual presence and, concomitantly, increased and improved access to grievance mechanisms to the armed forces community and the wider public. Yet, working remotely has also created many challenges, *inter alia*, forcing staff members to undergo fundamental change, for instance, in their management style or in the workspace of their homes; increased costs and processing times of complaints; and, most importantly, the toll on the mental health and the emotional cost of staff working remotely created by feelings of isolation coupled with the nature of ombuds institutions' work. The physical presence of other staff may be vital in difficult conversations with complainants and must thus be substituted by easily accessible remote access to the same support. In general, the new normal requires new working behaviours and concomitant expectations that govern the office landscape.

### Enduring complaints and new fears

While many of the same challenges are reflected in the nature of complaints as was the case prior to the pandemic, new fears have also emerged. Perennial systemic issues remain and have, at times, even overshadowed concerns that have arisen during the pandemic. Scandals of sexual misconduct and other forms of discrimination lay bare the systemic maladies that continue to plague many armed forces around the world, due in large part to the prevalence of a culture which insulates bad actors and demands silence from its victims. Herein, continued efforts from ombuds institutions to establish and enhance their ability to tackle these challenges is of vital importance, and may even take the form of campaigning for public support through news conferences or outreach activities.

Next to enduring challenges, new fears have arisen related primarily to working conditions of service members deployed domestically during COVID-19. These related to the emerging needs of staff working remotely, clarity on the role of service members during deployment, unsafe and unhygienic working environments, and fears

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of exposure to the virus. Furthermore, the discriminate application of rules and procedures in different parts of the armed forces became more apparent as measures and regulations to fight the pandemic were implemented and applied unevenly.