

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

13 IC OAF

Daily Summary

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Session 3: Connecting operational effectiveness with the public image of the armed forces

Interest in the military profession

Interest in the military profession and corresponding recruitment rates are intrinsically linked to the public image of the armed forces. Said public image diverges greatly among states, and some trends suggest an inverse relationship between the public image of the armed forces and the state of the economy, with more favourable views being harboured during times of economic downturn. Regardless, the work of ombuds institutions greatly affects the public image of armed forces everywhere, albeit indirectly, by addressing and rectifying individual grievances and systemic issues, thereby increasing interest in the military profession. However, efforts to integrate gender equality must be strengthened as many systemic issues relate to a culture of discrimination against marginalised gender identities. This has severe effects on the ability of the armed forces to attract diverse recruits, and in turn, a diverse and inclusive force – recognised as essential requirements for operational effectiveness.

Public trust after high-profile cases of wrongdoings

High-profile cases of wrongdoings committed within the armed forces or on deployments abroad severely affect public trust and the public image of the armed forces. In many cases, they are reflective of wider systemic issues, among which sexual harassment and assault feature prominently in armed forces around the world. Ombuds institutions often play an integral part in rebuilding public trust by investigating instances of alleged misconduct and issuing recommendations. Experiences have shown that focusing on transparency and accountability in the measures taken following a case of wrongdoing is good practice, as is the allocation of resources to counter misinformed narratives in the media. Ensuring that investigative and forward-looking reports are made as public as possible, communicating updates via press events, monitoring public trust through regular surveys, and strengthening governance mechanisms, such as direct reporting duties of ombuds institutions to parliament may provide entry points for ombuds institutions to rebuild public trust in the armed forces. Hereby, independence of the ombuds institution is vital to effectively demonstrate the value of their role, and may be ensured by maintaining an arms-length relationship with the ministry of defence.

Working with veterans

Meaningful engagement with the veteran community, including their families, is a crucial element of a positive public image of the armed forces. While veteran affairs are in many cases subsumed under a special department within the ministry of defence, such engagement may also be fostered by ombuds institutions. For instance, ombuds institutions can partake in annual meetings of veteran associations, increase

and improve access to their offices for veteran communities, and pay subsequent attention to their plights and needs. As a valuable source of information, complaints issued by veterans often centre around veteran welfare, and perceptions of neglect such as difficult access to psychological support and medical care. Yet, definitions of who qualifies as a veteran, and corresponding entitlements for support differ greatly among states. Some limit the label by whether a service member was deployed on mission, whether they were engaged in combat, how long the deployment lasted, or whether they were deployed at all. Ombuds institutions can play a leading role in discussions which reflect on how novel forms of engagement – for example, domestic deployments in the assistance of civilian authorities or remote operations via drone – feature in the process of delineating veteran communities. Furthermore, how and with whom veterans identify (e.g. by region, operation or unit) may be useful information in building bridges between veteran communities, such as between active and former service members.