



An Roinn Cosanta
Department of Defence

Statement by the
Minister with Responsibility for Defence,
Mr. Paul Kehoe T.D.,
on the Motion before Dáil Éireann
seeking approval for
the Report to Dáil Éireann regarding service by the Defence
Forces with the United Nations in 2017 & 2018

16 May, 2019

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

I am pleased to report to the Committee on Irish Defence Forces participation in United Nations missions in 2017 and 2018. These reports were laid before Dáil Éireann on 7 February 2019.

The following Motion is now before the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence for approval:

“That Dáil Éireann approves the reports by the Minister with Responsibility for Defence, regarding service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations in 2017 and 2018 respectively, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 7 February 2019, in accordance with Section 13 of the Defence (Amendment) Act, 2006”.

In commending the motion, I will shortly outline some of the key aspects of Ireland’s involvement with the UN in 2017 and 2018.

Irish troops were first deployed on UN peacekeeping operations in 1958 and since then, not a single day has passed without Irish participation in UN peace support operations. This is a unique record and one of which we can all be proud.

Irish 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 68,000 tours of duty.

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 the U.N and to multilateralism.

There are currently some 670 Defence Forces personnel serving overseas in 9 different missions around the world of which approximately 5% are female. Ireland has a Battalion comprising some 460 troops in UNIFIL. We also have a Company in the UNDOF mission on the Golan Heights along with other significant postings in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. For these Irish men and women, service with the United Nations is rightly regarded as noble and important.

Commitments during 2017 and 2018

Ireland's main commitments during 2017 and 2018 were to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights.

UNIFIL

The UNIFIL mission was Ireland's largest overseas deployment during 2017 and 2018. From June 2012 to November 2018 Irish troops served as part of a joint Irish-Finnish Battalion in UNIFIL. From 2015 a number of Estonian personnel were also deployed as part of the Finnish contingent. Due to other National commitments both Finland and Estonia withdrew from the Irish-Finnish Battalion, UNIFIL, in November 2018. As an interim measure, an additional contingent of approximately 106 Defence Forces Personnel were deployed to the UNIFIL mission to cover the backfilling of the Finnish contingent for a 12 month period. Ireland assumed the full duties and responsibilities of the Irish Battalion in November 2018 and will continue in this role up to November 2019.

It has recently been agreed that a contingent of Polish Armed Forces together with a contribution from Hungarian Forces will join our UNIFIL contingent from November 2019 as part of a joint Battalion.

In 2018, for the first time, two Maltese personnel deployed to UNIFIL as part of the Irish Battalion. The Irish Defence Forces have had an ongoing relationship with Armed Forces of Malta since 2009, providing both cadet and officer training. To date, 38 Maltese cadets have completed their training in the Defence Forces Training Centre.

Partnership with other States committed to UN Peacekeeping has become an increasing element of our overseas peacekeeping operations. Working with other such States is critical to overcoming the new and ever emerging challenges we face.

My last visit to UNIFIL was in March 2019, when I – along with my Secretary General and the Deputy Chief of Staff - saw at first hand the commitment of Irish Defence Force personnel to the UNIFIL mission. I was also impressed by the strong relationship forged between our personnel and the local communities in which they serve. Liaison with the local population and the provision of support and humanitarian

assistance is one of the hallmarks of Ireland's approach to involvement in peace support operations.

Indeed this was something I was proud to highlight in my subsequent address to the UN Peacekeeping conference in New York later that month, when I spoke about the necessity of all peacekeepers being trained to engage proactively with the local population, including women, so as to deliver more effective peacekeeping operations on the ground.

UNDOF

Ireland's second largest overseas deployment in 2017 and 2018 was to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights. The Defence Forces contribution to UNDOF comprised approximately 136 personnel over this period.

Since its establishment in 1974, UNDOF has been a successful mission in supporting the efforts of the international community both in the Golan Heights and in the Middle East region. In March 2018, the UNDOF Headquarters returned to Camp Faouar on the Syrian side of the area of separation and the then Chief of Staff UNDOF, Colonel Michael Dawson, together with seven other members of the Defence Forces moved with the headquarters.

The main Irish contingent, comprising a Force Reserve Company of some 130 personnel, completed their relocation to Camp Faouar in September 2018.

The security situation in UNDOF's area of operations is continually reviewed by the UN and the Defence Forces. The continued presence of the UNDOF mission remains an important element in ensuring stability on the Golan Heights and in the Middle East region and is supported and welcomed by both Syria and Israel.

UNTSO

Ireland continued to contribute Military observers and staff to various United Nations missions such as the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) throughout 2017 and 2018.

MINURSO and MONUSCO

In addition a small number of Defence Forces officers continue to serve with MINURSO, the UN mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, and MONUSCO, the UN Stabilisation mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Other UN Mandated missions

The UN has come to increasingly rely on regional organisations including the African Union, the EU and NATO to provide forces to implement and support UN Security Council Resolutions. In 2017 and 2018, the Defence Forces were deployed in a number of such UN mandated missions.

EUTM Mali

Ireland has participated in the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) since the mission was launched in 2013. Currently, twenty (20) Irish Defence Forces personnel are deployed to EUTM Mali. I was delighted to visit the mission in January, along with An Taoiseach, my Secretary General and the Chief of Staff. The objective of this mission is to improve the capacity of the Malian Armed Forces to maintain security in Mali and restore the authority of the Malian Government and the territorial integrity of the Malian State.

Operation Sophia

In July 2017, Government and Dáil approval was secured for the deployment of an Irish Naval Service vessel as part of the EU Naval Mission “Operation Sophia”.

Participation in Operation Sophia represented the first involvement by the Naval Service in a multilateral security operation under a UN mandate.

In February 2018, the Government approved a further Naval Service contribution to Operation Sophia. This involved a total of 2 naval vessels deployed consecutively during the year from April to October 2018. In addition, 5 members of the Defence Forces were deployed in the Operation Headquarters over the course of 2018.

The objectives of Operation Sophia have been not only to disrupt the activities of smugglers and traffickers; but also to prevent loss of life at sea and to reduce the suffering and exploitation of migrants by

countering and challenging the criminal organisations engaged in such activities.

Other UN Mandated missions in which Defence Forces personnel were deployed in 2017 or 2018 and are still serving are the EU led mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR) and the NATO-led international security presence in Kosovo (KFOR).

Anniversary of UN Peacekeeping Operations

2018 was a particularly significant year for United Nations peacekeeping. The United Nations celebrated the 70th anniversary of UN Peacekeeping Operations, and Ireland marked its own significant milestones as a long standing contributor to UN Peacekeeping.

In March 2018 my visit to Irish troops in Lebanon coincided with the official UN commemorations in Naqoura to mark the 40th anniversary of the UNIFIL mission's establishment.

It was an occasion to pay tribute to the tens of thousands of UN peacekeepers who have served together with local communities for peace and security in South Lebanon.

Separately, in June 2018, I hosted an official State ceremony in Dublin Castle – attended by President Michael D Higgins and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar - to mark the 60th anniversary of Irish involvement in U.N peacekeeping operations.

The Government was also very proud to mark this significant anniversary internationally, when we hosted a ceremony at U.N. headquarters, New York in July 2018. This ceremony allowed us to recognise the contribution of Irish men and women from the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, and the wider Public Service, to international peacekeeping.

In addition, in December 2018 the 60th Anniversary of Irelands deployment with the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), was marked with a Commemorative Ceremony held in UNTSO headquarters in Jerusalem.

Overseas service

Participation in peace support missions comes at a personal cost for individuals who must be away from families and friends for extended periods of time. I commend our Defence Forces personnel 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.

Our ability to protect the health and safety of our personnel is of paramount concern when considering participation in any mission. 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. The safety of our peacekeepers is of the utmost importance.

Ireland's contribution on aggregate to overseas missions of some 1,639 personnel or 18% of our Defence Force strength in 2017 and 1,696 personnel or 19% in 2018 is a very significant contribution in the context of the overall strength of our Force and the resources available for Defence.

I wish to assure you that the Government is committed to ensuring that the Defence Forces continue to contribute in a meaningful way to overseas operations.

I commend the motion to the Committee.

Thank you.

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