



Reserve Defence Force Representative Association

Comhlachas Ionadaitheach na nÓglach Cúltaca

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RDFRA Opening Statement

Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence; 27 June 2023

Mr. Chairman, Deputies and Senators, on behalf of the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association I would like to first sincerely thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. During this appearance, it is our intention to update the Committee on the implementation of the Commission on the Defence Forces recommendations – as they pertain to the Reserve Defence Force – highlight areas of key concern, and generally inform the Committee as to what is going on within the Reserve sphere of the Defence Forces.

To begin with, the Commission on the Defence Forces report was published in February 2022 and made eleven RDF-specific recommendations. While the Commission used the tiered Level of Ambition 1, 2 or 3 approach in all of its other recommendations, when it came to the Reserve the Commission recognised that this element of the Defence Forces was “in an extremely weakened state” and that a multiple-choice Level of Ambition approach would be inappropriate; instead, the Commission noted that “The RDF is at present in such a poor state that the Commission believes the more relevant options are quite stark: regeneration or abolition.” The report went on to state that the Commission firmly believed that the Reserve could and should be regenerated, in order to “allow it to play an active and effective role in support of the PDF in all its functions, including in challenging new domains.”

The Commission’s recommendations – including the eleven focussed on the Reserve – were subsequently translated into a High Level Action Plan, published in July 2022. Some of the Commission’s recommendations were sub-divided within the High Level Action Plan, and so the eleven Reserve recommendations from the Commission’s report became fifteen recommendations within the High Level Action Plan. Out of the 130 total recommendations within the High Level Action Plan, thirty-eight were then selected as ‘Early Actions’ – essentially the first recommendations that would be implemented. Two of the Reserve’s fifteen recommendations were selected for inclusion on the list of Early Actions; the first, to establish

a Reserve oversight body known as the Office of Reserve Affairs by August 2022, and the second, for this office to draft a Reserve Regeneration Plan by December 2022.

At this point it is worth stating that within the Commission on the Defence Forces' report, the Commission noted that "While Commission members were very impressed by the high quality and clear commitment of the RDF personnel that they met, it was also apparent that morale is at a very low ebb, with many dedicated members of the view that the RDF is being allowed to "die on its feet". Many firmly believe that both the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence are not willing to take the necessary urgent and corrective action to prevent the decline of the RDF. This belief is strengthened by the fact that, of the 13 projects related to the RDF arising out of the White Paper on Defence 2015, not one had been commenced when the Commission began its work in December 2020. As part of its work, the Commission received submissions from both the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence which stressed the importance of the RDF, and an apparent commitment to its revitalisation. Nevertheless, the Commission believes that the RDF's current status is quite unacceptable and is concerned about the extent of genuine commitment to supporting and developing the RDF."

The Commission had alighted on something that the Reserve has experienced for years; the consistent low priority and lack of proper resourcing assigned to the Reserve, despite publicly supportive comments and acknowledgements of the Reserve's vital importance from those responsible for the force. As the Association feared, this once again played out following the publication of the High Level Action Plan in July of last year and the inclusion of the two Reserve recommendations on the Early Actions list. By December 2022 – at which point the Office of Reserve Affairs was supposed to have been established and the Reserve Regeneration Plan was supposed to have been drafted – the Office had still not been set up. By early 2023, the Office of Reserve Affairs was finally established, but while its initial operating capacity was supposed to be six members of the Permanent Defence Force and four reservists – it was formed with only one PDF Colonel and one RDF Lieutenant-Colonel; two senior officers with no staff who had the not inconsiderable task of fixing everything that was wrong with the Reserve. Now, in June 2023, the initial PDF component of the Office of Reserve Affairs is nearly all in place, but the Reserve appointments within the Office have still not been formalised, and the all-important drafting of the Reserve Regeneration Plan is likely still six months away, meaning that this so-called Early Action will be delivered a year late. It must be stressed that this delay has nothing to do with the commitment and dedication of the staff within

the Office of Reserve Affairs, but has everything to do with the resources being provided to this Office.

Another priority and resourcing issue is the topic of Reserve recruitment. This is conducted in short, infrequent windows, while Permanent Defence Force recruitment remains open essentially year-round. In fact, since 01 January 2019 – while Permanent Defence Force recruitment has been open nearly continuously since that date – it has only been possible for a member of the public to apply to join the Reserve for approximately ten months out of a four-and-a-half-year period. Reserve recruitment was open for only three months in 2019, two months in 2020, one month in 2021 – and this was solely for persons seeking to join in Tralee where a new recruitment pilot programme was taking place – and then for four months in 2022. Since the conclusion of this last recruitment drive in July 2022, Reserve recruitment has remained closed.

Recruitment windows aside, medical resources for the screening of new Reserve recruits are woefully insufficient, and certain items of clothing and equipment are regularly unavailable to new reservists. Obviously, the root cause is financial, but part of the problem is cultural; we are the part-time volunteers, and so perceived as not as important as members of the Permanent Defence Force. All members of the Reserve – and RDFRA – take no issue with this point; we accept that the Permanent Defence Force must have primacy in all things as they are the full-time career professionals. However, there is certainly a better balance to be struck when it comes to assigning priority and resources to Reserve matters. For years, the Reserve has been asked to just accept that the resources are not available at this time to remedy X issue, or that priority cannot be assigned to Y issue until another matter is dealt with first; the Reserve has borne these setbacks professionally and stoically, but we are now under the very real threat of being low-prioritised and low-resourced out of existence.

To give a stark example, in October 2021 when we last appeared before this Committee, we stated that the Reserve Defence Force could cease to exist within five years. This projection was based on the consistent decline in Reserve numbers that had been observed in recent years, coupled with the lack of resources and general low priority assigned to Reserve recruitment. In 2021, the effective strength of the Reserve was 1,513 personnel all ranks – only 37% of what the Reserve should have – with this figure representing the lowest strength in the Reserve's history at that time. As of 31 May 2023, the official effective strength of the Reserve is 1,430

personnel all ranks – 83 personnel less than in October 2021. Two years on from our last appearance before this Committee, our projections unfortunately have not changed.

It must be stressed that this projection has nothing to do with the interest levels in terms of applicants seeking to join the Reserve, since with every Reserve recruitment competition in the last decade, applicant figures have ranged into the thousands on each occasion; during the last Reserve recruitment window in 2022, the Reserve received over a thousand applications within a four-month period.

This issue of resourcing and prioritisation plays out over and over across a number of critical areas. In June 2022, a new Defence Forces Regulation R5 – the regulation that governs most aspects of how the Reserve operates – was authorised by the then-Minister for Defence. The last iteration of Defence Forces Regulation R5 had been published in 2005 when the FCÁ was disbanded and replaced with the modern RDF, but – following the Defence Forces reorganisation of 2012/13 – there had been a need for another new R5 at that point. However, despite years of campaigning by RDFRA and other key stakeholders, the document was only updated last June, nine years late. While this latest version of the regulation brought much-needed updates in several key areas, the contemporary publication of the Commission on the Defence Forces report resulted in a need for further amendments; RDFRA were informed that this would not be an issue, as the regulation was now being perceived by the Department of Defence as a “living document”, subject to change and amendment in a fluid manner as and when required. The reality, however, is that despite regular engagement with stakeholders on vital, additional required amendments to Defence Forces Regulation R5 since last June, the document remains unchanged from the version implemented a year ago. Some of the required updates amount to the remedying of minor textual errors within the document, but even these have not been changed.

The requirement to regularly update Defence Forces Regulation R5 is so great that in May of this year the President of RDFRA wrote directly to the Secretary General of the Department of Defence to raise concerns over the total lack of progress in terms of introducing further amendments to the document. To date, the Association has received no acknowledgement or reply to this letter.

To sum up the problem, the Reserve and RDFRA accept that resources are finite and that certain Defence matters must necessarily take precedence over others, but we cannot survive on the proverbial scraps from the table. Announced in 2015, the thirteen Reserve projects in the White Paper on Defence were never implemented. The first Reserve Early Action from last year's High Level Action Plan was implemented late and in a half-measure format, while the second Early Action will be delivered a year late at best. It took nine years to amend Defence Forces Regulation R5, and a year after the last version of this regulation was published it remains unchanged, despite all parties acknowledging that it requires frequent updating. When it comes to the Reserve, it appears that published timelines in official reports are suggestive only.

To put it bluntly, the Reserve has the potential to be an invaluable element of the Defence Forces, but instead of providing upwards of 4,000 highly skilled reservists who can augment the Permanent Defence Force in specialist areas or share the burden in a wide range of taskings at times of peak activity, the next few years may see the last elements of the Reserve disappear completely, simply because no one cared enough to save it.

This Association does care, as does its members and every committed reservist throughout the State, and so the Association wishes to make three recommendations of its own to the members of the Committee here today – recommendations which, in RDFRA's view, will significantly help to secure the Reserve's future.

Firstly, substantially resource the Office of Reserve Affairs and bring it up to its full operating capacity establishment as soon as possible. This Office is the oversight body responsible for fixing the Reserve, and therefore it must be provided with the resources and the regulatory underpinning that it requires as soon as possible.

Secondly, the proper emphasis needs to be placed on the regular amending and updating of Defence Forces Regulation R5. The failure to amend outdated procedures on a regular basis essentially ties the Reserve's hands behind its back in so many important areas. Recruitment is negatively impacted. Categories of reservists are forcibly retired younger than is necessary. Promotion competitions cannot be run. Aside from the negative impact on Reserve operations, this also negatively impacts on Reserve morale, which further worsens the decline.

Thirdly, and finally, substantially resource Reserve recruitment. Last year, as previously mentioned, over a thousand people applied to join the Reserve during a short four-month recruitment window. To date, only forty-seven of these have been facilitated with all stages of the recruitment process and been successfully enlisted in the Reserve. To reiterate, that is only forty-seven out of 1,000+ applicants, or less than 5% of those who applied. It is beyond frustrating for serving reservists to look on as large numbers apply to join their units during recruitment campaigns, only for so many applicants to lose interest and withdraw their applications because it takes the Defence Forces months or over a year to organise and deliver all stages of the recruitment process. Reserve recruitment requires proper marketing, medical resourcing, and a range of other supports in order to translate the huge number of interested persons out there into new reservists within the Defence Forces.

Thank you, and I would now like to invite questions from members of the Committee.