

CORONA – What are the Belgian Armed Forces doing in the fight against Covid-19?

While the Belgian Armed Forces continue to carry out their essential tasks, they put maximum effort into telework and homework. Personnel who is not involved in essential tasks, remain at maximum at home, ready to be deployed.

The Corona Coordination and Information Center (C2IC) is running at full speed. It's the contact point for all corona related questions, remarks and suggestions. Additional planning and *command&control* elements are tasked in particular to study various options of support for the nation and to coordinate efficiently.

Behind the scenes, there is tough cooperation with other departments and public services to plan military capabilities in various fields, and to make them available where the need is greatest. This list reflects what the Belgian Armed Forces are doing in the fight against Covid-19:

- Reinforcement of the emergency central 112 in Brussels and the province of Flemish Brabant.
- Deployment of military ambulances for the transport of Covid-19 patients.
- Expansion of the Burns capacity of the Brussels based military hospital (MHKA) for the benefit of other hospitals: burn patients are transferred to the MHKA burn center to be placed in to free up extra capacity in other hospitals.
- Increase in surgical capacity of the MHKA with additional beds.
- Liaison officers (medical planners) in reinforcement of the federal crisis center and the federal department of Public health (coordination and crisis management).
- Provision of a respirators.
- Material aid to triage centers.
- Repatriation of compatriots and EU citizens from abroad.
- Deployment of transport and storage capacities (e.g. of mouth masks) for the benefit of the federal department of Public Health.
- Support for the reception of homeless people in several large cities.

In addition, the Belgian Armed Forces are ready, if requested, to provide the following support in the short term:

- Medical Role 1 support elements (Doctor, NCO, nurse, ambulance) are on notice to move within 4Hr to perform pre-triage, to serve as Medical Quick Reaction Force to deploy, or to reinforce civilian Medical Task Forces.
- A pool of Emergency Medical Technicians is on a notice to move of 8Hr to reinforce or relieve civil care providers or ambulance services.
- Individual reinforcement of medical coordination or decision levels with medical planners, veterinarians, pharmacists, dentists.
- Staffing and possibly management of an Intermediate Hospital Capacity.
- Provision of a disinfection capacity (CBRN, veterinarian).
- Provision of additional liaison officers (medical planners) to reinforce the federal department of Public Health.
- Support to the mobile civil protection laboratories.
- Support to the federal department of Justice.

It goes without saying that, if necessary, other capacities can also be deployed in support to the nation.

The message from the Belgian department of Defence to the Nation is clear: 'we do not impose ourselves but we're ready to provide quick and effective help when the federal government asks us to and we can add value'.

In the meantime, all operational missions abroad continue: in Mali, Niger, Afghanistan, Afghanistan, Lithuania,... as well as on sea. The counter-terrorist missions in the major Belgian cities (patrolling, guarding critical infrastructure,...) continue as well.

However, the coronavirus is placing a host of stresses on the military's day-to-day operations. And like the rest of our countries, the creeping threat of the virus has reached numerous pockets of the military.

It began with preemptive steps such as cutting short the large-scale military exercise *Defender 2020* with NATO countries in Europe and banning on all domestic travel not deemed mission-critical. The past week, the Belgian defence headquarters took the unprecedented step of postponing military redeployments. Other large-scale field exercises and day-to-day training activities are canceled too. Recruiting stations shuttered and education in military schools is put on hold. And a coronavirus infection aboard a warship, forced the Navy to reduce its deployments.