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EUROMIL Recommendations on Handling the COVID-19 Pandemic in the European Armed Forces¹

The European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL) is an umbrella organisation composed of 33 military associations and trade unions from 21 countries. It is the main Europe-wide forum for cooperation among professional military associations on issues of common concern. EUROMIL strives to secure and advance the human rights, fundamental freedoms and socio-professional interests of military personnel of all ranks in Europe and promotes the concept of "Citizen in Uniform". As such, a soldier is entitled to the same rights and obligations as any other citizen. EUROMIL particularly calls for recognition of the right of servicemen and -women to form and join trade unions and independent associations and for their inclusion in a regular social dialogue by the authorities.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges, including for the armed forces. Since the beginning of this unprecedented health crisis, EUROMIL has been closely monitoring the role of European armed forces in fighting the virus and the overall support they provided to civilian authorities and the population. In almost all countries, armed forces and their members provided logistical and medical support to the authorities. Among others, they were tasked to transport medical supplies, set up field hospitals, distribute personal protective equipment and provide medical equipment and staff. Additionally, in some countries military personnel were requested to enforce lockdown measures or had other tasks such as disinfecting public places, conducting testing, or transporting dead bodies.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, members of the armed forces faced particular challenges, including shortages of protective equipment and medical teams, a lack of health-related data, long working hours and absence of work-life balance, no compensation and recognition of COVID-19 as an occupational disease, cancellation of trainings affecting preparedness, no training or preparation for the requested tasks, human rights infringements and lack of social dialogue. Mental pressure was particularly high in this context.

EUROMIL and its member associations acknowledge that in times of crisis, armed forces and their members must be engaged in supporting the population. However, they call for protection of those who protect! While some European armed forces are no longer formally engaged in the fight against COVID-19, others are still actively providing support to civilian authorities and their personnel do nonetheless not receive appropriate care or support. This has a negative impact on their moral and motivation which consequently affects operational readiness. As the pandemic is nowadays back in Europe, EUROMIL recalls that the military cannot function

¹ As adopted by the 122nd Presidium Meeting in October 2020.



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without its human capital and insists that taking all measures to protect and support the defence personnel is vital for our collective security. Relevant care will impact motivation and readiness if soldiers are aware that they and their family will be taken good care of.

Unfortunately, only a few countries already conducted a review or made publicly available lessons learned from their armed forces' engagement in the COVID-19 crisis. Some of them continuously adapted their mission. However, EUROMIL believes it is high time to draw clear lessons from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the view of making improvements to the armed forces and get prepared for its subsequent waves or future pandemics.

Therefore, in the face of the resurgence of the virus, EUROMIL calls on political and military authorities to respect their duty of care towards military personnel while at the same time ensuring the good functioning of their armed forces in times of crisis and beyond. The organisation particularly calls on international organisations and states:

1. **To respect the fundamental rights of armed forces personnel.** In times of crisis, states should not use the context (state of emergency or similar) as an excuse to undermine or attack the human rights and fundamental freedoms of military personnel.
2. **To grant military personnel the right to freedom of association and to strengthen dialogue with staff representatives.** In these challenging times, the right to freedom of association plays a central role in protecting the living and working conditions of armed forces members, such as social protection, remuneration, rest periods and working time arrangements. It is therefore of utmost importance to keep social dialogue ongoing, where it exists, and to pursue consultations with professional military associations and trade unions. Countries where armed forces best managed the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic were countries where social dialogue is in place and where military personnel are able to make their voice heard and discuss or negotiate their social and working conditions. However, this should not only take place at central but also at local level, in the units. Authorities need to discuss and agree about what it means for members of the armed forces to work in the context of a pandemic at local level. Communication is key. Trade union rights must therefore absolutely be respected and EUROMIL urges countries that started discussions on opening the right to freedom of association to military personnel to go forward in their projects.
3. **To allow military personnel to fully enjoy their right to health, both physical and mental health, and increase legislation, policies, actions and investments in this area.** The health of all workers must be safeguarded at their workplace. It is therefore essential **to ensure that military personnel have the right to access preventive healthcare as well as treatment during a health crisis and beyond.** During a

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pandemic, exposure and transmission of the virus to or from armed forces must absolutely be reduced. It is thus necessary to adopt an effective testing system in the armed forces and provide the necessary protective equipment to the staff, particularly for those sent to the frontline to support public health services and other ones. Military personnel should have enough protective equipment at their permanent disposal, including face masks, gloves, disinfectant, and goggles and clear guidelines on how to use them. Protective measures should be provided by the employer. Further efforts should be conducted on preventive healthcare, including vaccination for all personnel at the frontline when vaccines will be available. Personnel at risk because of their age, chronic disease or pregnancy should systematically be redeployed. Vulnerable groups should be protected, and special leave be granted to those in need. For sick personnel, sufficient medical support, in personnel and material, should be made available to treat them. They should also be put in quarantine and treated separately by the armed forces. Self-isolation for those possibly contaminated must be foreseen. A structural solution becomes urgent in countries where armed forces are confronted to shortages of doctors and nurses, and especially where members of the armed forces do exclusively have access to military healthcare systems. Furthermore, it is particularly needed **to increase investments and better access to mental health services in the armed forces**. EUROMIL highlights that mental health is a critical issue in the military. It believes that psychological support should absolutely be given to armed forces personnel who have been designated for carrying out unusual tasks without having a specific preparation during the COVID-19 crisis. The tasks they had to carry out may have an impact on their mental health during but also after these special assignments. During the first wave of COVID-19, some countries have already shown examples of best practice by psychologically accompanying their staff with physical meeting, phone lines or stress management tools. Support teams are thus needed for soldiers and their families. These may include psychologists, but also chaplains or other persons of trust.

4. **To respect the right of military personnel to have access to relevant information.** When a sanitary crisis occurs, transparency and communication are important. Military personnel should have access to data and information about the health condition of the staff and the environment in which they needed to operate. Data on exposure, infection cases or death due to COVID-19 in the military should be made public.
5. **To respect safe and healthy working conditions for military personnel at all time.** EUROMIL underlines that military personnel should be treated as "Citizens in Uniform" and therefore be protected under the same conditions as any other worker. Authorities should respect the rights of soldiers as regards occupational risks, health and safety measures. EUROMIL thus recommends **to adopt a clear and binding definition of "frontline workers"** to ensure that military personnel always falls within that category and are equally protected to health and other workers who



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are at the forefront to fight the pandemic. Human resources should recruit fundamental rights and social welfare experts and consult with staff representatives. Even in times of crisis, military personnel should enjoy their right **to rest in relation to working time as well as to work-life balance**. Working time should be respected and recognition be given to family life. As a matter of work-life balance, military personnel should not be kept in barracks or sent away far from their families. **Telework, where possible, or shift work should be encouraged** and regulated by negotiations. In times of pandemic, military personnel should be allowed to work as much as possible from home, unless presence at the workplace is necessary. Should this be the case, rotating shift work should be organised to reduce the number of personnel present at the workplace and contain the spread of the disease. Efforts to reduce the mobility of personnel across cities and regions should be made. For the personnel to quickly adapt to an evolving situation, preparedness and coordination are essential. Moreover, states should **ensure safe and healthy accommodation and infrastructures to their military personnel**. Investments in infrastructures and decent accommodation are needed. Military infrastructures should in overall be upgraded and social distancing as well as hygiene (sufficient disinfection) ensured in military compounds, including refectories, sanitary facilities and dormitories. Specific measures to protect the personnel should be adopted in environment where social distancing is being made difficult, as for instance navy ships. Military vehicles of the personnel performing services should equally be properly disinfected. Guidance on hygiene, social distancing and the use of protective equipment should be made available at all time, together with the necessary material. **Compensation schemes and recognition COVID-19 as an occupational disease should be made available for military personnel**. Frontline workers, including military and police personnel, who have been deployed in the fight against COVID-19, and who develop the disease as a result of their deployment, should have the right to seek compensation for an occupational disease.

6. **To provide sufficient training, preparation and equipment for military personnel** dealing with public health crises. In most countries, non-medical personnel are generally not trained or prepared for performing tasks they are requested to undertake in support of civilian authorities. However, as this type of crisis is likely to occur in the future, sufficient preparation and equipment should be made available for this type of circumstances.
7. **To strengthen national coordination at all levels**. Efficient structures for command and control with national coordination mechanisms should be established. A close operational cooperation at all level is key. For instance, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, some countries established specific task forces with new HQs to respond to the crisis, which was the basis for good command and staffing work. This resulted in well-coordinated, joint all arms effort and a large volume of supporting directions



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and material for soldiers use. These coordination structures should include experts in various fields. In addition, pandemic plans and protocols must be drawn up with an approach that mitigates as much as possible the impact of such a crisis on readiness and recruitment. Moreover, states should **invest in Information Technology** and particularly online education, training, and teleworking when social distancing is necessary. IT systems can solve several challenges including recruitment, education, training and physical presence in times of crisis. Generally speaking, armed forces should adopt a more assertive stance in the event of such a crisis by approaching the authorities proactively and explain how and with what it can support society. They should better organise themselves by having appropriate medical equipment, establishing permanent military medical crisis cells within the defence staff, strengthening joint cooperation and training between the military and civilian medical personnel and organise “pandemic trainings” as an integral part of the military readiness activities.

8. **To strengthen European defence cooperation**, including regional cooperation initiatives, to pool human and financial resources to efficiently respond and increase preparedness to pandemics. As diseases do not stop at borders, a genuine co-operation and co-ordination of armed forces will be beneficial for the wellbeing and health of every European citizen. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely deteriorate our security environment in the years to come, which only increases the need for stronger European security and defence. **EU-NATO and other regional security partnerships should thus be reinforced** to ensure synergy in their responses to the present and future crises. Finally, with this in mind, it is important **to preserve defence spending targets**, once the pandemic is over, to allow armed forces to respond to future crises and deliver on expectations in the defence sector.