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Sergeant-Major António Lima Coelho, President of the National Association of Sergeants (ANS) since 2000, with a two-term break (between 2015 and 2018), is a member of the IASFA Advisory Board, as a representative of ANS. In the year in which he will cease his duties as President of the Association, he spoke to InfoIASFA about several aspects that he considers relevant for the improvement of military conditions.

How did ANS come about and what is its mission?

The National Association of Sergeants was created in 1989. It came into being because sergeants realized that, in addition to not having a professional status, because until 1990 only officers of the Armed Forces had professional status and that in addition to sergeants needing a professional status to which they also fit, they also realized that they needed a voice to represent them. We needed something to represent us in socio-professional terms, because even at the level of the military hierarchy, sergeants and enlisted men were not properly heard. And, naturally, as a highly hierarchical organization, issues were always and exclusively dealt with by officers. As a result of the events of April 25, our Navy comrades, based on their experience in other countries and contact with other realities, particularly in Europe, realized that there were many countries, and some of them were even presented to us as references, that had already had associations and, in some cases, even military unions for many, many years. When our Navy comrades visited these countries, they were welcomed by these organizations and invited to participate in various events. Thus, in 1976, right after April 25, the Navy Sergeant's Club was born, precisely because of this reality. Conversations and discussions began to emerge within the Club about the need for a representative mechanism. A date was needed to bring together the sergeants and January 31st was found as the date to bring the sergeants together, and we began to celebrate January 31st, the first celebration of which was in 1978, which was even subject to persecution and prohibitions, who knows why... And throughout these celebrations it was realized that more was needed. The lunch to celebrate January 31st was no longer enough. At the end of the 80s, a pro-statute committee was established, now including military sergeants from the three branches. And so, in the celebration of January 31, 1989, it was decided to hold a large national meeting of sergeants and on April 1, 1989, at the Sacavenense Pavilion, which no longer exists, this meeting was held where it was decided

to create the National Association of Sergeants, which saw its formalization in June 1989, but the creation date, so to speak, is April 1, 1989.

Have they stopped celebrating January 31st?

No, quite the opposite. January 31st is an emblematic date for us and, for some reason, the proposal to recognise January 31st as National Sergeant's Day continues to be rejected every time it is presented in the Assembly of the Republic. We want January 31st to be formally recognised and it is unclear why the date that was, in fact, the precursor movement of the regime we serve today: the Republic, is not recognised. The first attempt to establish the Republic was on January 31st, 1891, in Porto, led essentially by sergeants and this initiative was unfortunately defeated. For the first time, "A Portuguesa" was sung, which was banned. And the newspaper "O Sargento" was also closed and banned. On the centenary of January 31st, in 1991, we acquired the right to the title and registration of the newspaper "O Sargento", which is still our official organ. In 1910, "A Portuguesa" was sung again and this time it effectively became our National Anthem. Therefore, the National Association of Sergeants was created for all of these reasons: the need for a professional status and the need to have a representative voice. The first years were very difficult, with a lot of disciplinary persecution and many punishments for the first leaders. We continued to struggle to improve these conditions until finally, in 2001, the Law on Professional Associations of Military Personnel was recognized in Parliament, enshrined in law, approved unanimously in the Assembly of the Republic, which is not very common in our legislative reality. And from then on, the associations began to be recognized socio-professionally, with one condition: active military personnel cannot join the same association. There must be an Association of Officers, an Association of Sergeants and an Association of Enlisted Personnel. In reserve and retired personnel can join the same association. Our mission is essentially to seek to improve the socio-professional conditions of sergeants and their families. Obviously, we have faced many difficulties, because although the law stipulates that legally constituted associations have the right to join advisory boards, study committees, working groups, etc., this has rarely happened, and this "rarely" is very rare indeed! It is in the law, however, that neither military leaders, when they set up working groups, nor the political power, when they set them up, call on associations to join these groups. Unfortunately, to our painful reality, they know how to use paragraph b) of the same law. Because paragraph a) says that we have the right to join and paragraph b) says that we must be consulted on statutory matters, etc. Invariably, what appears in the

preamble of the laws is "under paragraph b) of article 2 of Organic Law No. 03/2001, military associations were consulted".

And are they heard?

This is an understatement, because they often send us diplomas two or three days in advance, asking us to comment on them, and then what is published is invariably exactly the same as what was already in the draft. In other words, our proposals are rarely incorporated, but they can say that the associations were consulted. What is conveyed to the ordinary citizen and to our military comrades is a profoundly mistaken idea, because it seems that we were consulted, that we participated and even agreed with what is proposed, which is clearly false. Our association is 35 years old. When it was created, some said that it was nothing more than a group of adventurers and that they did not expect it to last more than six months. Thirty-five years later, here we are and it is important that it exists. We are currently integrated into a European organization of military associations and unions, EUROMIL, which has existed since 1972. It currently brings together organizations from 23 European countries. It is an organization that deeply defends social rights and the professional rights of military professionals. It has nothing to do with operational aspects, but it has been a school of life, because it allows us to understand that defending the fundamental rights of citizens and citizens in uniform is possible, desirable and advantageous. Because we, the military, are called upon to defend the rights of countless citizens throughout the world. And the rights of others will be better defended by those who know what rights they are going to defend and those who have the opportunity to experience those same rights.

It is often said that military personnel cannot demonstrate. This is false. Article 31 of the national defence law was amended in 2001, when the right to form professional associations was recognised, and military personnel, currently on active duty, have the right to freedom of expression, the right to assembly, the right to demonstrate, the right to collective petition, even the right to appeal to the ombudsman, the right to passive voting rights, obviously with the restrictions imposed by law and the Constitution. But restrictions are not prohibitions, as some leaders sometimes try to make out in the media. We have these rights and we do not give them up. Why? We were already citizens when we decided to wear a uniform one day, and in doing so, we did not give up being citizens. On the contrary, we assumed a more responsible position, ready to, at the limit and if necessary, give our lives so that other citizens do not lose their rights duly protected. Now, anyone who does

not want to understand this and sees military personnel as lesser citizens, does not understand what it means to be a military person.

In short, this is the existence of our association, despite all the difficulties it has faced, because for many years associations were seen as something dangerous, a foreign body within the institution. Associations are not a foreign body. They are a fundamental mechanism for improving the Armed Forces themselves. This is how it is throughout Europe.

You mentioned military unions earlier, but they don't exist in Portugal. What would be the big difference between having a military union instead of an association?

I will give you a concrete example. In the social dialogue in our country, the government is represented at the head of the table. The employers' confederations are not represented by the military leaders. The workers' confederations are not represented by the professional associations, but it is in the social dialogue that the salaries, social conditions, etc. that will be applied to us are decided. In other words, there are others who are discussing on our behalf what will be applied to us. Others know little about the specific nature of the military condition. Well, we have concrete examples. Recently, I was with the President of the Danish Sergeants' and Enlisted Men's Union, Jesper Hansen, at a EUROMIL meeting in Brussels, and he had to leave because he was called by the Danish government to discuss and negotiate the salaries and social conditions of the Danish military. This is a completely different reality from Portugal. A few years ago, we held a Congress in Sweden and then, at the opening of the Congress, the President of EUROMIL opened the event and there was always a guest entity from the host country, and the guest in Sweden was the Swedish Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Armed Forces of Sweden. A General in uniform who, after welcoming the delegates from the various associations and unions, told us "do a good job defending your representatives, because I am a member of my union and when they negotiate my salary, I will ask them what they negotiated for me". During the interval, I had the opportunity to ask the General if these issues were not discussed among themselves at the meetings of military chiefs, which take place periodically throughout Europe, and he was very surprised when I asked where I was from, because he stressed that he had good friends in Portugal, and he highlighted two names who, I remember well, were clearly against anything that had to do with associations. Many of our leaders when they go to these international summits are very open and very modern, but then here at home that is not the reality we live in.

What are the pillars of unionism according to the law? Legal representation of members. Professional associations do not have this capacity. We want to work towards a legislative change so that we can defend our members in litigation. What we have managed to do is establish a protocol with law firms in which the first consultation is supported by us and then it is a lawyer/client relationship. We cannot go to court to defend our members, and this is a fundamental part. This is one of the pillars of unionism: legal representation of members. Another is collective bargaining in the context of social concertation, with links, a condition that we also do not have. And the third pillar, ultimately, is the right to industrial action, the so-called strike. But this is the last pillar, which in a military institution does not make sense. But when we talk about unions, what immediately comes to mind? The strike. The Swedish military union, which has existed for over 100 years, as well as the Dutch, Danish and Belgian unions, which have had unions for many years. There are military unions that have given up the right to strike because they themselves understand that, in times of peace and otherwise, it makes no sense for an institution with the characteristics of a military institution to go on strike, but they have not given up what the European Social Charter provides for in terms of representation and negotiation. It is this change in mentality that we have been trying to achieve for Portuguese professional associations for many years. I hope and wish that, in my lifetime, I will be able to see this become a reality for Portuguese military personnel.

As a representative of ANS on the IASFA Advisory Board, what is your assessment of the Institute's work in recent years?

I must say that in recent years we have seen more positive work, and I do not wish to belittle those who preceded him, but there were a number of difficulties that were experienced and I can say this because long before there was an Advisory Board with this figure, and recognised by law as it is today, Admiral Sarmento Gouveia was Chairman of the IASFA Board of Directors, many years ago, when, for the first time, he decided to call the associations to a Board meeting and it was a shock for the board members themselves and for the directors of the various Social Support Centres (CAS), when they saw leaders of the associations at the same meeting. And I was present at that meeting, with my colleague who was the Chairman of the Board, whom I replaced, and we both went to that meeting. Unfortunately, it had no practical consequences, until the law was changed and we became an integral part of the Advisory Board. Now, my assessment of these last few years, despite all the difficulties, is always positive because our presence on the Advisory Board is essential to convey what the beneficiaries send us, but also to bring information from there

to pass on to the beneficiaries. I would like this to be even more effective, but it can always be improved. Now, in fact, I believe that it is extremely important to participate and that the assessment of these last few years, particularly with the effort to regularize the accounts that has been made, but there are many matters that I believe are giving the Institute a wrong image. Understanding the intentions, we cannot forget that this is an institute whose primary mission is complementary social action. This has been subverted. In fact, I had the opportunity to say so in writing, this thing about tenders for houses that need work and already cost 10 thousand euros. Now, if someone has 10 thousand euros available, that is not someone who necessarily needs social support. We are seeing the opposite of the mission. At times, it is the beneficiary supporting the Institute that should be benefiting the beneficiaries. There is a reversal of the mission here and we are entering the business phase, and this is worrying. IASFA should not be a source of business, but an Institute for complementary social action, supporting beneficiaries, especially because those who carry out such work will remain there for many more years. The objective of the support homes is for them to be temporary support for a limited time, not 10 or 20 years. This subverts the image and mission of IASFA and gives many beneficiaries a completely wrong idea of what IASFA should be. On the other hand, there is still work to be done. How many beneficiaries are occupying IASFA residences? Under what conditions? Are the beneficiaries still there? Year after year this is put on the table and there are no answers. because we know that there are those who have been enjoying conditions for a long time that many others lack.

What is your assessment of the functioning of the Advisory Board? Do you consider that the current composition of the Advisory Board, as provided for in the legislation, is adequate for its objectives?

It is not. I believe that the functioning of the Advisory Board is limited. It is clearly short-lived that, when there is one meeting per year, it is only necessary. It makes no sense. It is clearly short-lived that most of the time the advisors are called, not to deliberate or discuss what is intended to be done, but to be informed about what has already been done, and sometimes two or three years late, because the activity reports, etc., do not arrive on time or are delivered very late. It is not possible to read all of them. In short, the functioning of the Advisory Board is not in a way that serves the interests of the beneficiaries and the frequency of the meetings is not useful in any way. I hope that General Morgado Baptista understands the need to convene advisory boards more frequently and whenever matters are at stake in which it is important to hear the advisors. This is without wanting to interfere,

of course, with the mission of the members of the Board of Directors, but the Advisory Board cannot exist only on paper and only to say that they were heard once a year.

In your opinion, how often should the Advisory Board meet?

I think that it would not be bad to do so at least once every four months, that is, three times a year, or extraordinarily, whenever there are matters under discussion, matters so serious or so profound that they may have an impact on the service or the provision of assistance to beneficiaries. I think that this is important so that we are not confronted with things that have already been decided. There is nothing like discussing things in the proper place, because often, in the discussion, it can shed light even on those who may have the wrong or right idea and who later realize that perhaps it is not the best path, but that there must be discussion. On the other hand, the constitution gives the mistaken idea that the Minister of Defense has much more privileged information. Why should the Ministry have two representatives on this Council? The Ministry is first represented by the Chairman of the Board of Directors, whom it appointed. He is the first representative of the Ministry. Not content with that, it also sends two more emissaries, that is, the Ministry indirectly or directly has three representatives on the Advisory Council. This jeopardizes any vote that might be taken, because in most cases, the representatives of the branches follow the Ministry's decision. On the other hand, the professional associations, of which there are three, plus ASMIR, which, although not a socio-professional association, as the law requires, is also a full representative, are always in the minority. On the other hand, I think that there is a group that should be part of the Council, as a guest or as it sees fit, which is the Armed Forces Disabled Association, which has a very large influence on the IASFA, because there is a significant expenditure that is already being incurred. The composition of the Council is not equitable.

How do you classify the relationship between IASFA and ANS?

I am biased, because in addition to having worked there, the bonds of friendship that have linked me to the last presidents of the Board of Directors make things very close. I have a deep respect for General Fialho da Rosa, who I think was a person who had a hard time there. And with General Serafino, the friendship and respect that binds us also allowed for a closer relationship, but this is in personal terms. In institutional terms, the relationship between IASFA and ANS is short-lived. Why? Because just as it is short in terms of the functioning of the Advisory Board, it is also short in terms of consultation with the representative associations. In other words, if the Advisory Board were to meet more

frequently, IASFA's relationship with the associations would also be closer, more immediate and more frequent. I would like to recall the round table held on October 11, 2022, at the CAS Oeiras, which was very interesting and where very important issues were discussed. which later did not materialize much of that, but where a fundamental question was raised: ADM is a foreign body within IASFA. ADM subverts IASFA's primary mission. ADM must leave IASFA. ADM should never have entered IASFA.

What areas of IASFA's Complementary Social Action would you like to see further developed?

There is a major concern about the degradation of heritage, and we have proposed this in several meetings of the Advisory Board and the response is that this requires changes to the legislation. Well, let it be changed. We have seen legislation being changed over the years on so many other issues, why not this? I am referring to the fact that protocols can be established with the branches of the Armed Forces and the IASFA for the beneficial use, the possible use of the IASFA property, because our comrades often express the concern that, given the military condition of mobility, the military have to be available to go anywhere, for the mission, and often they are placed in areas where there is no such place, although the statutes of the Armed Forces military personnel state that the deployed military personnel have the right to adequate housing for themselves and their families, but the reality is different. So, protocols between the Branches and IASFA for the use of much of the IASFA property that is vacant or in a state of great degradation, and that protocols be drawn up for the use of these spaces so that the military personnel have the possibility of having a house, punctually and temporarily, and not for 10, 20 or 30 years, as is unfortunately being seen. If there is a protocol that allows the branches to collaborate in the recovery, the Ministry, the Branches and IASFA will collaborate in the recovery of all this to provide better conditions for the military personnel. Now, the Air Force, for example, has already begun the recovery of the residential neighborhood in Beja. If this is possible in that residential neighborhood, it must be possible among the Branches to make this type of improvement in many other places. Admiral Gouveia e Melo came to announce a naval village. Well, forget about the naval village and help to recover the IASFA property for the Navy personnel who need it. In other words, there are many ways in which we can improve this and establish this relationship that should never have ceased to exist between the Branches and the IASFA. Because, sometimes, and this I would like to make clear, many years ago I said this and I said it to successive IASFA leaders: for a long time, the IASFA was seen as a career development mechanism, because at the time, going to the IASFA gave you a vacancy in the

branch. So, comrades from various ranks were sent to the IASFA to open vacancies in the Branches, regardless of the skills of those comrades. The IASFA is not a career development mechanism and cannot be seen that way. The Branches must accept that the IASFA is also theirs and that it needs military personnel capable of performing the necessary functions there so that the IASFA can carry out its missions. Not to see this is to help move towards the end of the IASFA. IASFA is a social work that must continue and one of the areas of complementary social action that I would like to see further developed is effectively the support for the lack of temporary housing. Not from a business perspective, as is happening, but from the perspective of temporary social support for displaced military personnel, and support for young people, because educational support was also a very important fundamental mechanism.

Do you think there is room for deeper cooperation between ANS and IASFA in some areas?

Yes, without a doubt. In all areas. The ANS has maintained this position in all areas where cooperation is necessary. Currently, we are more concerned about one area where we can play a supporting role in the work of the IASFA, which is with the youngest. Because if those of my generation and the generations that followed already questioned what the IASFA is, the youngest have a completely wrong idea about it and they have an even more wrong idea when they do not get the answer exactly where they should: in daycare centers, in school support, etc. That is exactly where it is. The youngest do not feel the need to turn to the IASFA. Also because the law also dictated it, perhaps to protect the banks, in what the IASFA could do: limited financial loans with social conditions. For young couples starting out in life, support to buy a household appliance or something else is essential, and without high interest rates and without major conditions. Now, these types of support should be resumed. The legislation removed this, so let's change the legislation again. What do we want to do? We want to support the younger generation as well as the older generation, of course. It seems that in this context, the association can and should help to create a good image among the young, but for this, IASFA also has to help. It has to open up these mechanisms. On the other hand, there is also an aspect that we believe we can help with. The residences for the elderly cannot continue to operate according to the logic of the military hierarchy. The residences cannot be for generals, officers, sergeants or enlisted men. They must be for military personnel. We do not live in the time of colonial wars. The social reality today is completely different. Continuing to provide support to the elderly according to the logic of the military hierarchy contributes to bringing to IASFA the idea that

first come the officers, then the sergeants and the enlisted men have almost nothing. This cannot be. The Armed Forces Social Welfare Institute must always be at the service of the Armed Forces, because if we follow the hierarchical logic, those with the most economic power will continue to prevail over those who do not. Therefore, people must understand that what is at stake is social support for military personnel. And we are all military personnel. I am very proud to serve my country as a military man. I do not consider myself more military than anyone else, but I find it very difficult to believe that anyone considers themselves more military than me. The day I swore allegiance to the flag, I made the same commitment as a soldier or a general, therefore, our commitment to the country is the same and our responsibility towards what is or was our mission must be the same. Social support must exist for those who serve and have served the country, regardless of the rank in which they did so.