

Major General Sean Brennan has overall responsibility for all Defence Forces operational issues both domestically and overseas. While certain on-island roles have changed since the Good Friday Agreement, the Defence Forces participation globally in a multiplicity of locations and functions has evolved and expanded particularly over the past five years. Here Maj. Gen. Brennan discusses these issues with SIGNAL Magazine.



Could you give a brief analysis of the Defence Forces' current overseas deployments?

"In October 2003 the Defence Forces had only one real mission, which was in Kosovo where we had a Transport Company. It had been decided to replace the Transport Company with an Infantry Company Group and we were in the process of completing that change when the Irish Government was requested to supply troops to the UN in Liberia (UNMIL). So, we were committed to Kosovo and we were asked by the UN what assistance could we contribute to UNMIL. The Director of Operations at the time, Colonel Gerry McNamara, headed a Recce group to assess the situation. Arising from this reconnaissance it was decided to provide an Infantry Battalion (Bn) of 440 soldiers to UNMIL as the Quick Reaction Force (QRF). During the reconnaissance we identified a suitable base for our troops in the capital city, Monrovia. Within eight weeks we had our troops deployed and fully operational in theatre. In February 2004, the Irish Battalion was augmented by a Swedish element to form the Irish led



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QRF based in Monrovia with a remit to operate throughout the whole of Liberia. In Kosovo (KFOR) the already tense situation further deteriorated in March of this year and our troops acquitted themselves in an exemplary manner in a very difficult situation. Plans for a review of our contribution to KFOR were put on hold and we continue there now as part of a Finnish/Irish Task Force based in Camp Clarke, as part of the Multinational Brigade Centre (MNB(C)).

In addition to UNMIL and KFOR, the European Union is about to launch its second mission in Bosnia (Operation ALTHEA). The Defence Forces will make a significant contribution to this operation. Our troops will be based in Sarajevo and Tuzla as part of Multinational Brigade North East (MNB(NE)). The lead nation for this Brigade will be Finland. Our experience with the Finns in Kosovo and the Swedes in Liberia has been outstanding in terms of doctrine, interoperability, multinational operations and equipment.

In addition to that we have officers, NCO's and soldiers with UNIFIL in Lebanon, UNTSO in the Middle-East, UNFICYP in Cyprus, ISAF in Afghanistan, in Western Sahara, Georgia and various other locations throughout the world.

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develop and confirm our expertise, training and procedures and are vital for our interoperability.

The Defence Forces spent years in UNIFIL. In present times the trend has been for contributing nations to spend shorter periods on missions abroad, our own contribution to UNTAET (East Timor) and UNMEE (Eritrea) confirm this trend. In more difficult missions such as UNMIL, the wear and tear on equipment, vehicles and resources is very significant and shorter term missions are more appropriate. More emphasis is now being placed on rapid reaction and deployability and such operations carry heavy overloads in terms of planning, logistical support, training and development. So the requirement now may well be for more at short notice, more rapidly, and hitting the ground running. Of course without the expertise of our soldiers none of this would be possible.

Do you believe this rapid development dovetails with the development of a cohesive pan-European defence strategy?

The Helsinki Headline Goal Catalogue of Forces and the requirement for the European Union to be able to conduct crises management operations have been under consideration for the last three years. The initial operational capability (IOC) was declared at Laeken, during the

Belgian Presidency in 2001. The first military operation was the operation in Bunia, Congo in 2003. The ability to respond rapidly was identified as a key element for future operations, both for EU and NATO. This does not mean that all future operations will be undertaken by Rapid Response Forces of battalion size but it does mean that there will be a capability available which might be used in certain operational situations, perhaps as a precursor or a spearhead to a follow on force. At present there is much discussion in the EU on Rapid Reaction Forces, the Government recently agreed to have a study carried out in relation to the Defence Forces participation in a European Rapid Response Force due to become operational from 2007 onwards. In summary, the European Union is developing capabilities to respond with the appropriate force to the full range of Petersberg Tasks.



Lieutenant (rank correct at time of photo) Ed Holland on a hillside near the village of Slovinje, Kosovo. December 2003.

Do you think that the UN, on an international level, still has the respect and standing it needs to attract the world-class peacekeepers?

I think that the recent history of the conflict in Iraq and the decision that was taken by the Americans and the British to go ahead more or less on a unilateral basis, without a UN Security Council resolution, has shown the importance of having a Security Council resolution. It is important in the sense that you have consensus, you have support and you have a better approach to a situation like Iraq. I think events in Iraq have demonstrated the need for UN authorisation. The UN is the recognised world body and is accepted as such. Ireland supports the UN.

How do you feel the Defence Forces are poised to take on the challenge of United Nations Chapter Seven

peace enforcement missions as well as NATO-led missions?

I think there's been a dramatic culture change within the Defence Forces in the last five or six years. Groups going overseas now will spend up to a year in training before they go. That has led to very significant changes in the way we train, the demands that we make upon our personnel and also in the realism of the training that we do before we depart overseas on such missions. That's reflected in a tangible way in the performance of our troops and last March in Kosovo is an example of the breadth and depth of pre-deployment training that those soldiers had done before they left Ireland. The equipment that we have for our soldiers is now world-class and there has been an organisational culture change with much more focus on our training, capabilities and professionalism, which allows us to perform a wide range of tasks.

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Irish troops on observation with the UN in Southern Lebanon in 2001.

It's surely a huge motivation for a young officer or NCO or soldier to know that they can go somewhere like Liberia and face professional challenges?

"You're absolutely right. In the European context at the moment, people are talking about expeditionary forces and the ability to react quickly – as I've said, to nip something in the bud and to get boots on the ground as quickly as possible. I think future operations will require the full range of capabilities including a rapid reaction capability. For young soldiers the opportunities for overseas service seem to be increasing rather than diminishing. Liberia was a challenge, the situation was very serious, the threat real, and the challenge in terms of remoteness, the environment, infrastructure and climate, immense, I am proud to say that our soldiers rose to the challenge and responded in the way we have come to expect – in an exemplary manner. You mentioned the range of activities up to Chapter Seven Peace Enforcement; we train for all eventualities. Thankfully in Liberia the frequent use of force has not been required – but there's a reason for this. We would see ourselves as a quick-reaction

force in Liberia and we're the people that go to a given flashpoint to stabilise the situation. We always go in sufficient numbers and in sufficient strength to meet the challenge. That's very important: the safety of our troops on the ground is paramount, and we ensure their safety with our training, by the measures that we take to protect them in terms of the equipment they use, the vehicles they use and the weapons that we give them.

On the other side of that coin the Defence Forces is part of an operation in Kosovo which requires troops to portray a low aggressive profile. Do you think overseas operations can be different to what a young officer would expect?

It's interesting if you look at the diversity of the operations we have been involved in. For instance, go back three years to when we were still involved in East Timor (UNTAET), in the jungles in Southeast Asia. Now we're in the jungles in West Africa. Two years ago we were in the desert-like conditions of Eritrea. We're in the Balkans. We're still in Cyprus. So there's a wide range of types of terrain and climate you can expect to operate in. I think our

training is applicable to all missions. Our time in the Lebanon was more or less a static position, whereas in Kosovo it's a more mobile situation, with very little feet on the ground. Similarly, the situation in other missions will dictate the type of activity that you will be involved in. The operational situation will dictate the response required, as the situations improve the response will be tailored to meet the situation.

The Defence Forces is operating abroad under two different structures: the NATO one in Kosovo and the UN one in Liberia. Which structure is preferable and benefits the Defence Forces long-term goals for what it will be doing overseas?

"We have a stand-by arrangement agreement with the United Nations, called UNSAS, and Ireland has always committed troops to the UN whenever we have been called upon, dependant on our capacity to do so. At the same time we are committed to the EU to the Helsinki Headline Goals (HHG). Our missions in Kosovo and Bosnia are UN-mandated NATO operations, and shortly the mission in SFOR (Bosnia) will become a UN mandated EU mission. The



Irish troops on patrol in a Gypsy (Askali) village in Kosovo.

troop contributors for UN, EU or NATO operations may be EU members, NATO members or third countries. I don't think there is any preference; I just think that we must ensure that our training and our equipment are to the highest international standards.

In reference to the triple-lock, there was criticism of Ireland in some quarters when the Defence Forces was unable to participate in the Macedonia deployment as the triple-lock requirement was not satisfied?

Remember, we're not the only ones who have these national caveats. Last March in Kosovo the German troops weren't allowed operate outside their own area. Even in terms of deployment of troops overseas every nation has its own legislative and authorisation processes to go through and we're no different. If the mission is such that it warrants the provision of Irish troops then I have no doubt that the decision can be made at very short notice to send troops wherever they are required.

At present the Defence Forces does not have a full Irish battalion

deployed overseas. What is your view on the necessity of an overseas battalion deployment for the Defence Forces?

We had a Battalion in the Lebanon for a long period, around 550 to 600 troops. If you compare the force that's in Liberia today, which has 22 APCs, six other armoured vehicles and much more

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firepower, there is no comparison between the group in Liberia and the group that served in the Lebanon. The numbers in such a unit doesn't necessarily reflect the overall capability that the unit has.

What about the provision of medical care to the members of the Defence Forces when serving overseas?

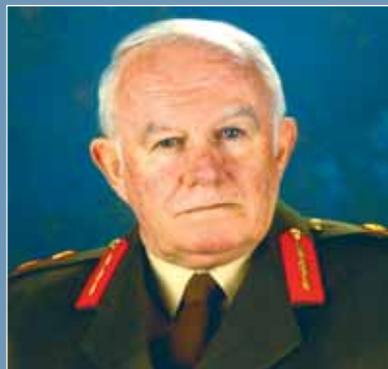
In Liberia we have our own Level 1 medical facility as well as access to a Level 3 field hospital facility operated by the Jordanians. In addition to that we have 24-hour a day Medevac capability by aircraft to Ghana to a Level 4 hospital, or alternatively straight back to Dublin. Additionally, early in the UNMIL operation we had the 'Rotterdam' hospital ship from Holland whilst the facilities in Monrovia were being developed. In Kosovo we have an agreement regarding the provision of medical care with the American-base hospital in Camp Bondsteel that has been working extremely well.

With regard to the EU. What demands could the proposed EU Battlegroups place on the Defence Forces?

The maximum number that the Irish government will contribute overseas at any particular time is 850 – almost 10% of the Army. If they're committed to the UN then they can't be committed to the EU, and vice-versa. Under the HHG we have committed a pallet of forces up to 850

CAREER RESUME

Maj. Gen. Brennan has served overseas with UNFICYP in Cyprus, UNTSO in the Sinai, UNIMOG in Iran-Iraq and also in the Balkans. In addition he worked with the European Union Monitoring Mission in Sarajevo, with responsibility for all of the Balkans. He spent a year in Iraq in 1989 with the UN interim Iran-Iraq Disengagement Force. He also spent 14 months in Brussels in 2001-2002 helping to set up the EU military staff.



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personnel. Those forces at the moment are deployed in Kosovo, Liberia and elsewhere, so they cannot be deployed under the HHG catalogue at the moment. In the development of the mission in Liberia, we did send out additional troops, engineers, communications, ordnance and transport personnel to help set up the Base and this exceeded the 850, but only on a temporary basis. The EU Rapid Response Force requirement is at present being studied. I

see this a further refinement of the forces nominated in the palette of forces to the Helsinki Headline Goal.

In terms of the Bosnia deployment, which is the first EU-led deployment, it's a very important moment for European military development. Would you like to be able to commit more troops to that?

We are happy that we are making a significant contribution to Op Althea. Bearing in mind our other commitments, our contribution will be about 55 all ranks, located in Sarajevo and Tuzla. Ireland will take the lead role in the Military Police and Verification Teams sphere of influence.

So overall, the Defence Forces has continued to play its role on the international scene, as is evidenced by the various missions we're involved in at the moment. We have been very active in support of the UN. We're active players on the European scene now as well. The White Paper supports that activity in terms of the way forward. As the EU develops, there will obviously be more demands placed upon us and each of those demands will have to be looked at when it arises.

The Good Friday agreement is 6 years old & since then the Defence Forces has been decreased in size by 25%. Do you think it is too much of a burden for the Defence Forces to maintain their Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP) commitments?

ATCP operations are carried out in support of the Gardai. There have been significant reductions in such operations in the last 18 months and these operations are constantly being reviewed. There is no doubt that they present an overhead which impinges on other operations and training. We will continue to support the Gardai as long as the requirement exists and will continue to benefit from the fallout from the Good Friday Agreement.

Is there one particular overseas mission that you could pick to illustrate the Defence Forces at their best, doing what they do best?

I think the mission in East Timor was highly significant because you must

measure these things, in a way, by what other people say about it. East Timor was the first time we operated under command of New Zealand and in the presence of Australians. All the feedback that came from both the Rangers and the Infantry platoons that were sent there was very positive. In the same vein, I think the performance of the troops in Kosovo last March was highly significant.

On a personal level I remember in 1973 at the end of the Yom Kippur war in the Sinai, marking out the Israeli and Egyptian lines and separating and surveying the area. That was one of the memorable things from my point of view.

Looking at the future, do you see a role for UN in Iraq?

It is difficult to foresee how events in Iraq will unfold. It is possible that a UN Mandated Peacekeeping Force might be deployed, in that event the Government will decide on any contribution by the Defence Forces to such a Force.

In reference to operation ALTHEA. One of the low points in European foreign policy was during the Yugoslav war in the 1990s, where legislation trapped UN troops so they weren't able to actually act the way they should have been able to. Do you think Operation Althea brings us back to a point where we can now go in there and make a difference?

The first thing is that the situation in Bosnia now is completely different to what it was. Secondly, what's happening with European Response Forces and the development of European capabilities to some extent is based upon the experience in the Balkans in the 1990s, where the Europeans and the UN were seen to be ineffective and it was only when NATO was brought in that the situation was brought under control. No doubt about it, the situation in Bosnia will be a big challenge for the EU in terms of its high profile status – they have to be seen to succeed and they can't be seen to fail. It's a very important operation from the EU's perspective, a job which they are far better equipped to do now.

