

SIGNAL

Interview with the Taoiseach



In an interview with SIGNAL, the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern TD discusses with Commandant Michael Geraghty many of the issues that are of specific interest to the Defence sector in Ireland.

Arising from over 50 years of experience, the Irish Defence Forces is internationally regarded as amongst the most skilled and successful peacekeepers in the world – so much so that for 10 years we have been training military personnel from all 5 continents at the United Nations Training School, Ireland [UNTSI].

Based on your travels as Taoiseach to some of the global trouble-spots where Defence Forces' officers are deployed, what is your analysis of the performance of the Defence Forces on the international stage?

Since 1958, the Defence Forces have brought great honour on Ireland through their participation in peace support operations all over the world in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the Far East and South America, completing over 55,000 tours of duty with UN led or UN authorised missions.

The Defence Forces committed and dedicated service in overseas

missions reflects well, not alone on the Defence Forces, but on the nation as a whole and contributes to the excellent reputation which Ireland holds among peacekeepers throughout the world. This has been reflected in the compliments I personally have received from world leaders on the contribution our troops have made.

I know from conversations with the Minister for Defence, Willie O'Dea, that he too has heard nothing but praise for our peacekeeping troops from a wide range of senior figures, including Sir Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the President of Liberia and indeed from former UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan when he visited McKee Barracks in 2005.

The Taoiseach alongside Lt Col Adrian Ryan, Deputy General Secretary and Col. Brian O'Keeffe, General Secretary of RACO.

However, participation in peacekeeping operations is not without risk. In this regard we should not forget the 85 members of the Defence Forces who have paid the ultimate price in the cause of peace.

Service with the United Nations demands a wide variety of skills and personal qualities. Patience and diplomacy have become as important and as necessary as the required conventional military skills of the soldier. Throughout the years Irish Defence Forces' personnel worked hard to build up an outstanding reputation as committed, conscientious, professional and humane peacekeepers and have served as ambassadors for Ireland.

2006 marked the 50th anniversary of Irish involvement in UN peacekeeping missions with over 55,000 tours of overseas duty to date. How has this involvement contributed to the development of Irish foreign policy and Ireland's standing internationally?

In December 2005, the Minister for Defence Willie O'Dea organised a series of ceremonies at various venues and Barracks across the country to mark the 50th anniversary of Ireland's admission to membership of the United Nations on December 14th, 1955. Ireland has participated continuously in UN peacekeeping operations since 1958 and next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the Defence Forces involvement in international peace support operations.

Participation in overseas peacekeeping missions is a key element of Ireland's foreign policy and has been an important dimension in meeting Ireland's international obligations as a member of the UN and the EU. Irish foreign policy is directed at supporting cooperative arrangements for collective security through the development of international organisations, especially the United Nations. This approach continues to define Irish priorities within the UN system and Ireland remains willing to play a full role in contributing to the security of Europe and the world.

As well as the extensive involvement of Irish military personnel in United Nations peace support operations, a number of Irish officers have held the most senior and prestigious appointments with several United Nations missions since our involvement first

began. Such appointments bring prestige and honour not only to the Defence Forces but also to the country as a whole and extend Ireland's influence in international relations diplomacy beyond that which might otherwise be the case for a country of our size.

Ireland has also made a significant contribution to observer missions and its personnel are well regarded in this role. The deployment of Defence Forces personnel on observer missions provides Ireland with the opportunity to contribute to a wide number of missions and can contribute in a significant and meaningful way towards the achievement of the objectives of Ireland's foreign policy in a cost effective manner.

The last six years have seen a radical change in Defence Forces international

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involvement; principally the move from UN Chapter VI [peacekeeping] operations to more robust UN Chapter VII [peace-enforcing] operations such as those missions in East Timor, Kosovo, Bosnia and Liberia. For the Defence Forces, this has resulted in a marked increase in the numbers of Defence Forces' officers serving overseas with international organisations such as the UN, EU, OSCE and NATO-PfP. What is the Government's strategy in regard to continuing participation in overseas crisis management operations over the next 5 years?

The nature of peacekeeping support operations is changing from traditional UN led “Blue Hat” missions to regionally-led peace operations with the onus being placed on regional organisations such as the EU, NATO, the African Union [AU] and Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] to assemble peacekeeping troops and manage and organise missions for the purpose of discharging a UN Mandate.

The Defence Forces has shown the

capacity and experience to respond to the changing nature of peace support operations. It has participated effectively in UN-authorized NATO/PfP-led missions in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Afghanistan, as well as in EU-led missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In parallel, Ireland has also continued to participate in UN-led missions in UNIFIL in Lebanon and in UNMIL in Liberia.

Ireland remains fully committed to the UN and to the obligations that membership brings. Ireland is currently contributing 812 Defence Forces personnel to 17 different missions throughout the world. Of this number, 157 are officers and 655 are non-commissioned personnel.

Ireland receives requests from time to time in relation to participation in various missions and these are considered on a case-by-case basis. We have no such requests at present. However, we are currently fairly close to the 850 limit of our sustainable commitments under the UN Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS) and there are no plans at this time to increase the level of our commitment to UNSAS.

Looking to the future, we will complete our withdrawal from the United Nations Mission in Liberia in May 2007 and will take over as Lead Nation in the KFOR Multinational Task Force Centre in August this year for a period of 12 months. We will also be participating in the Nordic battlegroup, which will be on standby for the first six months of 2008, and preparations for this are now in train. The question of further deployments on overseas missions will be looked at in mid-2007 in the context of the available resources.

The White Paper on Defence, 2000, set out the government's 10-year plan for Defence and had as an overarching aim the establishment of a ‘world class’ military organisation.

Does the Government believe that this goal is being achieved?

The White Paper set out to create a well-equipped, well-trained, motivated, flexible and deployable Defence Force. This has been achieved and the skill and



professionalism of our Defence Forces is recognised at home and internationally. The progress made has been vital in preparing us for the changes that have taken place in recent years. The security environment has changed greatly since 2000 with September 11 and other acts of terrorism across the world and as a result of that the nature of our involvement in peace support operations has evolved. The organisational and structural changes, human resource developments, and increased investment recommended in the White Paper have prepared us well for these changes.

The past ten years have seen dramatic re-organisation of the Defence Forces in terms of equipment, manpower, overseas participation and organisational capabilities.

Does the Government regard the Defence Forces as representing good value for money?

In order to maintain a modern Defence Forces capable of discharging the roles assigned by Government, particularly in its overseas obligations, is it envisaged that appropriate capital

investment will continue to meet future modernisation?

The increased investment of recent years together with structural and organisational improvements, have certainly contributed to a more efficient and effective Defence Force. This investment has addressed any shortcomings that had existed. Going forward there will be a greater need for investment to be targeted at enhancing the capability of the Defence Forces. We, in the Government, are committed to maintaining the improvements that have been made so that the Defence Forces can continue to discharge their mandate into the future. This will be done in the context of the investment criteria set out in the White Paper.

In an Irish context, neutrality is generally depicted as two separate concepts; political and/or military alignment or non-alignment.

With the development of European security and defence policy, how does the Government envisage the issue of neutrality developing in the future?

Ireland's participation in the European Security and Defence Policy [ESDP] and in the Petersberg Tasks - "humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking" - has been endorsed and supported directly by the Irish people in the referendum on the Treaty on European Union and the subsequent referenda on the Amsterdam and Nice Treaties.

In the context of the ratification of the Nice Treaty, the Government secured the adoption of the Seville Declarations outlining the parameters of Ireland's participation in ESDP, including maintenance of our traditional policy of military neutrality, the implementation of the 'Triple Lock' and our position on common defence.

The European Union continues to develop its capacity to carry out both military and civilian crisis-management tasks. The ambition of the EU to be able to respond rapidly to emerging crises has and continues to be a key objective of the development of the ESDP - the development of EU Battlegroups is one of the means available to the EU in this regard.

Ireland only participates in EU peace

support operations which have been mandated by the United Nations Security Council. Ireland's ongoing participation in the development of European Security and Defence Policy is fully consistent with our policy of neutrality and our commitment to international peace and security and we will not participate in any initiative which is inconsistent with this position.

Defence Forces participation in overseas crisis management operations must be conducted 'in accordance with the principles of the United Nations' and satisfy our triple-lock obligations.

In this context, how does the Government view the concept of EU military defence in its collective interests?

European Security and Defence Policy is firmly based on the primacy of the United Nations. As the European Security Strategy makes clear "The fundamental framework for international relations is the United Nations Charter. The United Nations Security Council has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security." The UN has, however, increasingly sought the support of regional organisations in assisting in peacekeeping and crisis-management operations. In this context, the European Union is developing its capacities to carry out crisis-management operations in support of the Union's wider foreign policy goals and in support of the United Nations.

The question of a common defence within the EU does not arise for Ireland for a number of reasons. First, there are currently no proposals for common defence within the Union. Second, we are constitutionally prohibited from participating in an EU common defence, with the EU treaties acknowledging the Constitutional positions of Member States on these questions. Finally, all matters relating to security and defence within the Union are subject to unanimity; so Ireland has in effect a 'veto' on any future proposals which would conflict with our traditions or interests.

There has been much debate over recent years on Ireland's agreement to participate in the EU Battlegroups.

How important to foreign policy development is Ireland's involvement in the EU battlegroup strategy?

Ireland has always sought to play a full role in the development and implementation of European Security and Defence Policy, which can contribute effectively to international peace, and security. Moreover, we should be absolutely clear that the tasks, which the EU Battlegroups are designed to carry out, are firmly rooted in the Treaties already approved by the people in successive referenda. The UN has also enthusiastically welcomed the development of the EU Battlegroup concept.

It is important for Ireland and the EU that the Union has the capacity to respond to crisis situations. This capacity will allow the Union to respond to requests from the UN to assist in preventing or overcoming the many problems associated with conflict situations. As such, for Ireland, our participation in EU Battlegroups is a further development in our commitment to the UN and to UN mandated peace support operations.

I welcome the fact that Ireland's first participation in an EU Battlegroup will be alongside likeminded nations with whom we have a longstanding association in UN peacekeeping such as

Sweden, Finland and Norway, as well as Estonia, which was one of the ten newer EU Member States I was proud to welcome into the Union during the Irish Presidency in 2004.

“We are constitutionally prohibited from participating in an EU common defence, with the EU treaties acknowledging the Constitutional positions of Member States on these questions”

The establishment of the independent office of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces was a joint initiative

between the representative associations and management. Do you think that it has had a positive effect not only within the Defence Forces but also on the perception of the Forces?

I think that the establishment of an Office of an Ombudsman for the Defence Forces marked the delivery of this Government's commitment to give members of the Defence Forces access to an independent, statutory civilian Ombudsman.

Like all organisations, the Defence Forces faces its own particular challenges. The careful management and development of people, that most essential resource, is a challenge common to all. So the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces was another step in cultivating a supportive, modern, working environment for the benefit of the members of the Defence Forces and the organisation as a whole.

The appointment of Ms. Paulyn Marrinan Quinn in September 2005 was also most important, particularly in light of her qualifications and experience. While it is still early days, the Office has already secured good visibility and response across the Defence Forces and this is to the benefit of the complainants as well as to improving overall procedures.

There can be no resting on laurels; the Defence Forces must work at maintaining a positive culture in the military environment with its unique demands. I have no doubt that the work of the Ombudsman, in her assessment of complaints, will support this process into the future.