

Ph. +353 (0) 1 8042686/7  
+353 (0) 1 8042689

Fax +353 (0) 1 6779018



Public Relations Section,  
Defence Forces HQ,  
Public Relations Section,  
Parkgate, Infirmary Road,  
Dublin 8,  
Ireland.

Friday, 12 October 2007

Speech by The Minister for Defence, Mr. Willie O'Dea, T.D., at the PDFORRA ADC

Tralee - Wednesday October 10th

Mr. President, Secretary General Department of Defence, Chief of Staff, General Secretary of PDFORRA, distinguished guests and assembled delegates, I would like to thank PDFORRA for inviting me to address your Association's sixteenth Annual Delegate Conference.

This is my fourth address to a PDFORRA ADC. I welcome the opportunity of working with your Association to continue the progress of the last few years. The modernisation of the Defence Forces has been my priority since my appointment as Minister. My objective remains to ensure that we have a modern Defence Force capable of meeting the needs of Government and the public and delivering value for money.

The development and modernisation of the Defence Forces in the past decade is a public sector success. Each of you should be proud of the part you have played in that success. Of course, we must continue to seek to deliver more productivity, value for money and excellence into the future. The Government remains committed to Defence and success will be measured by our ability to meet our commitments at home and on the international stage.

The agreed Programme for Government is a signal of this commitment. It includes

- \* Ensuring that investment in the Defence Forces continues.
- \* A continuation of the ongoing policy of annual recruitment and maintenance of the present establishment. This will enable the Permanent Defence Force to maintain a strength of 10,500 fully trained personnel with an additional provision for up to 350 troops to be in training at any given time.
- \* Ensuring that our troops have the most modern and effective range of protective equipment, weaponry and training available.
- \* The preparation of a second White Paper on Defence for the period 2011- 2020
- \* Development of the Commissioning From the Ranks programme, both for enlisted personnel under 28 by way of the cadet competition and by way of regular CFR competitions for NCOs.
- \* Conducting of regular reviews of the operation of the equality and anti-bullying measures in the military.

In my time as Minister for Defence I have witnessed the tremendous work being done by members of the Permanent Defence Force at home and in various overseas missions. I would like again to put on the record my own appreciation and that of the Government for the tremendous work being done in many troubled areas of the world and for the sacrifices that your members make in the cause of international peace. The support your family and friends provide is a crucial component in the success of overseas missions.

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Ireland is committed to maintaining our contribution to international peacekeeping by participation in UN mandated missions. The European Union, through the European Security and Defence Policy is taking increasing responsibility for peacekeeping. The proposed EU military operation in Chad and the Central African Republic represents a big challenge for the EU in contributing to the efforts of the international community in restoring normality in the Darfur region.

I have authorised the Chief of Staff to undertake a reconnaissance mission to the region. I understand this reconnaissance team departs Ireland tomorrow. Subject to a satisfactory assessment I would anticipate that the Defence Forces contribution to Chad and the Central African Republic mission would be substantial, probably in the region of 300 – 350. This mission will compliment the work of the UN/AU hybrid mission being launched in Darfur.

As you are no doubt aware, Ireland has decided to provide the Operations Commander for the EU operation. Lt. Gen Pat Nash assumes his responsibilities immediately, following yesterday's debate in Dail Eireann. This prestigious position is an honour to General Nash. It also reflects positively on the progress made across the entire Defence Forces in recent years.

The Government and Dail Eireann will consider the despatch of a contingent to the EU operation in Chad in due course. Participation in this operation would be demanding financially for the Government, logistically for the Defence Forces and of course personally for the members of the Defence Forces who participate. This is the type of challenge that we have been preparing for together. I have no doubt that the Defence Forces will meet this challenge in the professional manner we have come to expect.

Another major achievement for the Defence Forces was the assumption of command of the Multinational Task Force Centre of KFOR. This is a new development for the Defence Forces, as they have never before commanded a brigade size force in a multinational peace support operation. Undertaking this responsibility is an indication of both the experience of our troops in crisis management operations and the regard in which our international partners hold them.

There has been an unprecedented investment in Defence spanning the past 10 years. Over one third of a billion euro has been spent on providing the Defence Forces with modern operational equipment, training facilities and accommodation.

At the end of August I launched a tender competition for a new Naval Service Vessel Replacement Programme. This Programme represents the single biggest investment in Defence Forces equipment in the history of the State. We will be purchasing two Offshore Patrol Vessels and one Extended Patrol Vessel with options for one additional vessel in each category.

It is vitally important that the Naval Service has the equipment and resources it needs to meet the demands placed on it. These new vessels will ensure that the Naval Service will be

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equipped to protect our waters and our fisheries and meet Ireland's obligations in the area of maritime safety and security.

There have also been many other positive developments for the Defence Forces on the domestic front. At last years Conference I spoke about my belief that every recruit should have a reasonable expectation of being promoted to officer level by virtue of his or her leadership qualities, ability and character. I am pleased to see that following the completion of consultations with the representative associations an internal Commissioning From the Ranks competition was held in June.

A total of 24 successful applicants, selected from the ranks of Junior and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers, have already commenced the course in the Cadet School in the Curragh. I wish them well in their future careers.

The Policy on the running of similar future competitions, to provide Non-Commissioned Officers with the opportunity of obtaining commissioned rank, will be progressed under the Defence Force Modernisation Agenda. I have also asked the Chief of Staff for his views on the prospect of facilitating suitably qualified enlisted personnel to compete internally for technical/professional posts in the officer ranks in the future

In relation to ongoing recruitment, I believe the Defence Forces should reflect the significant broadening of cultural and ethnic diversity that has occurred in Ireland in recent years. The Defence Forces Equality Policy underpins equality legislation and outlines our commitment to the principles of equal opportunities in all their employment policies, procedures and regulations.

I know that people from diverse backgrounds have already been employed in the Defence Forces, but this has mainly been in certain specialised areas. This has worked well - albeit on a limited scale. I have asked the Chief of Staff to review recruitment into the Defence Forces at all levels and to implement changes that would facilitate recruitment from among cultural and ethnic minorities. I believe that this can only enhance our Defence Forces.

The ongoing implementation of the recommendations of the Doyle report "The Challenge of a Workplace" remains as one of the highest priorities for the Defence Forces and the Department since its publication. I am satisfied that the military authorities are alert and vigilant to this issue and are committed to addressing the matter in a continuing and proactive manner through educational modules on interpersonal relationships which are now embedded in career courses for all ranks. I am determined that we should build on the positive issues arising from the report while continuing to address the challenges identified. Your association will shortly be invited to participate in a review of the progress made in this area.

The Defence Forces offers an interesting and challenging career to women as well as to men. The Government is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for men and women in the Defence Forces and to the full participation by women in all aspects of Defence Forces activities.

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I recognise that requirements such as overseas service and service at sea places high demands on both men and women and have an impact on family life. However, the requirements to serve overseas and at sea are a basic and necessary part of the job of the soldier and sailor, male or female. At the same time both my Department and I are committed to ensuring that the Defence Forces continue to provide a challenging and rewarding career and a supportive working environment.

I am committed to ensuring that as ongoing developments emerge in the areas of family friendly policies, they will be reviewed positively to determine if they can be accommodated to the operational requirements of the Defence Forces.

The reports of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces (who is with us today) are impacting on the Human Resources management of the Defence Forces, particularly in the area of selection for career courses and for overseas service.

As well as the developments mentioned above the day-to-day work of the Association, on behalf of its members, continues through the formal Conciliation and Arbitration machinery. The Association has a vital role to play in the implementation of modernisation and change. I am pleased to see that the process continues to work successfully. Since the last ADC, 15 significant reports have been signed. The majority have recorded agreement. The most important was probably the implementation of the Towards 2016 pay agreement. That has resulted in increases in pay on 1 December 2006 and 1 June 2007. Agreement has also been reached in the areas of technical pay for unestablished drivers, substitution allowance and Aircraft Inspectors technical pay. A substantial number of smaller individual claims have also been processed.

Negotiations on issues of major importance to your members, such as NCO promotions, technical pay and overseas peace support allowance, are being advanced. I am pleased to say that negotiations on a revised pensions scheme are almost finalised and it is hoped to conclude this issue within the next few weeks with a final offer being put to the Association.

I am sure you agree that the last twelve months has been an extremely busy one for the Defence Forces as it continues to make a large impact both at home and on the international front. I want to assure you here today of my commitment as Minister for Defence and that of the Government to joining with you in the ongoing development and modernisation of the Defence Forces. I want to thank your Association and all members of the Defence Forces for the efforts they have played in these areas and I look forward with optimism to the future.

Finally, I would like to wish you the best for the remainder of the Conference and I hope it is a successful and productive occasion.

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