

## PSYCHOSOCIAL CONDITIONS OF CZECH SOLDIERS IN KFOR

Katerina Bernardova, Daniel Strobl, Jaroslav Sykora

Centre of Advanced Social Studies of the Chief of General Staff of the Army of CR

### ABSTRACT

*The activity of Czech soldiers in the peacekeeping mission, KFOR, is an important demonstration of the successful collaboration between the Czech Army and our alliance partners.*

*During the latter part of April 2000 a psychosocial research experiment was undertaken with members of a Czech unit participating in KFOR. Many important facts were ascertained from the findings of this research. Three time blocks were established and named: "before mission", "during mission" and "after return." We learned that each time block required better psychosocial preparation and support for the soldiers. The list below gives an overview and description of each of the time blocks.*

*The "before mission" category is characterized by the soldiery uncertainty. A large-scale strategic cultural plan (both political and military) is essential to prepare soldiers for a variety of potential problems during the mission. This preparation allows the soldiers to deal with such issues as xenophobia, dehumanization or the stress that accompanies missions.*

*The "during mission" time segment is fraught with physical and mental hardships. The daily routine of a mission, however, caused many soldiers to become complacent in a potentially dangerous environment. Several methods of combating this problem include relaxation time for the soldiers both on and away from the mission area and correspondence with the soldiers families.*

*The "after return" portion of the mission is best illustrated by the difficulties soldiers encounter in their personal lives. Research shows that many soldiers harbor images of a better life for themselves upon their return from a mission. The potential backlash that the soldiers may exhibit when their expectations are not met is of great concern. Psychosocial therapy for the soldiers before their departure from the mission as well as during their return home is one method of counteracting these feelings of disappointment.*

*This kind of challenging situation affects everybody involved in the mission to some degree. The soldiers learn to become confident with their ability to be flexible in any given situation- The emotional aspect of their personalities enables the soldiers to adapt to many rapidly changing scenarios.*

*Military psychologists, who work with soldiers, must deal with a multitude of topics that affect- the overall performance of the soldiers, Comfort and discomfort of the soldiers, actual mental conditions, potential causes of stress, and a variety of other mission-related issues are all factors that influence the mental makeup of the soldiers both on and off the job.*

*The results of the psychosocial research of the members of the Czech unit, KFOR, definitely show the difficulties of this experience, and moreover, this research, has provided the groundwork for future solutions to the issues raised by this study.*

Ladies & Gentlemen,

KFOR is the most recent foreign action of the Czech Army which has been actively engaged in the military operations of UN and NATO since the beginning of the 90's; the participation of our chemical unit in the Persian Gulf was the first mission. This distinctly wartime operation was later exchanged for peacekeeping missions on the territory of former Yugoslavia, which is why our army had sufficient experience with this kind of military actions when it joined KFOR.

Despite researches conducted during the last two years which were focused on the psycho-social conditions of our soldiers in the SFOR missions (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the study of KFOR from the spring of this year brought to light much new data which is relevant not only to this action, but also to other foreign missions of the Czech soldiers.

This challenging kind of situation affects to a greater or lesser extent the structure of personality, the dynamics of perception, the behavior of everybody involved in the mission to some degree as well as influencing the value system in the deepest part of the personality. The soldiers learn to become confident of their ability to be flexible in any given situation. The emotional aspect of their personalities enables the soldiers to adapt to many rapidly changing scenarios. They also have to cope additionally with their personal and interpersonal problems.

It is necessary to deal with a multitude of topics that affect the overall performance of the soldiers. The comfort and discomfort of the soldiers, specific mental conditions, the structure of relationships and the quality of communication must be observed. The personal benefit of the mission for a soldier, material and social conditions and a variety of other mission-related issues are all factors that influence the mental makeup of the soldiers both on and off the job. Potential causes of stress must be found for maintaining low potential impact.

It is not important which specific factors affect a soldier to a greater or lesser extent - e.g. separation from his home, temporary or permanent loss of a close individual, family conflicts, difficulty of tasks, discomfort, monotonous activity, isolation, loss of privacy or loud noise. ADAPTATION to their new life determines the LEVEL of their SATISFACTION, and how it is expressed in their actual mental condition.

Psycho-social research among members of the Czech KFOR unit arises from the need of the Chief of the General Staff and the headquarters of the army of the Czech Republic to obtain and evaluate concrete information from the area of the mission and to compare these results with those from previous researches. Some types of problems regularly occur in all missions. It is not a question of elimination local problems, but of key issues, the repetition of which causes fundamental problems. For example the influence of the selection of some negative phenomenon reappear later, during the mission, affecting relationships between headquarters and staff and impacting logistical problems, etc.

The research study of the Czech KFOR unit is established according to the main purpose mentioned above. The Czech Army base is located in the mountains, difficult, inaccessible terrain, in the north part of Kosovo, close to the village of Gornji Sibovac, about twenty kilometers from Pristina. About 180 Czech soldiers operate under the British army command there. They are made up mostly of members of the special forces trained to operate in the rearguard of military action, in activities like pyrotechnics, logistics and as members of CIMIC center, engineers, communicators, members of the intelligence service, physicians and medics.

Their remit is to guard about 48 kilometers of the Kosovo/ Serbian border, where there are many illegal crossings. Native Serbians live there and their security is highly endangered. Their lives depend on the protection of our soldiers. Czech soldiers have to monitor the day-to-day situation, to mediate between different ethnic groups and to accompany military and humanitarian convoys.

This project is focused on obtaining a complete summary of information demonstrating potential risks. Clear indications of significant frustration among the members of the KFOR unit may lead to the proposal of equal socio - technic arrangement that diminishes pressure or eliminates risks and causes.

The goals of this study arise from the need of the Chief of the General Staff and Headquarters of the Peace Forces of our army to be continually informed for analysis of the situation and for proposed short and long - term solutions.

A group of approximately 100 people was selected for our research to cover horizontally all occupations of the soldiers and vertically every level from command to the staff.

The sample drawn from 44,4% of the whole team, which was 80 people. Our collection of the data was carried out in the mission area.

The research is divided into three parts

- before mission
- during mission
- after return

The structure and the dynamics of the mental condition and feelings was checked in all the three parts by the SUPOS 7 test, in respect to the interaction of the individual with his social and work environment. Psycho-social screening during the mission is moreover focused on the personal profile of the members of the mission, based on screening, a psycho-diagnostic test battery and a questionnaire by the Czech authors.

The questionnaire that was created for use in the military area was administered for the screening of the psychosocial conditions of the Czech soldiers. Directed interviews were obviously part of our research.

The opening part of the research - before mission - is focused first initially on discovering the level of the socio-cultural preparation and motivation factors. Almost two thirds of the respondents were satisfied with the mission preparation and they understand the meaning of it very clearly.

On the other hand the results demonstrate insufficient information regarding the specific circumstances in the mission area, the history of the conflict, the character of the local people, etc. The majority of the soldiers' information came from the mass media. This lack of information led consequently to the occurrence of xenophobic and dehumanizing attitudes.

Despite the linguistic and cultural relationship which exists between Serbians and Czechs, these kinds of attitudes are more prevalent among our soldiers in Kosovo than among the soldiers serving in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Muslim-Albanian population presents greater diversity in social customs, value systems etc. Problems with recognition of the civilian population and paramilitary units may support these tendencies which occurred among approximately over a third of the responders. Soldiers with university education demonstrated lower levels of this kind of attitude.

The attitude of the local people towards our soldiers is evaluated as good, even friendly by two thirds of the respondents.

The importance and consequences of the socio-cultural preparation of the soldiers are obvious and the Army of the Czech Republic takes account of this as part of before-mission training.

The Czech soldiers give the impression of being communicative and cooperative people. Their standing is raised by the definitely positive rating of their relationship with the other armies included in KFOR. A high level of confidence, positive self-evaluation, self-criticism, professional abilities and neutrality were also noted.

Responding soldiers mostly feel in good mental condition. This could be evidence of the quality of the personal selection of the staff. They are able to maintain good mental condition despite difficult life-circumstances. These subjective reports are confirmed by diagnostic screening of the actual mental condition as well.

Despite the low number of women in the Czech KFOR unit - 1,6% - their presence and positions are well evaluated by more than one third of the respondents. This strengthens opinions about the importance of the female factor in military.

Considering the economical situation of the Czech Republic the financial benefits head the motivation factors. They are important for one third of our respondents. Average income of a member of the Czech KFOR unit is approximately five times higher than his income at home.

Our soldiers often resolve their bad economic situation or that of their families. Comparing the results of the researches carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the last two years, there is a noticeable increase of patriotic tendencies and factors associated with professional growth. The presence of one hundred professionals in that unit, in contrast to the

missions IFOR or UNPROFOR, where the majority were reservists, may be a reason for this progress.

KFOR is the first foreign mission for more than one half of our respondents; nevertheless it is not possible to say that these soldiers are in worst situation compared to those who have some previous experience with this kind of military operation. This peacekeeping mission is definitely specific, which is why it is a new experience even for the veterans.

Military psychologists function at the level of a battalion or a brigade, which is why there are none in Kosovo throughout the whole mission which comprises only a company. The absence of psychological service in the psycho-diagnostic, psychotherapeutic and counselling areas is seen as a serious problem. This was confirmed by more than three-quarters of our soldiers.

Considering the absence of a psychologist KFOR unit, more than half the soldiers would ask their friends or colleagues for help. The quality of interpersonal relationships is a key factor in the mental condition of our soldiers.

The mission period is mostly described as monotonous, routine activity. This assessment applies especially to the logistics area. Everyday maintenance of motor vehicles, routine repairs of technical equipment, always driving the same routes for the same reasons, creates a highly defined stereotypical situation.

Combat units have more colorful and dynamic activity but even in that sphere there is the appearance of automation and monotony in everyday life. This state may lead to chronic fatigue, a high frequency of errors during duty or increasing dissatisfaction and irritation among the members of KFOR. Here the military psychologist may be present. Contrary to some other armies of NATO, Czech military psychologists have different position. In addition to their other duties, they act as advisers to the commanders. They may help to resolve the monotony and fatigue of the soldiers due to this position. If they detect increasing monotony they can advise, for example, special training that may help to eliminate monotonous activity, the dominant source of stereotype and automation, which means decreasing fatigue as well. Attention and combat readiness of the soldiers increase in this manner.

The results of our research indicate some problems associated to the relationship of the Army of the Czech Republic to the soldier in missions. Some uncertainty concerning the professional future of the soldiers arises from this attitude. After return from the mission one-quarter of them think about leaving the army to return to civilian life.

Strange as it may seem, more than half of our respondents expect an improvement in the quality of their personal or family life. This may be associated with improving their life style, based on saving money. It may signal the presence of soldiers who solve their personal problems by leaving home for a mission. This usually doesn't work. The problems appear after the soldier's return. Almost two thirds of them would ask their relatives or friends for help. The results of the screening diagnostic of the acute mental condition are more than favorable. They imply a very positive structure of feelings and attitudes of the members of the Czech KFOR unit. This promotes a good reaction to activities and social conditions during the mission. The diagnostic screening was conducted voluntarily on 27% of the unit including the command.

The results of this diagnostic screening detected a good mental state among the soldiers and a high level of activity, initiative, desire for action combined with assertiveness, a feeling of satisfaction, power and energy. Good self-control and self-regulation with a low level of tension and absence of anxiety were also recorded.

Despite higher occurrence of physical (61, 7%) and mental (44, 7%) fatigue, headaches and sleep disorders, positive mental state indicate good mental resistance, adaptability, and a professional approach to the mission.

Drinking coffee (55, 03%), smoking (51,1%), occasional use of alcohol (14,9%) and prescription drugs (59,6%) is in the same range as the average population of the same age.

Several socio-technical arrangements were proposed to the Chief of the General Staff on the basis of the results. They are related to the KFOR unit and also generally to foreign missions. Some of them have been realized. The results of our research imply urgency, justification and usefulness of similar projects in the Army of the Czech Republic.

In this study we tried to show that despite all snags, difficulties and problems with relationships, inner life, and adaptation to hard conditions in the area of logistics and technical security the Czech soldiers are “good guys in the right place”.