



An Roinn Cosanta
Department of Defence

COVID19 RELATED QUERY

Department of Defence Internal Reference Number: DCQ23

Name of TD making query: Mick Barry, TD

Query Received: To ask the Minister for Defence if those members of the Defence Forces who are due to complete their tour of duty in Lebanon with the UN in May be permitted to return home; and to make a statement on the matter.

Reply:

Given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 crisis, and in order to mitigate its transmission and ensure the continued operation of all missions, the United Nations Secretary General, on 5 April, 2020, advised all troop contributors and mission commanders of his plans to suspend all rotations and leave for military personnel serving in UN missions until 30 June. The UN direction will impact over 100,000 UN uniformed personnel from over 120 countries serving world-wide.

The moratorium on upcoming rotations and leave is designed to ensure the continued operations of essential peacekeeping missions, to protect vulnerable populations in conflict zones and to maintain international peace and security. It is also designed to ensure the health and wellbeing of personnel deployed on UN operations by limiting movement of personnel into mission areas.

The UN Secretary General has advised that in certain limited and extenuating circumstances, it may be determined that units or uniformed personnel must be deployed or rotated, in order to continue to deliver on the mission mandate. In such circumstances and where a rotation is vital to maintain a critical operational capability, an exemption may be granted. Such an exemption will only be granted, however, where the requisite quarantine requirements for incoming and rotating contingents can also be guaranteed and in accordance with the requirements of the host state. Decisions on any exemption will be taken by the UN Headquarters in New York on a proposal from the Force Commander.

The Department of Defence and the Defence Forces have been examining the impact of the UN decision on Defence Forces personnel currently serving with UN missions. We are also examining the impact it may have on future deployments, so as to advise personnel and families accordingly. Personnel deployed overseas have been briefed by their commanders in the mission areas.

Force Commanders in UN missions are currently preparing their plans with a view to addressing the direction of the UN Secretary General. There is ongoing engagement within the missions and with UN mission commanders where the Defence Forces are deployed to ensure that Defence Forces rotations can take place as close as possible to the original planned dates and in accordance with the direction of the UN Secretary General.

Insofar as is practicable, within current restrictions, we have been successful in rotating Defence Forces personnel on their due dates or as required.

- We have had a successful rotation of the Defence Forces contingent in UNDOF on 4/5 April, while observing all quarantine restrictions for the rotating contingents. Returning personnel self-isolated at home or, where that was not possible, were accommodated in military facilities.
- On foot of a significant reduction in training activities in the EU Training Mission in Mali, the EU decided to reduce the number of training personnel in the mission while maintaining essential advisory and support capabilities. As a result, seven Defence Forces personnel were withdrawn and flown on a Spanish military aircraft to Madrid where they were met by the Air Corps Casa aircraft and repatriated to Ireland on 18th April.
- A rotation of 11 personnel currently deployed in Kosovo with the NATO led KFOR operation was conducted on 22nd April using the Air Corps Casa aircraft.
- In the case of MINUSMA, the UN Mission in Mali, the Defence Forces contingent is embedded in the German contingent in this Mission and are rotated with that contingent using German military air assets. Defence Forces personnel due to deploy to MINUSMA are currently in quarantine in Mali and will rotate on their due date. The returning personnel will be flown to Germany and will then be repatriated to Ireland.
- In the case of UNIFIL, the rotation of the main contingent is due in mid May. As our largest mission, this involves the rotation of a significant number of personnel and is thus more complex, given quarantine and operational requirements. Unfortunately it is not simply a matter of landing a plane in Beirut Airport. UNIFIL is an active security operation in a volatile conflict zone and the extraction and rotation of personnel requires approvals and permissions from the UN and from the Host State, not least in terms of their health status and that of the local population in a time of a global pandemic health restrictions. In accordance with the direction of the UN Secretary General, the UNIFIL rotation will require the approval of the UN in New York on the recommendation of the Force Commander. Planning is ongoing in the mission headquarters in Lebanon in relation to the operation of the mission, including contingent rotations.

As indicated above, there is ongoing active engagement within the UNIFIL mission, with UN Force Commander and at UN Headquarters in New York through Ireland's Permanent Mission to the UN to ensure that the Defence Forces rotation can take place as close as possible to the original planned dates.

Following consultation between the Department of Defence, the Defence Forces and the Department of Foreign Affairs, in accordance with the process laid down by the UN Secretary General, a submission was made by the Defence Forces through the Senior Irish Officer to the UNIFIL Force Commander seeking an exemption. In tandem with this, the Department of Foreign Affairs through our Permanent Mission in New York has been in close contact with UN Headquarters at senior level in relation to the case being made for an exemption.

While there have been generally positive indications from the UN in New York in relation to some level of exemption specifically for the Defence Forces contingent, formal confirmation of this and clarity on the new rotation dates is still awaited. When a more definitive position is known, personnel and their families will be duly advised by the military authorities through the normal communication channels.

The Military authorities have confirmed that personnel deployed in UNIFIL are being fully briefed by their commanders on an ongoing basis in the mission area on the current situation and ongoing developments.

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