

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

Remarks at Ambassadorial-level meeting of the UN Group of Friends of SSR

hosted by Slovakia and South Africa as co-chairs of the Group of Friends

Engaging the security sector in the COVID-19 response:

Challenges, opportunities, lessons learned

30 June, 4.00 – 5.30 pm

Held via Zoom

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests and colleagues,

Dear friends of SSR,

I highly welcome this dialogue among like-minded Member States and the opportunity to discuss the important and timely topic of the role of the security sector in times of COVID-19. I sincerely thank the co-chairs of the United Nations Group of Friends of SSR, Ambassador Matjila of South Africa and Ambassador Mlynár of the Slovak Republic, for co-hosting this event and inviting me to deliver keynote remarks.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a global public health emergency — but it is far more. It is an economic crisis. A social crisis. And in some places, it can become a human rights crisis. We are confronted with myriad challenges – and the struggle to uphold the rule of law is one of them.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed many challenges. In a number of instances, it demonstrated governance and accountability deficits of the security and defence forces, which for instance had their mandate extended by states of emergency without the necessary preparedness, crisis analysis and civilian oversight.

Such interventions *can* aggravate and deepen structural inequalities and violence, in particular against women, youth and children. They may lead to disproportionate use of force, in times when civilian control and oversight mechanisms are struggling to perform.

In some instances, security sectors are taking the opportunity to strengthen their relationship with communities. They are raising awareness of the local population on the importance of social distancing measures – instead of enforcing them through the use of force. They are also playing an essential role by supporting the flow of goods, medicines, and resources, building field hospitals and conducting medical evacuations.

Arguably, social cohesion and confidence in state institutions are among the main pillars for sustained peace and prosperity. In times of crisis, public trust in state authority is of particular importance. As the Ebola crisis has shown, public trust in the State is critical for the successful containment of an outbreak – without it, citizens will not follow the advice of public health authorities and communities will be suspicious about restrictions to their daily lives, and security services charged with implementing them can face open resistance. It is therefore in the interest of governments to ensure that security measures are necessary, proportionate and in compliance with the rule of law.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to recall, in this regard, the Secretary-General's call for a people- and rights-centered approach. In late April, he stated that the best reaction to the pandemic is "*one that responds proportionately to immediate threats while protecting human rights and the rule of law.*"

To support this, OROLSI – both at Headquarters and in the field – has reacted quickly to provide immediate assistance to national rule of law and security institutions. For example, my Office has helped Member States through training on a human rights-based approach to policing tasks amidst a COVID-19 related state of emergency. Further, to decongest overcrowded prisons, OROLSI developed practical tools and guidance to mitigate the spread of the virus. OROLSI also developed a manual to conduct remote court hearings which aims at continuing judicial processes during this difficult time while

upholding international fair trial standards. These toolboxes are being used by Member States and UN partners around the globe.

Soon, this set will be complemented by a guidance note on “Providing rule-of-law-based public security during the COVID-19 emergency”, offering guidance on a coordinated, people-centered and conflict-sensitive security response to the pandemic. Mr. Daniël Prins, Chief SSR Unit, is going to elaborate on this in the next session.

Turning to the field, ROLSI components have swiftly re-oriented activities in UN peace operations to enable the continued implementation of core tasks. For example, in response to national requests, our SSR teams in UN mission have quickly put into place a series of mitigation measures to maintain their support to host states and are providing strategic advice and resources required by security authorities to deal with new challenges posed by COVID-19.

In the Central African Republic, for instance, MINUSCA provides highly critical personnel protection equipment to the armed forces and supports the dissemination of health protocols for security personnel.

In Mali, MINUSMA supports national security sector institutions to enhance trust of the population into the security apparatus and to address the needs of women, youth and children.

All of the work and support that the United Nations provides in the field of SSR would have not been possible without the commitment of Member States, including by keeping SSR high on the UN’s peace and security and development agendas, and mobilizing critical resources. In this regard, the UN Group of Friends of SSR has been a driving force and I sincerely thank you for your engagement and continued support.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In closing, let me emphasize that the deployment of security forces in support of civilian authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic requires a robust governance framework.

Such a framework should define the scope, legality, and proportionality of emergency security measures at national levels and, most importantly, solid democratic control and accountability mechanisms. It also requires effective coordination and a conflict-sensitive approach.

Where the pandemic is being brought under control, after-action reviews of the performance of security agencies during the pandemic can be helpful, especially if acting under emergency powers, to inform future practices and reform where appropriate. OROLSI stands ready to support you in these efforts.

I am looking forward to a frank exchange and thank you for your attention.