



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ARMED FORCES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS

WEBINAR REPORT

Brussels, Belgium

2 June 2020

1. On 2 June 2020, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) held its second webinar as part of the [NATO PA's response and adaptation to the COVID-19 crisis](#). **Lieutenant General Fernando Lopez del Pozo***, Commander of the Spanish Joint Operations Command and in charge of Operation *Balmis* (the mission of the Spanish armed forces in the coronavirus crisis) addressed close to 90 Assembly members and parliamentary staff and engaged in lively discussions with them.

2. After the World Health Organization declared a state of worldwide pandemic on 11 March, the response accelerated in Spain. At the time, Spain had registered more than 2,100 infected people and 47 deceased. On 14 March, the Government of Spain declared a state of emergency across the whole Spanish territory, which included a general lockdown. Operation *Balmis* was established on the same day, and, on 15 March, the Spanish Armed Forces began to deploy.

3. To deal with this crisis, the Spanish government established a managing system composed of four leading ministries: the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, Transportation, and Health, with the latter in the lead. Within the Ministry of Defence, the command and control structure was based on an existing standing structure, designed for the conduct of daily military operations but tailored to the specific operation by adding the Military Emergency Command and the Defence Health Service Command. This process was quick and straightforward, as the core of the structure had already been tested and trained.

4. The hectic early days of the Operation witnessed the headquarters liaise with all relevant authorities, working along four basic principles: assess, offer, response, and help. Lieutenant General Lopez del Pozo's intent was clear from the beginning: to offer Spain the best-possible assistance to mitigate suffering and preserve the safety and well-being of all Spanish citizens. Four possible lines of intervention were early identified and put into action:

- the necessary contribution to the police forces,
- support to other authorities with transportation needs,
- disinfection of assorted facilities, and
- support to the national health system through, for example, the deployment of field hospitals.

5. The Spanish armed forces carried out different tasks in direct support to the police forces in tasks of presence, border control, and surveillance of critical national infrastructure. In this context, they reached over 2,200 different locations in Spain. Intense air transportation of personnel and medical supplies was carried out, with 16 strategic international flights and more than 50 domestic flights.

6. The Spanish armed forces carried out an invaluable effort to disinfect different facilities, including a number in excess of 5,200 homes for the elderly. They also helped shore up the national health system by providing medical care in the hospitals of the armed forces and by providing psychological and nursing personnel. A little less than 3,400 medical and administrative personnel were transferred to the Ministry of Health, Consumer Affairs and Social Welfare. One final commitment came in the deployment of field hospitals, with 16 deployed in 14 cities. In total, almost 180,000 service personnel had deployed and participated in Operation *Balmis* at the time of the webinar (79 days).

7. Although still ongoing, Operation *Balmis* had been generally successful in attaining its objectives and have had positive side effects. A wide media coverage resulted in the Spanish

* While the meeting was held under the Chatham House rule, Lieutenant General Fernando Lopez del Pozo subsequently waived the rule for the purpose of this summary.

armed forces' reassurance of their citizens, who witnessed how useful their military services had become when needed at the home front. The support given by the Spanish armed forces to the national health system proved invaluable in preventing its collapse.

8. Since the beginning of Operation *Balmis*, Spain's Armed Forces maintained its contribution to the government's main efforts and keeping commitments abroad. This crisis confirmed, Lieutenant General Lopez del Pozo stressed, how relevant, valuable, and, sometimes, irreplaceable, the role of the military tool in emergencies could be. Armed forces were able to support civilian institutions and governments across different domains dealing with a health crisis, including security, transportation, and health support.

9. Spain was not alone in this fight, he underlined. On 23 March, Spain put forward a request to Allies through NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). Help was sent from different Allied nations, and for that Spain was extremely grateful, he said. Help was also offered to Spain by non-NATO countries, most notably from Japan. Support from the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) was also sought and found. Through this agency, the armed forces' logistic services were able to find contractors to bring in medical materiel from Denmark and China. Allies also cooperated in strategic transportation to and from overseas deployments, both in support of Spain as well as Spanish support to other Allies.

10. Lieutenant General Lopez del Pozo expressed his gratitude for Allied support. He also argued that NATO showed itself slightly slow in its initial reaction, but, once sparked, it proved, once again, its adaptability and the strength of multilateralism. It had become apparent that agencies such as the EADRCC and NSPA were useful. There seemed, though, to be room for improvement in other areas, such as a possible system to allow for information exchange on military response to a crisis – a system that would allow for effective prioritisation and for adequate coordination of support. Information in this system should include stock levels of those critical items in this kind of emergencies.

11. Furthermore, he concluded that in this crisis, Spain continued its support of operations overseas. Security paved the way for both political and economic development, he said, and military operations outside national borders enabled national security. He highlighted that, now that NATO countries were facing the economic fallout in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, security should remain paramount for the Allies. Lieutenant General Lopez del Pozo cautioned that the economic impact of the crisis on the armed forces should be mitigated. This would help prevent health crises turn into security crises and improve NATO's overall resilience.

12. During the questions and answers period, members asked the Lieutenant General about:

- lessons learnt for intelligence services in predicting such crises;
- the capabilities of the Spanish armed forces in their support of their domestic health sector;
- the impact of and reaction against disinformation campaigns during the pandemic;
- the lessons learnt by the armed forces;
- the effect on the military's public perception;
- cooperation between NATO and the EU during this and future health crises; and
- the practical cooperation between the military and health institutions, especially hospitals.

assistance in

13. Lieutenant General Lopez del Pozo focused, inter alia, on:

- strengthening the anticipation of intelligence services;

- the lack of medical capabilities in the Spanish armed forces;
- the value of NATO bodies such as the NATO Support and Procurement Agency and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence; and
- building upon successful civil-military cooperation during this crisis.

APPENDIX 1 – ATTENDANCE LIST

NATO PA BUREAU MEMBERS

President	Attila MESTERHAZY (Hungary)
Vice-President	Osman Askin BAK (Turkey)
Secretary General	Ruxandra POPA

MEMBER DELEGATIONS

Albania	Mimi KODHELI
Belgium	Annick PONTHER
Canada	Leona ALLESLEV Cheryl GALLANT Mohamed-Iqbal RAVALIA Brenda SHANAHAN
France	Jean-Marie BOCKEL Jean-Jacques BRIDEY Philippe MICHEL-KLEISBAUER Gilbert ROGER
Greece	Mariori GIANNAKOU
Italy	Paolo FORMENTINI
Luxembourg	Semiray AHMEDOVA Lydia MUTSCH
Montenegro	Branimir GVOZDENOVIC
Poland	Marcin MYKIETYSKI
Portugal	José Luis CARNEIRO
Romania	Vergil CHITAC
Slovakia	Ludovit GOGA
Spain	Zaida CANTERA Xavier CASTELLANA
Turkey	Kamil AYDIN Utku CAKIROZER Muhammet Naci CINISLI Ahmet Berat CONKAR Omer Faruk KILICKAYA Kamil Okyay SINDIR Ahmet YILDIZ
United States	Filemon VELA

NON-PARLIAMENTARY OBSERVER

Radboud (Rad) VAN DEN AKKER, NATO Affairs and Security Policy (NASP), Political Affairs and Security Policy Division (PASP), NATO HQ
