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What the Bundeswehr needs: Fresh urgency, a new mentality

This report for the year 2016 is my second annual report as Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces of the German Bundestag.

I summed up my first report under the heading ‘The Federal Armed Forces at a Turning Point’. It was not an option to carry on making cut-backs, tolerating gaps and shortages, spreading resources thinly, slashing programmes and economising. That was my message.

Today, I am able to note that political decisions have been taken to reverse these trends: in manning levels, materiel and the budget. That is good.

Now comes the ‘but’: This is all being done far too slowly.

Servicewomen and men are suffering from **overstretch** *right now*, today. The *current* generation serving in the Bundeswehr is having to struggle with a rapidly growing burden of deployments, from the further enlargement of the contingent in Mali and yet another naval mission to an expanding NATO Response Force and the battalion sent to Lithuania. It is not wrong to be doing any of these things, but there is a great deal going on. And 280 days away from home in a year is really *too much*, even for our Navy specialists. That does nothing to make service in the forces compatible with family life.

The change of course has begun. But our servicewomen and men are not yet seeing the arrival of more personnel and more equipment. For the time being, they are actually being given additional tasks to cope with.

Simultaneously, the individual services and military organisational areas are having to trim their manpower to free up personnel for new structures (e.g. to run cyber operations). Consequently, their manning levels will go down for a while longer before they start going up. They are getting more and more overstretched.

That is why I wish to make this appeal: The Bundeswehr needs an **initiative to speed up** all the projects it is carrying out to reverse previous trends.

- One area of concern is **personnel**: It has been calculated that 14,300 additional posts will be required to close the gaps apparent today in the structure of the Bundeswehr. To start with, however, provision has only been made for 7,000 more posts, by 2023.

This means it will take seven years to raise the forces' manpower by four per cent, half a per cent a year. That is a snail's pace.

- Another area of concern is **materiel**: I will cite the striking example of battle tanks: In order to achieve full resourcing for training, exercises and deployments, the fleet of 225 available tanks is going to be reinforced with 100 second-hand Leopard 2s, which will need to be modernised. Over the next seven years. If we are buying back second-hand tanks – why is it going to take so long? No contracts have been signed so far. The whole operation to ensure the Bundeswehr is 'fully resourced' for its 'current' functions is due to continue until 2030.
- I feel the many **projects at barracks** are moving ahead far too slowly as well. In this field too, it is not unusual for there to be a seven-year wait before anything gets done. And if the plans change in the mean time, it can quite easily drag on even longer.

I believe the action to reverse various trends that has been decided on might need to be accompanied by a kind of change of mentality as well. *Business as usual* and sticking to the rules are no longer much help right at the moment. Maybe the bureaucratic **processes and procedures** that accumulated over a quarter of a century of continual cut-backs are no longer appropriate to the world as it is today.

I have said enough about the need for 'fresh urgency' and a 'new mentality'.

In 2016, although manning levels initially fell in the Bundeswehr, there was a remarkable **increase in personal submissions** to the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces and accordingly in the total number of cases processed. The case rate (25.6 per 1,000 servicewomen and men) was the second highest since 1959.

When I try to put my finger on reasons for this increase, the defining words and phrases of the last year soon come to mind: Overstretch, assistance for refugees and the Military Personnel Working Times Ordinance.

Like the enlisted personnel spokespersons, the staff councils and the Bundeswehr Association, I see a need for significant adjustments to the **provisions on working times** that are in place. What is identified here will have to be implemented promptly. There is no reason for putting things on the back burner.

The Annual Report contains a whole range of suggestions and proposals made in response to letters from and discussions with members of the forces, for example on the necessity of **accommodation for commuters** at barracks or how we could improve our materiel readiness if we *insourced* servicing capacities within our technical formations.

Allow me to conclude by passing on the impression many servicewomen and men have gained: We are past the stage of discussing *whether* there are problems and *whether* people ought to talk about them. Lots of problems have been identified and acknowledged. What we have to do now is find solutions. And show some sense of urgency.