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I am delighted to be able to present my third Annual Report as Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces to you today.

The focus of the report remains on the major gaps in personnel and materiel in all areas of the Bundeswehr, Germany's federal armed forces. Above the junior ranks level, 21,000 posts for officers and non-commissioned officers are unoccupied. Because so many personnel are missing – commanders, trainers, specialists –, the duties that have to be done end up being shouldered by the servicewomen and men who are there. This not infrequently results in overstretch and frustration.

What is still the smallest Bundeswehr of all time does not have just one core task today, as it did with collective defence in the epoch before 1990 or 'out-of-area' deployments in the era after 1990. Rather, the Bundeswehr has to do justice to both aspects of its mission today as core tasks of equal value, which means: carrying on 13 mandated deployments abroad, from Mali to Afghanistan, and at the same time contributing to collective defence in Europe with the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), the NATO Response Force (NRF), the Standing NATO Maritime Groups, Air Policing in the Baltic and the NATO battalion in Lithuania.

Because this is a very great deal, I speak of overstretch, for example in parts of the Navy, or the Army and Air Force's helicopter formations.

At the same time the troops' material operational readiness has not grown any better in the last few years, but has tended to get even worse. The reversal of personnel, materiel and financial trends that has been proclaimed is definitely to be welcomed. But merely proclaiming it does not make matters any better.

For example, Germany's military air transport capabilities have now become so weak that it is almost becoming the norm for what are known as 'in' and 'out' flights to and from mission areas to be delayed, sometimes by days, and for flights to be cancelled. This is imposing additional burdens on servicewomen and men, and their families.

In the spring of 2015 I deliberately paid my very first official field visit as the new Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces to the German battle group for the NATO Response Force's 'spearhead', the VJTF. Back then, at Bergen Training Area, I was presented with a list of 15,000 individual things that were having to be borrowed from other parts of the Bundeswehr so that, at the least, 1,000 German armoured infantry soldiers were combat-ready and available to NATO.

That was in 2015. It is now 2018, and the system of loaning items back and forth has not changed in any way. The materiel situation remains dramatically bad, in some places it has got even worse.

At the end of the year six of the six German submarines were out of action. At times not a single one of the 14 Airbus A-400M aircraft that have been put into service was flying. Eurofighters, Tornados, Transalls, CH-53s, Tigers, NH-90s – the flying units rightly complain they have nowhere near enough flying hours to train their crews, because too many aircraft are not mission-ready on too many days of the year.

The picture is the same in the Navy: the decommissioning of old ships goes ahead smoothly, to schedule. But the efforts to put new ships into service drag on years behind. Instead of the 15 frigates provided for in the planning, the Bundeswehr only has nine today. And the periods these nine ships spend in dry dock are becoming longer and longer because the ships are getting ever older, because spare parts are in short supply, and because the management of projects by the Bundeswehr and the industry occasionally leaves a certain amount to be desired.

The problem of managing scarce resources, the overlong repair times and the systemic shortages of spare parts are affecting the Army, the Air Force and the Joint Support

Service just as much. This can be attributed to decisions taken in connection with the 2011 Bundeswehr reform.

It will be important for the government and parliament to make sure new weapons systems ordered in future are (to use the technical term:) ‘logistically supportable’, that is to say they come with spare parts, testing equipment, simulators and training peripherals included. In sufficient quantities. This would be more expensive, but would function better.

As far as the ‘reversal of financial trends’ is concerned, I can only say today: hope is the trend. Everything needed additionally for full resourcing will cost extra money that has to be channelled into the budget, although it has still not been topped up significantly so far. Not only that, yet again 10 per cent of the funding for investment in armaments, €600m, was not spent on armaments procurement projects in 2017. The administration has to become even better in this field.

The government is not wrong when it makes the point that the ‘reversal of trends’ will take time. But maybe, alongside the long-term plans that have not been fully financed to date, there could also be individual ‘fast-track’ projects: particularly carefully managed, quick solutions that make visible, tangible improvements, for instance to the new combat clothing, including the boots. Or to radio sets. Or to night vision goggles. Or a solution for the flying hours disaster afflicting the helicopters. Many servicewomen and men would like to see a kind of clean break at some point or another along the lines of rapid procurement packages.

The tasks for which there are to be additional personnel and materiel in future – those tasks already confront us today of course. And the women and men who are serving in the forces now are already having to cope with them every day – using what they have to hand. As well as they can.

And this can only be done with great commitment, with a talent for improvisation, a sense of duty, solidarity, camaraderie and sometimes humour as well. Many do far more than their duty requires.

This was partly why the discussion about ‘leadership and dignity’ during the year under review provoked considerable disquiet. Many servicewomen and men felt themselves subjected to a general suspicion directed against all members of the Bundeswehr. They sensed distrust. And yet, if it is to be effective, the concept of ‘Innere Führung’ (leadership and civic education) expressly presupposes reciprocal trust between commanders and those they lead.

This relationship of trust is currently following the latest trend, one could say: it is under repair.

For obvious reasons, the Annual Report deals once again with fundamental issues of Innere Führung, as well as the individual cases that attracted particular attention last year: Pfullendorf, Illkirch, Sondershausen and Munster. Rules were broken in these places, even leading, in the case at Munster, to irreversible physical harm and loss of life. Very different events occurred, entailing extremely different consequences. The report also examines deficiencies identified in the – sometimes overly hasty – way conclusions were drawn from what had happened. In this respect it must be clear: learning from mistakes or misconduct is of existential significance for the Bundeswehr, one way or another.

Without it being prompted by any specific incident, but because this creeping trend always gets overlooked otherwise, the Annual Report 2017 addresses the excessive levels of centralisation and bureaucratisation under which superiors at all levels suffer, from subunit leaders, senior officers and company sergeants major to divisional commanders: the smothering of everything and everybody in red tape with thousands of self-imposed Bundeswehr rules and regulations is suffocating the principle of mission-type command and control. Holistic responsibility that can be exercised personally is disappearing. The diffusion of responsibility, a safety-first mentality and feelings of impotence are taking its place. This is not new. It is to be heard on every field visit. Ultimately, tackling this would not just be a question of effectiveness, but also a question of the attractiveness of service in the Bundeswehr. The same is also true of long-running issues such as

commuter flats, family-friendliness, predictable overtime arrangements, better infrastructure, Wi-Fi, and attractive sport and welfare facilities.

The number of personal, written submissions went down from 3,197 in 2016 to 2,528 in the year under review. One reason for this might be the extensive realisation of the target structure laid down by the 2011 Bundeswehr reform. This means some sources of uncertainty about people's personal careers in the Bundeswehr have finally run dry. Which is good. The subjective situation is being improved by the prospect of 'growth' rather than 'cuts' that is linked with the 'reversal of trends'. The number of cases processed, including special incidents reported by the services, remained comparatively high at 4,173 (2016: 4,560). This is likely to have been driven by the boom in reporting inspired by the cases about which there were public discussions, particularly Pfullendorf and Illkirch.