

Peacekeepers in Kosovo and HIV/AIDS: Ukrainian soldiers reliably protected against the “new black death”

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Editor’s note: “KT”, as promised, publishes the first report of American journalist Natalia Feduschak about the link between AIDS and national security.

Brezovica, KOSOVO -- The group of brawny men, all officers of Ukraine’s peacekeeping forces, fills the cramped room. A small religious icon is perched on a nightstand near a twin bed, while books and knickknacks fill space on the other. A large map of Kosovo dominates the main wall. Careful outlines made by felt pen divide the map into several regions. The names of military bases from NATO countries are written out, including the one where the Ukrainians are based, not far from Macedonia. Observing the map, a visitor thinks that here, in this sliver of land in the volatile Balkans, the men are a long way from home.

There is a knock on the door.

“Enter,” says Viktor Kopachynskiy, the group’s commander.

An orderly brings in coffee, cookies and an assortment of fruits and places them on a small table.

“Please,” Kopachynskiy says, pointing to the small buffet.

It is mid-morning; patches of sunlight stream through the curtain and begin to play on the wall. The still sleepy visitor gladly sips the hot coffee, having arrived late at the base the night before.

For a few minutes, the officers make small talk – how long they have served in the military, where they have been based, how the pay is better here than in Ukraine but how they are also ready to return home. The conversation then steers to the reason the visitor has come here.

“I am wondering,” she says, feeling a bit uncomfortable, given she is the only female in the room, “about the sex lives of your soldiers.”

There is a split-second pause, and then the room bursts with laughter.

In the early morning hours on this bright Kosovar day, the question may have seemed funny, but in reality, HIV/AIDS and the effect it has on the world’s military forces is no laughing matter. Analysts are warning that growing HIV/AIDS rates within the ranks of military forces in some countries are affecting their combat readiness and consequently threatening their national security. Recent studies have also shown that in some countries, HIV rates within the military are higher than in the general population.

Peacekeeping forces are not immune, studies show: Some soldiers stationed abroad are bringing the virus back home or spreading it in the countries where they are stationed. Ukraine learned its own bitter lesson several years ago when several peacekeepers based in Sierra Leone returned home and tested positive for HIV, having acquired the virus through sex with local women.

According Laurie Garrett, the author of a report titled *HIV and National Security: Where Are the Links?*, understanding the current impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or forecasting its toll in, say, twenty years, is still difficult.

“Little scrupulous analysis of the political, military, economic, and general security effects of the pandemic has been performed, both because the area is poorly funded and the problem is extremely complex,” she wrote in the report, which was published in 2005 by the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

The threat posed by HIV to the world’s military gained prominent attention earlier this decade after a number of studies showed HIV rates were higher among soldiers in several African countries than in the general population.

A 2003 report from the Washington, D.C.-based World Watch Institute, for instance, found that in the national armies of South Africa, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, more than four in 10 soldiers were HIV-positive. For its part, the U.S. National Intelligence Council has estimated that 10 to 60 percent of all soldiers in sub-Saharan Africa have HIV. And United Nations peacekeeping forces in at least two countries, Sierra Leone and Cambodia, have been linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS in those countries.

"Unless the HIV challenge is met, the sustainability of these (peacekeeping) operations, and their invaluable contribution to global security will be under threat," Peter Piot, the head of UNAIDS, the joint United Nations agency spearheading the fight against the pandemic, told the U.N. Security Council in 2003.

In that same address, Piot said: "One aim has been to institutionalize training on AIDS into training curricula for uniformed services -- as has been achieved in Ukraine's defense forces."

Despite the Sierra Leone incident and some critics at home, Ukraine has received high marks from the international community for its military’s HIV prevention efforts. For several years now, with the help of UNAIDS and other groups, soldiers have received regular training about HIV prevention, proper condom use and how the virus is spread from one individual to another. The training begins early in their service and troops undergo regular refresher courses.

UNAIDS works in some 50 countries with young military recruits, peacekeepers, police and immigration officers to help curb the pandemic.

“We have HIV/AIDS prevention seminars every three months at the base in Kosovo,” said Andriy Kovalchuk, the officer charged with the soldiers’ physical and emotional health at the base in Brezovica. “And everyone has received HIV training at home through repeated seminars.”

Ukraine’s ministry of defense tightened its rules regarding peacekeepers after Sierra Leone. As a result, troops in Kosovo are not allowed to have off-duty contact with local women, must stay clear of areas that include restaurants and cafes and are not allowed to drink alcohol.

“Alcohol causes stupid behavior, ” Kopachynskiy, the commander, said. “Everyone knows that if they violate the rules, they will be home within 24 hours.”

Most of the troops stationed in here are married and know unless they have home leave – which is not paid for by the Ukrainian government -- they won’t have sex for the duration of their year-long stay in Kosovo, he added.

By all estimates, the peacekeepers who serve in Kosovo are Ukraine’s elite. Competition to get here is tough, with several candidates vying for each position. Officers admit one of the reasons duty in the region is attractive is the training they

receive in modern military preparedness by working closely with soldiers from NATO countries. And, of course there is the higher pay.

Ukraine's peacekeeping forces are located on two bases. The team in Brezovica is part of KFOR's Multi-National Brigade (Northeast). It sits under the command of the Americans and is financially supported by the Ukrainian government. Ukrainian and Polish troops jointly monitor the region. The other, located in Gnjilane, a predominately Albanian region of Kosovo, is a 45-minute drive from the camp in Brezovica. These troops are under the direct command of the United Nations. The forces here include police units and K-9 teams that are able to detect drugs, bombs and weapons.

Soldiers stationed at Brezovica live in what was once a posh ski resort. It is situated at the foot of Sar Mountain, which was the site of the downhill ski competition during the Sarajevo Winter Olympic Games in 1984. A compact two-story building located on the compound is said to have been the residence of former Yugoslav leader, Josef Tito, on visits to the area. Although priests visit the base only intermittently, there is a small multi-faith wood chapel on the territory; some soldiers attend services at a Serb Orthodox church nearby. Next to the chapel is a small pond with goldfish, which is a favorite spot for the soldiers.

The base is equipped with all the tools necessary for combat -- Hummers converted into armored vehicles, jeeps and a myriad of weapons. Armed soldiers patrol the compound, as well as the surrounding territory. The Ukrainians have been assigned to a predominantly Serb area in this mountainous region, although one group of peacekeepers is charged with keeping safe an area made up of Albanian villages. The region is primarily rural, with open sewage and trash running into creeks and then flowing into rivers. Although the main roads are paved, thanks to extensive funding from the European Union, residents must traverse dirt roads to get to villages further in the mountains.

Plans call for some troops from Brezovica to eventually move to Camp Bondsteel, the U.S.'s primary base in Kosovo, where a number of Ukrainian commanders are already based.

The complex under U.N. command in Gnjilane is located across the street from another U.S. base and is heavily fortified. The personnel here live in barracks that are lined up in neat rows. There are separate quarters for women who are support staff and serve in the K-9 unit. A small athletic field is located near the entrance of the compound.

In addition to the medical doctor, the base in Gnjilane has a psychologist to help soldiers with any emotional issues. The rules here for personnel are more relaxed than for the KFOR troops; drinking alcohol, for instance, is allowed. Gnjilane, which is near Pristina, Kosovo's capital, is a vibrant regional center, with rapid construction of buildings and homes. Albanians dominate the region and Serbs are in the minority.

Although on the surface the situation in Kosovo appears calm, in conversations with local residents it is evident that tensions among Serbs and Albanians still exist and that is a constant worry.

This picturesque area was the site of a religious uprising in 2004, when the accidental drowning of two Albanian boys on Serb territory sparked a series of attacks on religious monuments and places of worship from both sides. Peacekeepers were ordered not to get involved in the conflict, a decision that locals remain embittered about to this day. Many religious monuments and churches were destroyed. Peacekeepers now spend

their time protecting the religious objects that remain and ensuring tensions do not flair again.

Stress, and how to relieve it, is a concern for everyone stationed in Kosovo. Troops spend their free time writing letters, reading and playing sports. No one ventures outside either compound, unless for duty. The strict rules extend to officers.

“We are getting too close to the cafés,” one of the officers told their visitor as they wandered through Pristina’s downtown one warm evening. “We are here to keep order. There can be no appearance of impropriety.”

The Ukrainian soldiers operate in an area rife with the epidemic being driven by drugs and sex. In interviews, analysts and religious leaders as far away as Rome expressed concern that Kosovo has become a haven for black marketers, drug runners, and human traffickers. While the U.N. may be doing a good job in stopping the growth of HIV within its own ranks, all these illicit activities are connected to the virus’ spread in Europe, they said.

Strewn across the wall inside one of the buildings in Gnjilane are several sheets of paper with the names and addresses of cafes and restaurants in Kosovo that military personnel must stay away from. These places are believed to be fronts for trafficking in human beings, a note from the U.N. on the papers said.

“Kosovo has become a dark hole,” Yuriy Hladun, assistant commander of Ukraine’s K-9 division, admitted. “In reality, we only get a small fraction of the drugs and weapons that come through here.”

The tenuous situation in Kosovo and other parts of the globe means the time peacekeepers spend away from their families has been of increased concern.

Currently, some 50 million individuals serve in military and police forces around the world. In her Council on Foreign Relations Report, Garrett said although little evidence exists to support claims that HIV rates are higher among armed forces than in the general population, military forces that are deployed for longer periods of time from loved ones do have a higher infection rate than those who live with or near their families.

“All countries are talking about the length of deployments,” said Kopachynskiy over his morning coffee. “The Germans conducted a study which showed that families are threatened when they are separated for more than six months. Some even fall apart. Our soldiers are usually deployed for one year, but now that will be changed to six months also.”

Troops said that lessons learned on HIV prevention and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are brought back home.

If Ukraine’s peacekeepers must rely on thin booklets and regular trainings provided by their government, their counterparts in Gnjilane have the full resources of UNAIDS to educate them about HIV.

Literature about HIV/AIDS is strategically placed around the base. Bathrooms, for instance, have pamphlets about HIV, testing and ways to protect oneself from the virus readily available. Each building also has a so-called HIV corner where military personnel can get additional information and condoms, which are in ample supply.

“He gives us condoms every time we have home leave,” laughed Angela Berezovskaya, the only female K-9 team member, said of Dmytro Los, the station’s doctor. “He’ll come running after us.” The U.N. pays for these home visits; the

preferable conditions mean that some peacekeepers in Gnjilane have had more than one tour of duty in Kosovo.

Military personnel joked they gladly took the condoms, saving them for when they return home.

“The U.N. has good condoms,” said one officer. “They are of high quality.”

Dr. Los said he is in constant contact with U.N. doctors to discuss the best ways of providing information about HIV and other medical issues. U.N. doctors, for instance, suggested information about the virus was best consumed in private. Thus came the idea for putting informational materials in the bathrooms.

Even the psychologist on base has undergone HIV training.

“Personal safety is the most important question, from the commander to the lowest personnel,” said Petro Vorobets, the psychologist. “We use all methods for preventing disease.”

P.S. Natalia A. Feduschak is an international fellow with the U.S.-based Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit, private operating foundation focusing on major health care issues (www.kff.org). The International Journalism Project is a new initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) to support journalists with a strong interest in reporting on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and related health issues.

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