



Comment from the Defence Forces regarding the study “Human rights in the Defence Forces 2013-2014”

As the authors of the study “Human Rights in the Defence Forces” note in the foreword, guarantees for and protection of human rights are one of the foundations of the continued existence of the Estonian nation. Human rights are enshrined in the country as a whole as well as within the Defence Forces and one of the primary duties of all state structures is to safeguard human rights and conduct oversight. The Defence Forces, too, do their part to raise awareness of human rights and protect the rights – both independently and in cooperation with the Institute of Human Rights. This study is a good example of cooperation in this field.

At the same time, being a militarily structured organization, the Defence Forces have some special characteristics due to which some personal liberties are restricted by law. As a result, commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers find themselves in a complicated situation – on one hand they have an obligation to fulfil the goals of training, and to teach and train all of the military units that must be interoperable in wartime, but on the other hand they must also comply with all laws, international conventions and declarations. While it must be said that the work that has been done in this field over the last 20 years is noteworthy, it must continue. As a result, the Defence Forces are very grateful to the Institute of Human Rights, which has done much work in carrying out and compiling this study. Indeed, our cooperation should not remain confined to this; we have to develop educational methods and human rights promotion efforts to reduce emotional bias in future studies. Emotional bias inevitably plays a part in certain fields in the study introduced today. The reason for this is that there is too little knowledge about human rights and valid legislation, as a result of which some of the participants in the survey categorized obligations that are merely not to their liking as bullying or persecution.

The Defence Forces has a high regard for the human rights study as an independent, non-military view of the perceived human rights situation among conscripts and active duty Defence Forces members, which is also a mirror of all of society.

Many of the indicators arising from the study instil optimism, for as can be seen from the study, knowledge in the area of human rights is better in the Defence Forces than it is in society as a whole. Certainly the Defence Forces has room for improvement when it comes to implementing human rights related knowledge and distributing information. The study results will be taken into consideration in planning and implementing such activities.

At the same time, it is to be considered positive that the majority of conscripts and nearly all active-duty respondents made a point of saying that their human rights in the defence forces were respected. Over two-thirds of conscripts also clearly understand that all civilian rules and rights do not apply in the Defence Forces.

Certainly, in analyzing the results of the study, we should keep in mind the fact that the main function of compulsory military service is to train units before they are assigned to reserve and the function of re-educating individuals is secondary or even less important. A number of key shortcomings pointed up by the study are also problem areas for our society at large, outside compulsory military service or the Defence Forces. They begin in the formative phase – at home



and at school. Thus I would like to appeal to all current and future parents to teach their children already early in their lives about their rights and responsibilities and how to treat their fellow human beings. The importance of physical training and proficiency in different languages should also be explained – without these it would be difficult to get by in today's world, especially in a small country the size of Estonia. All of these are topics that receive constant coverage in society but the questions must continue to be dealt with.

We agree with the study compilers insofar as the study must be conducted at a regular interval, every couple of years, so that there would be more adequate reference materials and possibilities of assessing activities within the Defence Forces in regard to ensuring and educating people about human rights.

The third part of the study focused on the links between human rights and security and armed forces in today's world, with an eye to international practice and experiences of other countries. The Defence Forces keeps close track of the developments and trends, and where necessary draws on best practices in future developments.

The Defence Forces is grateful to those who carried out and compiled the study and will use the information gained in planning and implementing its further activities.