

Portuguese Armed Forces in the International Security and Assistance Force in Afghanistan: Psychological Support for the Command of Kabul International Airport

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ABSTRACT

The Portuguese Armed Forces have sent 37 military personnel to Afghanistan whose main objective was to take on the command of Kabul International Airport (KAIA) for circa 4 months (from August to December 2005). During the preparation for this peace support operation, the commander of the task force, asked the Air Force Psychology Centre for cooperation, which was further designated “the support of Psychology to KAIA Command“. An intervention programme was elaborated so as to be implemented in the different mission phases. The present paper describes and analyzes the experiment of psychological evaluation and intervention in the support to the present ISAF mission.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As I was getting ready to leave my office in a late afternoon in the beginning of 2005, I was caught by a telephone call from a Portuguese Air Force (PoAF) officer who, in a very blunt and direct manner, said:

- “I am Lieutenant-Colonel Ruivo, appointed to command a military force (COMKAIA) to support ISAF. The main mission is to operate and keep Kabul International Airport secure for a period of 4 months. I would like to know about the kind of support that can be provided by the Psychology Centre”.

Although I had produced two theoretical papers on stress on peace support operations over the last three years, I was aware that we were still in an embryonic phase concerning the sensitiveness to the importance of the psychological dimension in this type of missions. I am referring to the existence of psychosocial problems or difficulties experienced by military personnel in adapting to peace support operations, which could compromise the performance of missions, affect the morale of troops as well as endanger the physical and mental health of the personnel and their families (Surrador, 2003).

Still surprised by the phone call, I asked:

- Why are you calling this Department?

The reply did not take much long:

- When I was consulting the telephone directory, I came across the Military Psychology Department and decided to make it a call.

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I said I would immediately send one of the papers I had written about the subject and volunteered to plan an intervention programme along with him.

The request of the Force Commander, as it had been submitted to and approved by the PoAF High Command, was crystal clear:

- “The operating conditions to be met by the Portuguese military personnel in Kabul Airport combined with the imminent conflict atmosphere they will experience and the prospect of having to live in a confined, exiguous space, will certainly increase the existence of personal conflicts leading to the degradation of interpersonal relationships (...) were the reasons why we deem relevant to resort to psychological support. This preoccupation is reinforced by the need for preparation expressed in the ISAF HQ Joining instructions where it is stated that prior to entering the theatre of operations all military personnel must undergo adequate training in stress management apart from other specialised sort of training.

The main goal of the current paper is to describe and reflect upon the collaboration provided by PoAF Psychology Centre focusing on the assessment carried out by the Portuguese Force Commander whose mission was to operate and keep Kabul International Airport secure for a period of 4 months.

2.0 PORTUGUESE AIR FORCE IN ISAF

The participation of the Portuguese Armed Forces in ISAF was decided by the Portuguese government in February 2004. The PoAF was responsible for preparing the means to detach for the mission assigned to NATO ISAF- expansion (ISAF IV).

Since July 2004, the PoAF has been participating with a detachment comprising a C-130 aircraft, the respective crew, a maintenance team, and an operations/intelligence cell. In addition, both a firefighter and an air traffic controller team have also participated in the mission.

More recently, the Portuguese Armed Forces have assigned 37 military personnel to Afghanistan (33 from the Air Force, 3 from the Army, and 1 from the Navy) whose mission was to take on the command of Kabul Airport (COMKAIA), from 1 August to 2 December 2005. The key tasks assigned to COMKAIA were the following:

- To control the airport operations as well as to facilitate the movement of personnel and the logistics support to ISAF;
- To assist the Ministry of Transportation in the operation of the civil airport.

3.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION PLAN

As a result of several meetings held with the force commander, the following intervention programme was proposed and accepted:

3.1 Before deployment

- Approach to Psychology intervention
- Psychological evaluation
- Management of deployment stress
- Deployment-related family stress

3.2 During deployment

- Individual psychological support
- Family psychosocial support
- Visit of psychologists to the theatre of operations by mid-term deployment

3.3 After deployment

- Psychological evaluation (1 to 6 months upon return)
- Preparation to stress reactive symptoms
- Eventual desensibilization session
- Individual psychological support, if necessary and clinically recommended

4.0 APPROACH TO PSYCHOLOGY INTERVENTION

The PoAF Psychology Centre has circa 3 decades of history. Originally, its main mission was to select the human resources for the Air Force.

During the last decade the Centre has embraced other areas of psychological intervention, namely as regards Military Aeronautical Psychology (pilot assessment, monitoring of pilot instruction, human factors, flight psychology, flight safety, crew resources management, etc.), Clinical and Health Psychology, Educational and School Psychology, teaching and instruction, etc.

Despite the enlargement occurred in the intervention areas, the institutional image associated to the military psychologist is strongly related to the “psycho-technical tests” professional, although the presence of psychologists in the Portuguese Air Force Academy, Basic Pilot Instruction Squadrons and Instruction Centres, among others, are beginning to make part of the Institution’s daily routine. On the other hand, however, some sort of misunderstanding largely contributes to the fact that Psychology is still viewed by many people only in a negative way (subjectivity, vulnerability, fragility, depression, anxiety, etc.).

It was, therefore, the first time an explicit request for the collaboration of Psychology in the framework of a strictly operational activity (such as this very peace support operation and, in this case, in an aeronautical context at national and international level) had been formulated in the Air Force. Having this in mind, it was evident that such request had innovative implications.

Therefore, it had to be dealt with appropriate care, namely regarding the preparation of the military personnel to accept the collaboration of Psychology as a “normal” help, viewed in a “positive psychology” perspective (what is right with people rather than what is wrong with them; Petersen, & Seligman, 2004) instead of being approached in an “abnormal” or pathological perspective.

Before any given intervention, the commander introduced the psychologist to the force and explained the reasons that had led to his formal invitation. On the other hand, the psychologist defined the goals of the intervention taking the above mentioned positive perspective into account. For this specific purpose the psychologist used a comparison with a top level sports competition team with which he must cooperate in order to contribute to higher performance levels. It was also mentioned that this collaboration would be extended to their families.

5.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION BEFORE DEPLOYMENT

5.1 Sample

- The Portuguese Force was composed by 37 military personnel (33 from the Air Force, 3 from the Army, and 1 from the Navy). All of them had been selected and offered as volunteer;
- Age was 38,4 years on average and the standard deviation was 6,5;
- 95% of the personnel were of the male sex, 75% were married and 72% had children. Of the latter 50% had only one child. 28% of the children were 0-6 years old and 72% were 0-15 years old;
- 62% of the military had served more than 21 years in the Armed Forces and 10% had served for less than 10 years;
- 75% of the military had undergone circa 10 to 12 schooling years;
- 67% were NCOs, 28% were officers and the remaining 5% were enlisted personnel;
- 36% had already been deployed, of which 39% had been assigned up to 3 months in such deployments.

5.2 Measures

Following psychological assessment tools were used:

- NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 2000; Lima & Simões, 1995);
- STAI-Form Y (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Form Y: Spielberger et al., 1983; Portuguese version in military context by Silva, D. et al., 1999);
- Psychological evaluation interview;
- Group dynamic session.

Experimental versions of the following constant scales in the Consensus WorkGroup: Common Survey Measures (2000) were also used:

- Soldier Commitment Scale (Biehl, H., vom Hagen, U., & Mackewitsch, R., 2001);
- Physical Symptoms Scale (e.g., Adler, Dolan, Castro, Bienvenu, & Huffman, 2000);
- Work Family Conflict and Family Work Conflict Scales (Netemeyer, Boles, McMurrian, 1996);
- Community Support for Mission (Biehl, H., vom Hagen, U., & Mackewitsch, R., 2001).

5.3 Preliminary results

Because the experimental study has not yet been concluded, this paper is essentially descriptive.

5.3.1 Data from self report questionnaires

Figure 1 compares the averages obtained in the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Form Y) with a military reference population (Silva, D. *et al.*, 1999). This inventory “includes independent personal communication scales, which aim at measuring the anxiety trait and the anxiety state” (Silva, D. et al., 1999, p. 12). The main conclusion to be drawn refers to average results slightly higher than those relative to the Portuguese military population in reference.

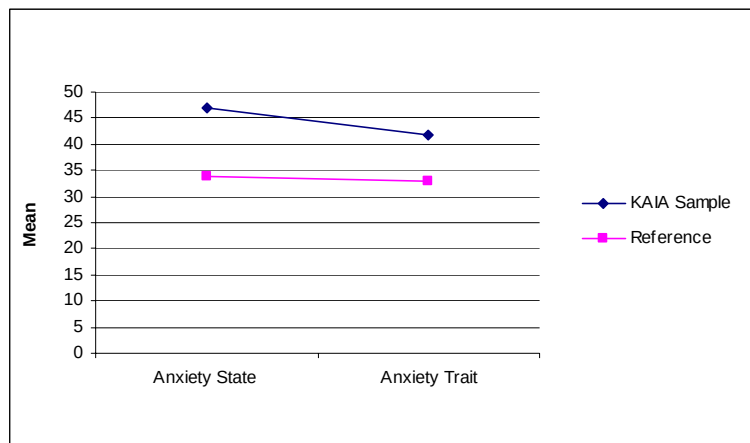


Figure 1: Comparison between the two types of anxiety (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory - Form Y)

Figure 2 provides the averages obtained by the military personnel that integrated the force (Kaia sample) with the reference Portuguese population (Costa & McCrae, 2000; Lima & Simões, 1995). The NEO PI-R is a personality evaluation test (personality self report), which measures five personality dimensions (Big Five). Except for “neuroticism”, all other results are higher than the reference population averages. One should not neglect the bias of the results due to the “social desirability” effect, namely the “impression management” effect (Paulhus, 1984), mainly as far as the “neuroticism” dimension is concerned.

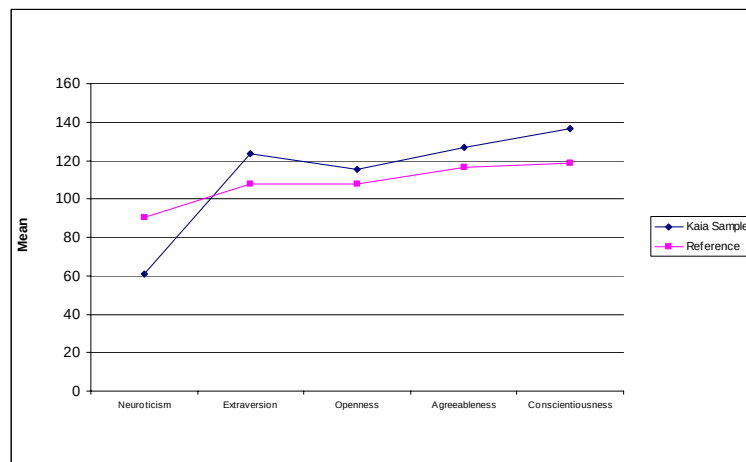


Figure 2: NEO PI-R results between a Kaia sample and a reference military population

5.3.2 Some results from other scales

As regards the Consensus WorkGroup: Common Survey Measures (2000) scales applied in this paper, the hypothesis of a bias (social desirability) is also to be taken into account, in spite of the fact that the force motivation high levels - one should keep in mind that all the personnel had been chosen for the mission and were volunteers - are an important factor to reckon when explaining this phenomenon.

5.3.3 Data from individual evaluation interview

During the psychological evaluation before deployment, all the personnel were individually interviewed by a psychologist. From the reports conducted by the psychologists, and resorting to a content analysis,

the main favourable factors (adjustment factors) and the less favourable ones (risk factors) to the military individual adaptability to the mission were identified. These factors were further classified into categories.

As we can see in figure 3, the main adjustment factors are:

- Social competences (interpersonal relationship capability and team integration);
- Family support;
- Emotional control (stability and self-control in emotionally demanding situations).

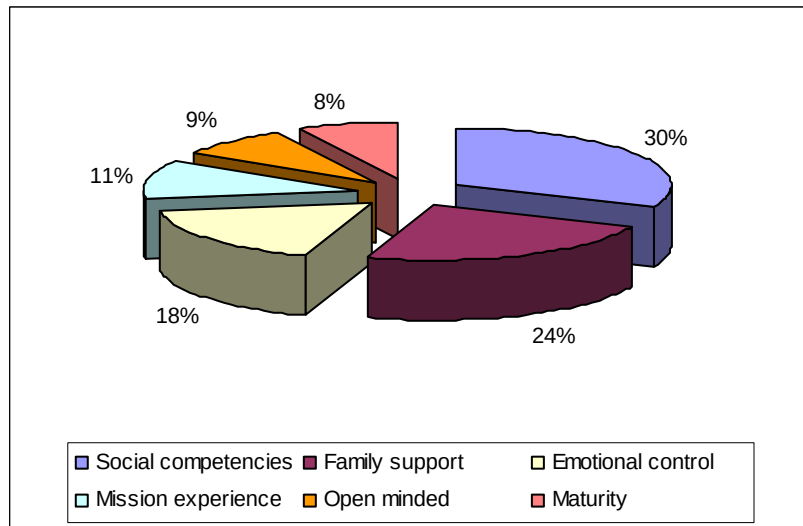


Figure 3: Major adjustment factors identified in the individual interview

Figure 4 relates to the main risk factors identified in the individual interview. Of these it is worth mentioning the following:

- Emotional control (less stability and self-control in stressful situations);
- Family issues (e.g., family health, separation, reaction of children to the absence of the father, children's school problems, etc.);
- Situational adjustment (difficulties in adapting to new situations, the climate, the food, etc.).

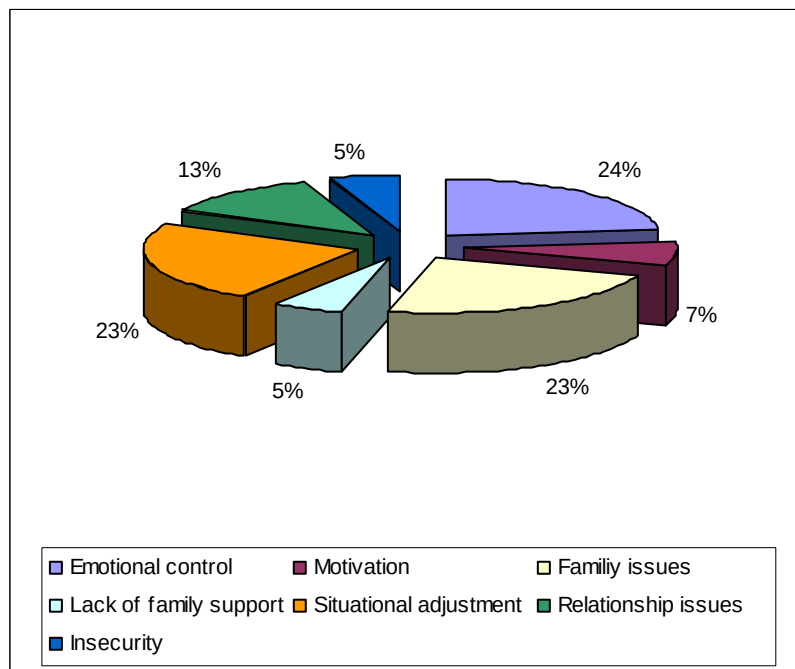


Figure 4: Major risk factors identified in the individual interview

5.4 Evaluation in group dynamics context (group dynamic)

During the psychological evaluation it was deemed important to gather all the personnel (exception made to the commander and respective staff totalling 4 superior officers) at a table in groups of 7-10 people. The objective was to give them a chance to discuss their concerns about the mission and the kind of support they considered important and would therefore like to have from Psychology Centre.

Following are the main conclusions achieved.

5.4.1 Concerning the mission

- Highly motivated
- Eager to depart: they had long been waiting for such an opportunity
- Establishment of a complicity and support among them, despite some of the personnel having proved to be more on the defensive side and endowed with a less spontaneous character
- Not verbalizing whatever kind of criticism as regards the mission preparation process although they have expressed some concerns about the support to be given by the PoAF, in particular to their families: “we are going to be deployed at about 8000 km far from Portugal”

5.4.2 About the psychological support

- In general, the military viewed the contribution of Psychology in a very positive manner and showed great hopes about this kind of support. Some of the personnel, however, showed a more defensive, suspicious attitude concerning not only this kind of support but also the need for it.

5.4.3 Main concerns

- Family support

- Uncertainty: lack of information about the variables in the field of action, mainly as far as the tasks they were supposed to carry out
- Difficulty in dealing with the management of official and officious information and the tackling of the rumours that were going on about the mission

6.0 STRESS MANAGEMENT PREPARATION

About one week before the departure to Afghanistan, the personnel attended a theoretical-practical session about stress management and deployment-related family stress carried out by an Air Force psychologist.

Regarding the first of the issues above, the main topics focused on the following:

- Physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral signs of stress;
- Main stress inducers during the different mission phases (before, during and after deployment);
- Stress management techniques (e.g., progressive muscular relaxation, imagination techniques, diet, physical exercise, breathing, etc.);
- Ways to deal with specific deployment stressors (e.g., isolation, separation, culture shock, sleeping difficulties, real and imagined problems at home, violent and traumatic incidents, etc.);
- Warning the personnel to the importance of recognizing stress in other people.

As far as the second aspect is concerned, the personnel were prepared to family stress, namely to ECOD (the emotional cycle of deployment, developed by Kathleen Vestal Logan).

7.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT DURING DEPLOYMENT

The planning of psychological support to personnel during deployment focused mainly on the following aspects:

- Long-distance support by e-mail or telephone;
- Planned visit of two psychologists to the theatre of operations, at mission mid-term. This visit was scheduled to be conducted during a programmed logistic support flight.

Telephone contacts and electronic mail were also made available to the families and the service would be provided by a team of psychologists if requested. At the military personnel request, it was agreed that the psychologists would not take the initiative in contacting families intervening only upon request either from the military personnel or from their families.

During deployment the following support was requested:

- Two families requested the intervention of the team due to learning problems felt by their children;
- None of the deployed military personnel has asked for any help. Only a few e-mail contacts were made by the psychologist's initiative who, occasionally, contacted them in order to enquire how the mission was progressing;
- The programmed logistic support flight did not take place, consequently, the visit scheduled by the psychologists was not conducted.

8.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION AFTER DEPLOYMENT

So far, also due to reasons not imputable to Psychology Centre, the psychological evaluation after deployment has not yet been conducted and will be made when the traveller's medical appointment is carried out.

9.0 “PSYCHOLOGY SUPPORT”: COMMANDER ANALYSIS

Three meetings with the COMKAIA commander were held upon completion of the mission and following a well-deserved vacation period. In the first meeting the commander was accompanied by his staff.

The main goal of the meetings was to evaluate the collaboration of Psychology in the command's own perspective. Additionally, attention was given not only to the areas to be developed in future missions but also to the lessons learned.

The commander's evaluation was as follows.

9.1 Before deployment

The following factors have been deemed relevant:

- Get ready “psychologically” to deploy
- Try to act normally (people's behavior at home)
- Feedback to COMKAIA – possible personnel “weaknesses”

9.2 During deployment

The following factors have been deemed relevant:

- “Buddy to Buddy support”
- Stress management
- Availability for family support (back at home)

9.3 After deployment

The following factors have been deemed relevant:

- To exchange personnel experience
- To record for future missions
- To prepare “mission phase out” (back to family)

9.4 Areas to improve

- Better communication
- Way people see Psychology
- Feedback

9.5 Lessons learned

- Meetings early before the deployment “in as much as possible”
- More meetings and lectures
- Short visit to customers “KAIA”

10.0 REFLECTIONS

As we have referred before, the current paper has mainly an eminently descriptive purpose about the psychological support experiment carried out during a peace support operation in an aeronautical context.

10.1 Force Commander’s perspective

In the Force Commander’s perspective the intervention was considered positive in the following:

Before deployment:

- It significantly contributed to the personnel’s psychological preparation for the mission, helping them understand that what they and their families were feeling in the pre-deployment phase was part of a normal emotional adaptation process.

During deployment:

- They were ready not only to identify the stress symptoms but also to make use of some stress management techniques;
- Such preparation has contributed to an increase in the self-confidence levels of the personnel. Additionally, a pro-active attitude towards buddy support (social support) was also developed. This is a crucial aspect because it “... can moderate the ill effects on stress” (Bartone, 2005, p. 321);
- The personnel was informed about the main stressors resulting from these type of missions such as isolation, ambiguity, boredom, danger, powerlessness (Bartone, Adler, & Vaitkus, 1998);
- They were sure that, if necessary, there would be a team of psychologists available who would provide psychosocial support to their families.

10.2 Psychological point of view

From the technical point of view, the following comments are important to note:

- The Psychology collaboration has proved to be of the utmost importance but it did not prove to be enough to tackle the situation: the personnel showed a kind of “fear” to be supported by psychological help. A possible explanation for this phenomenon results from the idea that people still have nowadays about the negative impact of Psychology (mental illness, vulnerability, weakness). A clear example of this is an interview made to one of the military who was evacuated (for medical reasons) a month after the deployment had begun. Inquired about the reasons why the comrades were not asking for help, he then answered: “they do not want to get in touch with you because they do not want to be considered weaklings”;
- As far as psychological evaluation before deployment is concerned, the self-report methodologies have proved important in the gathering of information. However, the social desirability effect has somehow contributed to data bias. The most informative techniques came out from the individual interview and group dynamics, possibly because there was a person relationship with the psychologist;

- During deployment the contacts between the Psychology Centre and the personnel were limited and were restricted to some sort of information exchange about the way the mission was being carried out;
- All the above mentioned contacts were initiated by the psychologist who was in charge of monitoring this mission; in all these contacts the personnel have responded that despite missing their families and being workload, they were enjoying the mission. They even referred that they would not mind staying longer;
- Only two requests for family support were registered. Such requests had to do with difficulties felt by two children in adapting to school environment during deployment.

10.3 Possible interpretation of results

Psychological evaluation by Psychology Centre, after deployment, had not been carried out, yet, when this paper was completed. Based on the sessions with the Force Commander and his staff it was possible to understand the general opinion about the collaboration of Psychology, namely of the results achieved. The following aspects have largely contributed for a better understanding of these results:

- The intervention programme to be conducted by the Psychology Centre was requested by the Force Commander. This shows a positive preoccupation and the notion that psychological well-being is important for the success of the mission. Such conscientiousness validates scientific literature when it refers the following:

“As part of effective leadership and force management, commanders and health care personnel must be able to understand and manage stress responses to operational deployments. When these have been inadequately attended to in past operations, the costs have been patently demonstrated in lowered morale, efficiency and effectiveness and also in increased casualty rates, both physical and psychological” (Carver, 1989: *apud* Marshall, 2003, p.39);
- The military personnel had volunteered and been chosen for the mission. Thus, having been chosen made them feel important. On the other hand, the fact that they had accepted the challenge was a clear indication that they had felt they could be successful.

“Soldiers have a tremendous need to see their work and activities as meaningful and important” (Bartone, 2005, p. 319);
- The Portuguese military personnel have a positive attitude towards peace support operations: In fact, according to studies conducted in Portugal, usually the military personnel easily adhere to this type of missions because

“(…) they reinforce the professional identity and the social recognition attributed to the role of the military personnel (…) by society (Carreiras, 1998, p. 93);
- The mission had a duration period of 4 months, which could have had a positive impact as regards “cumulative stress”, which Castro & Adler (1999) label as “deployment load” or “operations tempo - OPTEMPO”.

10.4 Future implications

- As referred above, this is the first time the Psychology Center has participated in a peace support operation;
- “It is the era of peace support operations” (Murphy, 2003, p.4) and the PoAF will certainly have other opportunities to participate in new missions;
- Because “(…) stress can have a profound influence on physical and mental health” (Bartone, 2005, p. 316), Psychology may significantly contribute to minimise such effects, collaborating with

leadership in the implementation of strategies that favour the welfare of military personnel and their families;

- We believe that this participation of the Psychology Center will certainly have positive implications in the way the military personnel will view the collaboration of Psychology in the operational missions involving deployment in the future. We also want to believe that the PoAF Chain of Command will adopt, in the future, the most suitable strategies in order to include the Psychology in the preparation and final reception procedures of all the military personnel involved in such missions. Obviously, these measures must take into account the possibility of psychologists visiting the forces deployed in the theater of operations;
- Psychologists are responsible for conducting experimental investigations allowing for the development of more effective psychological evaluation and intervention methodologies.

11.0 CONCLUSION

- “There is growing evidence that the stress of peace support operations can be as psychologically damaging as conventional warfare” (e.g., Bartone, Vaitkus & Adler, 1994: *apud* Murphy, *ibid.*, p.9).
- The current work has envisaged both a description and reflection upon the first experience of the participation of Psychology in a peace support operation conducted by the PoAF in the Kabul Airport International Command.
- To conclude we quote Colonel Luís Ruivo’s words, commander of the Portuguese Force, about Psychology intervention: “very useful to deal with stress”.

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