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the Commission**

## **Statement submitted by the African Council on Narcotics (ACON), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* [E/CN.7/2023/1](#).

\*\* Issued without formal editing.



## **Substance abuse among service personnel**

### **Abstract**

The use of alcohol, tobacco, narcotics and psychotropic substances among active service personnel is a significant problem. Stressful training, combat deployments, and other rigorous facets of the service culture account for the increased rate of substance use among service personnel. Frequent multiple deployments, combat exposure, and battle-related injuries and experiences are also risk factors for the use of psychoactive substances. This presentation discusses the abuse of psychoactive substances by service personnel. It also looks at the problems that arise from abusing these substances, some of the factors that contribute to them, and strategies for substance abuse prevention, such as the traditional and life skills approaches.

### **Introduction**

A couple of months ago, the African Council on Narcotics (ACON), in collaboration with the Baba-Rabi Foundation (a local NGO), carried out a sensitization programme for the Nigerian Army on the abuse of psychoactive substances at the Army School of Infantry in Jaji, Kaduna State, Nigeria. The well-attended programme was executed under the auspices of the Office of the Chief of Defense Staff (LT. Gen. Lucky Irabor). Over 1200 officers and men participated in the sensitization programme.

The programme's objectives among others were:

- (i) To promote activities that will enhance healthy, drug-free lifestyles, and promote high level professional performance among the officers and men of the Nigerian Armed Forces including the Army, Navy and Air force;
- (ii) To improve upon the psychological stability and alertness of officers and personnel of the Nigeria armed forces;
- (iii) To address problems associated with substance abuse and its attendant consequences on the psych, performance and families of officers and men of the armed forces.

The outcome of the programme inferred that substance abuse is increasingly becoming a major challenge not only amongst service personnel but their families as well. As it were, this challenge seems to be more pronounced in conflict situations.

### **Substance Abuse Among Service Personnel**

Substance abuse, in its simplest definition, is the excessive use of psychoactive substances, especially alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs that act on the central nervous system. It is a bio-psychosocial disease that affects a person's brain or behaviour and leads to the general abuse of illicit drugs. Some of the most frequently abused psychoactive substances among service personnel include alcohol, morphine, codeine, tobacco, cannabis, tramadol, opium, cocaine, heroin, etc.

### **Risk Factors**

The problem of substance abuse amongst service personnel, as it were, is a global phenomenon. Research in Iran shows the list of drugs used, which includes alcohol, marijuana, codeine pills, cough syrup, and opium. Controlling drug abuse in this region is quite problematic because the country is in an illicit drug-producing region, giving service personnel easy access to it.

Some of the other reasons for substance abuse among service personnel is the stress of deployment in war-torn regions. Loneliness, fatigue, being away from home, and spending months on end in a challenging environment could make personnel vulnerable to substance abuse. The stigma associated with addiction and the lack of confidentiality act as deterrents to seeking treatment for drug and alcohol problems.

It is also sad to note that multiple deployments in the military tend to lead to a high risk of drug abuse among service personnel due to the cumulative effect of stress. Amongst others, some of the consequences of involvement of service personnel in drug abuse include poor taking of instructions, poor decision making, and poor execution of tactics, strategies and other operational orders. Besides, drug abuse can lead to dishonourable discharge, seizures, strokes, mental confusion, and brain damage. It also affects interpersonal relationships among service personnel.

Larson et al. (2012) reported that the stresses of deployments and the unique culture of the military offer both risks and protective factors related to substance use among active-duty personnel. According to these experts, half of military personnel have reported that they believe seeking help for mental health issues would negatively affect their career.

### **Preventive Strategies**

#### **(a) The Traditional Approach**

This involves managing alcohol and other related drug problems in the workplace through employee assistance programmes (EAP), the formulation of a substance abuse policy, training of supervisors and managers, sensitization sessions for employees, and testing of these substances (Cook & Youngblood, 1990). The approach focuses on identification of service personnel with alcohol (and other drug) problems, assessment of the problems, and referrals to treatment centres.

Service personnel with substance abuse problems are often directed to their supervisor and then referred to EAP. Some symptoms that may be visible among service personnel that are addicted to illicit drugs include irritability, underperformance in the workplace, an increase in the use of sick leaves, increased workplace accidents, and aggression, which might lead to conflict with colleagues.

Under this approach, commanders are required to delegate officers to act in the position of supervisor(s) to enable them to identify the problem, immediately confront the officer and/or personnel constructively, and refer them to the EAP. In a case where the supervisory officer is unable to identify the service member, such service member can be referred by the family or other colleagues.

It is also important for formations to introduce a substance abuse policy that includes testing personnel for the presence of illicit substances in their systems. Testing can be done prior to enlistment, training, and commissioning, and thereafter occasionally or routinely. It could be after an incident or at odd intervals.

Educational methods/sensitization are also critical for family prevention. They help to educate or increase the conscientization of these personnel about the negative consequences of substance abuse. Common things that should be discussed include:

1. Alcohol, tobacco and marijuana addiction as gateway to other drugs.
2. The reasons for drug abuse and addiction.
3. Drug addiction processes.
4. The general consequences of substance abuse.
5. What help is available.

In addition to routine drug education for officers and personnel, top-level commanders and others also need drug prevention and awareness training. Such training should focus on identification skills, counselling, and referral procedures. The underlined benefit of the traditional approach is that more knowledge will lead to positive attitudinal changes.

The traditional approach focuses mainly on treatment; hence, prevention plays a secondary role in it.

**(b) The Life Skills Approach**

Life skills approaches as strategy for preventing substance abuse among service personnel may be employed and/or introduced right from military academies. These skills are the abilities needed to provide the groundwork for effective stress management and positive behavior on and off duty. The skills also help the personnel to execute both career and social responsibilities and to face daily interpersonal problems effectively.

Life skills revolve around socio-psychological and interpersonal skills, which help individuals to take conscious decisions, communicate effectively, improve interactive and self-management skills, and adopt a healthy lifestyle that can lead to effective service delivery and career productivity. Life skills also help to organize personal, interpersonal, and environmental actions in ways that lead to better health, which in turn leads to more physical, psychological, and social comportment.

Life skills approaches to substance abuse prevention should also focus on socio-psychological factors that lead to drug abuse among individuals and the consequences on family. The emphasis should be on the promotion of personal and social skills. Empirical evidence has shown the positive influence of life skills approach on substance abuse reduction, which also positively impacts self-confidence and the improvement of the ego as positive coping mechanisms.

**Recommendations**

In the light of the foregoing submission, it is herein recommended as follows:

1. Drug abuse prevention education should be introduced into the curricula of all military academies.
2. Top-level and other military commanders must be conversant with and aware of the problems of substance abuse and its prevention strategies.
3. All military formations should set up employment assistance programmes encompassing counselling, referral, mental health, and social support related to substance abuse.
4. It is recommended that military formations set up platforms for random drug testing of personnel for substance abuse and quick professional assessment referrals to well-equipped internal health facilities.

**Conclusion**

This presentation has offered an overview of substance abuse among service personnel. It reviewed its risk factors and prevention approaches and made recommendations on how to tackle the challenge.

**References**

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