

Soldier's death is a wake-up call

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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As if the Ministry of National Defense did not already have enough on its plate as it makes the fitful transition to an all-volunteer military system, the death of a 23-year-old soldier under mysterious circumstances on July 4 risks making the task of attracting recruits all the more onerous.

Army Corporal Hung Chung-chiu's (洪仲丘) death in Taoyuan, from what the public is told was heat stroke, is a stark reminder of the risks that come with a job in the armed forces, as well as of the culture of violence that exists in military establishments the world over.

It is one thing for soldiers to be reprimanded when they break regulations, or for their training to push them to the limits of their physical abilities. After all, the military needs to produce individuals who are capable of handling stress and able to operate under extraordinary hardships. However, it is another to engage in what can only be described as “hazing” or mistreatment, which rather than embolden soldiers serves only to undermine their morale and damage the reputation of the armed forces.

Given the state of the nation's military and the poor image that it has with the public — although this is often unjustified — such incidents cannot be allowed to happen. If they do, the government must do everything in its power to bring the perpetrators to justice and to fix a system that allows for such behavior to occur in the first place.

Hung's case could not have happened at a worse time, as it generates extremely bad publicity just as the armed forces struggle to attract the quality recruits needed to create a smaller, meaner, better educated and more modern military.

Through a combination of entry salaries that cannot possibly compete with those offered in the private sector, the fear of constant displacement, personal risks, rampant defeatism and poor public perceptions of life in the ranks — as well as unfavorable demographics — the ministry has continually failed to meet the recruitment benchmarks it has set for itself so that it can bring down the total active duty force to 215,000 by early 2015, from 270,000 at present.

The well-publicized news of Hung's ill treatment will certainly not help, and the consequences

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could be far worse if the ministry and top officials in President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration do not deal with the matter with the seriousness that the situation warrants. It goes without saying that Hung's family deserve full disclosure on the events leading to their son's death and should be appropriately compensated for their loss. Beyond that, the Ma government must ensure that the scandal does not further undermine morale among the troops and hurt the reputation of the military as a potential career choice.

This is a very serious matter and one that, if mishandled, could complicate the ministry's efforts to shift to a professional system, if not torpedo the program altogether.

Ultimately, what is at stake is not simply the safety of individual members of the armed forces; it is the very service that employs thousands of individuals who, every day, through personal sacrifice and at some risk, patrol this nation's coastlines, air space and waters to ensure that Taiwanese can continue to enjoy the freedoms, liberties and way of life that make Taiwan such a precious place.

The tragedy of Hung's death should be used as an occasion to take a serious look at the conditions under which our soldiers operate and the means by which service in the military can be made more attractive. The ministry owes it to the thousands of young Taiwanese who will undergo boot camp training and those who, for various reasons, will choose to make a career in the armed forces.

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