

Steady decline of military morale

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Ching Chuan Kang Air Base scandal involving personnel testing positive for Category 1 drugs is yet another blow to the armed forces' morale. Premier Lin Chuan's (林) team is being called the "drugs Cabinet," for which Minister of National Defense Feng Shih-kuan (馮) apologized, and one major general has been disciplined for his culpability in the case. Military leaders are scrambling to contain the conflagration, but the fallout continues to damage the armed forces' image.

Given the ready availability of narcotics in Taiwan it is not surprising that prohibited drugs found their way onto a military base. The base is a microcosm of society; soldiers are all ordinary people first. Yes, the base is isolated, but not entirely, and anything that happens in broader society will sooner or later occur on base. This case is not strange, but the damage to the military's image has created a public relations nightmare, and the military must set things right.

Authorities are no closer to solving the case two weeks since it occurred. Subsequent urine tests of military personnel revealed more people who tested positive for drugs use. More incredible is that after Category 2 drugs were discovered on the base, people tested positive for Category 1 drugs. This revelation led to a hemorrhaging of the situation. It is a serious problem that will certainly take more than public criticism and legislative talks to be resolved.

Meanwhile, serving senior officers are expected to oppose the Chinese Communist Party and protect military secrets, but some on retirement travel to Beijing to rub shoulders with leaders there. This lack of discipline, together with the looming threat of government pensions bankruptcy, has meant that morale has sunk to an all-time low. All the talk of reform, regardless of the decision to put changes to military pensions on hold, has seen military personnel protesting outside the legislature, promising to stay there for months.

From the death of army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪) — who died in 2013 allegedly from abuse while serving in the military — to the drugs scandal and pension reform protests, military morale appears to be on the brink of collapse; rigorous training has even been curtailed as a precaution. No drills under a fierce sun, better to wait for cooler weather; no drills if it is too wet, better stay indoors.

Soldiers' social status has plummeted, recruitment numbers are down and military schools are accepting anyone. Gone are the days potential recruits would have to get high grades in

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Chinese and mathematics: Now they just have to turn up to the exams and they are guaranteed a place. Is it any wonder people are worried when the quality of soldiers has sunk so low?

Soldiers are people, too. Sometimes they break the law and, when they do, they are subject to punishment. Respect for the armed forces is important, but it must be earned.

Had the Ching Chuan Kang Air Base investigated the source of the drugs in the first instance and dealt with the situation, subjecting the perpetrators to prompt and transparent disciplinary action, things might not have come to this sorry pass.

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