



BRIEFING PAPER

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Coronavirus: Deploying the armed forces in the UK

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Summary

On 19 March 2020 the Government announced up to 20,000 military personnel will be put on standby to support the public services as part of a new Covid Support Force.

There is a provision for armed forces personnel to be deployed on operations in the UK when asked to do so by relevant civil authorities. This may be to assist with flood relief, bomb disposal or supporting major national events like the Olympic Games. Such requests are known as “military aid to the civil authorities”. The armed forces do not maintain specific forces to assist civil authorities, as assistance is provided depending on the requirement.

Here we explain how this might apply during the Coronavirus pandemic.

When can the armed forces be deployed in the UK?

Civil authorities take the lead in responding to any emergencies or non-military threats to the safety and security of the UK and its citizens. Government departments or civil authorities may call upon the armed forces to assist in planning for, or the response to, an emergency. This is known as Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA).¹ Ministerial approval is required except when life is considered to be immediately at risk.

Defending the UK against military threats is distinct to MACA and is not the subject of this briefing paper.

Will the UK armed forces be deployed in response to covid-19?

On 19 March 2020 the Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced a new ‘[Covid Support Force](#)’ (CSF).² The MoD has put an additional 10,000 military personnel at a higher readiness and placed Reserves on standby to support public services. An existing 10,000

¹ Military Aid to the Civil Authorities used to be subdivided into three different categories - Military Aid to other Government Departments (MAGD), Military Aid to the Civil Power (MACP) and Military Aid to the Civil Community (MACC). These categories were removed in the third edition of JDP 02.

² “[Military stands up COVID support force](#)”, Ministry of Defence, 19 March 2020

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personnel are already held at higher readiness³, meaning that up to 20,000 personnel will be available if needed.

What will the CSF do?

The CSF may be called upon to provide a range of support to other government departments or civil authorities. From Monday 23 March 150 personnel will be trained to drive oxygen tankers in order to support the NHS if required. Specialist staff are supporting the Government's wider response: specialist military planners are supporting Local Resilience Forums while scientists from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) are supporting Public Health England.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has previously suggested the army could backfill the police if required.⁴

What if military personnel contract covid-19?

The Times reports that the MoD has made contingency plans for up to 20 per cent of its CSF to contract the illness. Some personnel with essential skills will be put into quarantine to ensure they do not become infected.⁵

Box 1: Have other countries deployed their armed forces during the Coronavirus pandemic?

Yes. In France and Italy the military have assisted with transport during Coronavirus-related lockdowns

France: the French army used its specialist transport fleet, equipped with intensive care facilities, to transfer six critical patients in eastern France to a military hospital. The French military said this was the first time it has used its "Morphée system" for civilians. The system is usually used to evacuate troops from conflict zones.⁶ In addition, the French defence minister Florence Parly said the army would hand over five million surgical masks from its own stockpiles to the health ministry.⁷

Italy: The army helped move bodies in Bergamo in north Italy to relieve pressure on the local crematorium. The bodies were taken to neighbouring provinces.⁸

Spain: Army specialists in protective suits helped disinfect train stations in Madrid after the city was locked down in mid-March 2020. The Government has ordered the army's pharmacy specialists to produce disinfectant and generic medicines in bulk.⁹

Serbia: Serbia's military was deployed to its borders on 18 March as authorities imposed a state of emergency. It is the first time since 2007 that the military have been deployed to the border.¹⁰

What is the legal basis for Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA)?

The legal authority to use Service personnel in operations under Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) is governed by the *Civil Contingencies Act 2004* and the Emergency

³ The 10,000 were announced as part of the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review to assist the civil authorities for significant terrorist incidents at short notice. This is known as Operation Temperer.

⁴ "[UK PM Johnson says army ready to step in if coronavirus escalates](#)", Reuters, 3 March 2020

⁵ "[Coronavirus update: army gets ready to drive oxygen tankers to hospitals](#)", The Times, 19 March 2020

⁶ "[Army steps in to help badly hit eastern France cope with coronavirus](#)", France 24, 18 March 2020

⁷ "[French police fine more than 4000 people violating the lockdown](#)", France 24, 18 March 2020

⁸ "[Italian army moves coronavirus dead from overwhelmed town](#)", Reuters, 19 March 2020

⁹ "[Army disinfects train stations as Spain's coronavirus death toll doubles](#)", Reuters, 15 March 2020

¹⁰ "[Serbia's military deploys at borders to help fight coronavirus](#)", Reuters, 18 March 2020

Powers Act 1964 (Section 2). In addition, service personnel can deploy under the Royal Prerogative for military tasks.¹¹

Authorisation process

With only a few exceptions, requests for military assistance must be approved by the Ministry of Defence. In certain cases – when there is an urgent need to protect life, alleviate distress and/or protect significant property – local commanders are empowered to respond under the authority of a 1983 Defence Council Order.

What sort of things might the armed forces do under MACA?

The armed forces may be called upon by local and civil authorities for a wide range of tasks. But broadly speaking the military may be called upon in an emergency:

- for their niche capabilities (this is explained below)
- general support when civil authorities' capacity/capability is overwhelmed by an incident
- in preparation for major national events

One of the most common tasks is an example of a niche capability: explosive ordnance disposal search support to police services.¹² Other examples include specialist reconnaissance aircraft to locate missing persons or provide specialist aerial imagery. The Royal Navy's Fishery Protection Squadron supports the Marine Management Organisation with fishery patrols and inspections.¹³

Military personnel may be called out on a wide-variety of tasks, from bomb disposal to helping with flood relief.

More general support may be required [during times of flooding](#), or to protect major events, such as G8 or NATO summits. [18,000 military personnel were involved in protecting the 2012 Olympic Games](#). Personnel may also be trained in anticipation of industrial action by emergency or essential services.

The armed forces do not maintain specific forces to assist civil authorities, as assistance is provided depending on the requirement. 10,000 military personnel are available on standby to assist the civil authorities for significant terrorist incidents at short notice (see box 2). The army has three battalions placed at extremely high readiness to respond to emergencies in the UK. This amounts to 1,200 soldiers on 24 hours standby on an enduring basis.¹⁴ The army also [changed its rules in June 2016](#) to allow troops who have passed basic training (phase 1) to be deployed on operations in the UK.

Military personnel have also supported the police in response to terror threats or attacks. In February 2003 troops in armoured personnel carriers were deployed to [Heathrow airport in February 2003](#) as part of a temporary wider tightening of security in the capital. The Ministry of Defence provided logistical and technical support after the 7/7 bombings in 2005. personnel have also been deployed in the aftermath of terror attacks in the UK to support the police.

¹¹ This is discussed in more detail in section 2.14-2.21 of JDP 02, [UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), third edition, February 2017

¹² [DEP2015/0803](#), 13 October 2015. Explosive ordnance disposal does not just mean bomb disposal. It may take many forms – for example in 2016 army bomb disposal units helped safely dispose of potentially dangerous [chemicals](#) at a number of schools.

¹³ Three Royal Navy River-class patrol boats are tasked with fisheries protection around the UK to support the Marine Management Organisation but they may also perform maritime counter-terrorism, pollution control or counter-drug surveillance tasks.

¹⁴ [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19](#), HC 2347, July 2019

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Specialist units may provide specialist support. The [Defence Medical Services](#) has over 11,000 service and 2,200 civilian personnel providing healthcare to armed forces personnel.

Box 2: Responding to terror attacks: Operation Temperer

10,000 military personnel are available on standby to assist the civil authorities for significant terrorist incidents at short notice, the Government announced in its [Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) in November 2015 (para 4.98).

Operation Temperer is the name of the standing operational contingency plan and it was activated following the Manchester attack in May 2017, when the Government raised the national security threat level to critical. Approximately 1,400 Defence personnel were involved, primarily by guarding locations across the country to free up armed police officers.¹⁵

Do soldiers carry their weapons?

Very rarely. Explicit authorisation is required for personnel to be armed. The MoD's guidance states "[using military personnel armed with weapons for MACA operations will always be an exception](#)".¹⁶

Can soldiers arrest people?

Responsibility for law enforcement lies with the police and the Home Office. The MoD guidance is clear that all MACA operations must be conducted within the law. Unlike the police, Service personnel have the same powers of arrest as ordinary citizens.¹⁷

There was some discussion during the Brexit process about deploying the military to help maintain public order. The MoD said in September 2019: "the maintenance of public order is the responsibility of the police. There are no plans to utilise military personnel in the event of civil unrest in the event of a no-deal Brexit".¹⁸

The Ministry of Defence Police (MDP)

The Ministry of Defence does have a specialist armed police force. The [MDP is a national civilian police force](#) and protects sites such as GCHQ, the Atomic Weapons Establishment, and naval bases.

MDP officers have the full powers and privileges of constables, identical to other civil police officers in the UK, within the jurisdiction defined by the MOD Police Act 1987.¹⁹ That jurisdiction is limited and largely confined to Defence purposes (for example naval dockyards).

However, jurisdiction was extended by the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 to allow MDP officers to exercise police powers where a local police force requests the assistance of MDP officers. On those occasions, MDP police will be under the operational control of the local Chief Constable from the requesting force, and will have the same police powers as officers of that force.²⁰ Further information on MDP jurisdiction and policing protocols with other forces is available on gov.uk: [MDP jurisdiction](#).

There has been no mention of the MDP police in relation to the Coronavirus pandemic.

¹⁵ [PQ3537](#), 14 July 2017; [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2016/17](#), p36; [Prime Minister's statement](#) following second COBR meeting on Manchester attack: 23 May 2017

¹⁶ JDP 02, [UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), third edition, February 2017

¹⁷ JDP 02, UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security, third edition, February 2017

¹⁸ [PQ290659](#), 30 September 2019 and [PQ221594](#), 19 February 2019

¹⁹ [The Ministry of Defence Policing Plan 2019-20](#) explains in detail the role of the MDP.

²⁰ [Guidance: Ministry of Defence Police Jurisdiction](#), Ministry of Defence, 21 May 2014

How many times is MAC used?

The MoD provided MACA on over 120 occasions in 2018-19.²¹ Numbers are given in the Ministry of Defence's [Annual Report and Accounts](#) along with examples of activity.

UK fixed tasks, such as explosive ordnance disposal and support to UK counter-terrorism operations (including counter-chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear capability) are also conducted under MACA.²²

Policy development

Military aid to the Civil Authorities has long been identified as one of the standing home tasks of the armed forces. This was stated in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (Cm 7953) and again in the 2015 [National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) (Cm 9161). The 2015 SDSR set the armed forces eight missions, the first of which is: *defend and contribute to the security resilience of the UK and Overseas Territories*. This explicitly includes supporting the UK civil authorities in strengthening resilience.²³

A policy review of MACA was published by the Government in February 2016 and in 2017 a new edition of Joint Doctrine Publication 02 *UK Operations: The Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security*, was published incorporating the main elements of the policy review. One of the key developments is greater involvement of Defence in planning for rather than simply responding to civil contingencies.

Planning for civil contingencies

The Ministry of Defence is not a designated lead department for planning for, and responding to, any civil contingencies, except in the event of a defence nuclear material accident or emergency. However as outlined above current government policy is for Defence to be more involved in preparing for potential emergencies.

Defence is no longer considered a "last resort option", the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff has said; rather "defence should be ready and configured to play an early role in providing civil resilience."²⁴ This was formalised in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review which announced military planners are to be placed in key government departments to give the military a "wider and more formal role in supporting national resilience contingency planning".

Library briefing paper [Dealing with civil contingencies: emergency planning in the UK](#), CBP08016, looks at emergency planning in the UK: the responsibilities of each of the responding agencies and how those fit within the framework for planning for and responding to civil contingencies laid down by Government.

²¹ [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19](#), HC 2347, July 2019

²² Defence Strategic Direction 2016 directed that Defence should conduct its UK fixed tasks under MACA. DSD16 is classified and this reference can be found in JDP 02 para 1.10

²³ Resilience is defined as the "ability of the community, services, area or infrastructure to detect, prevent, and, if necessary to withstand, handle and recover from disruptive challenges" Cabinet Office, *UK Civil Protection Lexicon Version 1.1.1.*, February 2013, quoted in JDP 02, third version, part 2: lexicon.

²⁴ JDP 02, third edition, foreword

Who pays?

With a few exceptions, MACA activity is not funded from the Defence budget. As such, the Ministry of Defence can recover the costs involved, depending on the assistance required. There is no cost involved if an immediate military intervention is required to prevent the loss of life. Full costs are recovered for non-emergency, planned routine support.

Box 3: Operation Banner and Northern Ireland

Between 1969 and 2007 the armed forces were deployed on Operation Banner to support the police and civil authorities in Northern Ireland. When asked in 2016 what contingency plans the Ministry of Defence has to respond to a raised security threat level in Northern Ireland, the Defence Minister replied:

Policing and security remains the responsibility of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Security Service. As with the rest of the UK, there are a number of standing contingency plans in place to provide Defence support in Northern Ireland beyond the capacity of the civil authorities and in times of crisis. I am withholding the detail of these contingency plans for the purpose of safeguarding national security and in order not to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of our armed forces.

Beyond this, as with the rest of the UK, Defence will consider requests for additional assistance on a case-by-case basis, ensuring that support provided is in line with Military Aid to the Civil Authorities principles.²⁵

Further resources

- Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP 02) [Operations in the UK: defence contribution to resilience](#) outlines the contribution of the armed forces to UK resilience. The third edition was published in February 2017 and is the primary source for this briefing paper.
- 2015-2020 government policy: [Military aid to the Civil Authorities for activities in the UK, August 2016](#)
- [The Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#)
- Ministry of Defence [Annual Report and Accounts](#) for examples of MACA requests.
- Library briefing paper [Dealing with civil contingencies: emergency planning in the UK](#), CBP 08016.
- Library briefing paper, [Parliamentary approval for military action](#), CBP07166, 13 May 2015
- Michael Head and Scott Mann, [Domestic deployment of the armed forces: military powers, law and human rights](#), Routledge, 2009

²⁵ [PQ46175](#), 21 September 2016

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