

INTERVIEW: COL. JUAN MANUEL GARRIDO-ARROQUÍA NOVES. "OPERATION BALMIS"

Ana Fe Gil Serra, Director of the European Documentation Centre in Almeria interviews Mr. Juan Manuel Garrido-Arroquia Noves

Colonel Juan Manuel Garrido-Arroquia y Noves, currently Head of the Spanish Army's Lessons Learned Section, under the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), has extensive national and international training in the field of Information and Telecommunications Systems for Security and Defence. In his long professional career, it is worth highlighting his participation in international missions, such as UNIFIL (Operation Libre Hidalgo) in Lebanon and EUTM-Mali, in Bamako. Previously he was a CIS analyst at the European Army Corps Headquarters (Strasbourg, France) and Command and Control Network Manager of the KFOR 3 field operations at NATO Headquarters in Kosovo.

Since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic, most European Union Member States have mobilized their armed forces. The **Operazione Strade Sicure** in Italy or the **Opération Résilience** in France are examples comparable to our **Operation Balmis**, launched on March 15. Similar actions have also taken place in countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia. Last May, the European Parliament stressed that, as in previous disasters, the pandemic has highlighted the human side of the armed forces and that their contribution has been vital in curbing the effects of this global crisis.

QUESTION. Operation Balmis has probably been the operation that has given the Armed Forces the greatest visibility among Spanish citizens. The reception has been extraordinary, but I imagine it has also been a complicated puzzle due to the constant coordination, not only internally, but also with civil institutions.



ANSWER. The execution of an operation in response to a crisis situation in national territory and in times of peace, such as operation BALMIS, is, without a doubt, a great showcase that allows citizens to see the efforts made in planning and preparation, generating the necessary confidence in the collective subconscious to overcome the challenge faced.

The extraordinary reception of the population becomes a factor that multiplies the morale of the military personnel, who, feeling recognized and supported by the citizens, do not hesitate to redouble the efforts necessary to overcome the crisis.

One of the main capacities that the Armed Forces contribute to the different Contingency Plans is the **Command and Control** capacity.

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The liaison and coordination procedures –both internal and external- are established and early planned. They are materialized by the preparation exercises, in which the Armed Forces as well as the different organisations of the central, regional and local administration with competences in the different areas of interest for national security, health security, public security, and civil protection participate. Requests for assistance from the different administrations and entities are channelled through the Government Delegations (Defence Sub-delegates/RIET/COMIL in Spanish), which makes coordination much easier.

All the effort made in planning and preparation is what makes possible the integral action of the state in times of crisis, making possible the rapid response and solution of the same.

QUESTION. Colonel, how has it been coordinated and how many troops have been involved so far?

ANSWER. Operation Balmis, which remains open, began on 15 March. This operation is the largest deployment of troops in Spain's recent history with the mission of supporting the population and public services in their efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus. As the most significant data, from that day to this more than **19,500** interventions have been carried out, some **11,000** disinfections have been performed, more than **5,700** interventions in retirement homes, actions have been taken in more than **2,200** different populations, in more than **3,300** hospitals and health centres and more than **1,200** interventions have been carried out in social

centres, all of which involved the intervention of more than **178,000 military** personnel.

In the central weeks, 550 interventions were carried out daily, with some 7,800 military personnel mobilized (3,000 of them belonging to the military health service) acting in 200 villages. Of all this effort, the Army has so far committed some 110,000 troops (patrols in more than 3,000 villages, disinfections in more than 1,800 facilities, more than 831 evacuations, 61 logistical supports and 12 permanent health supports.

A Command and Control structure was established under the direction of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Air Force General Miguel Ángel Villarroya, who directs the operation through the Operations Command (OP). Under this command, are integrated the capabilities of the Inspectorate-General of Defence Health (IGESANDEF in Spanish) and the four Component Commands are integrated: The Land Component Command (LCC), originally located at the Buenavista Palace (Madrid) -site of the Spanish General Army HQ and currently located at the headquarters of the Canary Islands Command (Tenerife)- the Maritime Component Command (MCC), located at the Fleet Headquarters in Rota (Cadiz), and the Joint Force Air Component Command (JFAC) and the Emergency Unit (EMU), both located in Torrejón de Ardoz. In addition, other units such as the Royal Guard and the Joint Cyber Defence Command are also participating. As regards the percentage of intervention by Component Command, the EMU stands out with 43%, followed by the LCC with 35%, the MCC with 17% and the JFAC with 5%.

As I mentioned before, requests for assistance from the various administrations and authorities are channelled through the Government Delegations (Defence Sub-delegates/RIET/COMIL in Spanish). Once approved, they are sent to the Operations Command (OC), where the analytical officers study the requests, both for logistical support and health, and determine the most appropriate personnel and means. Subsequently, the intervention is assigned to the different Component Commands (LCC, MCC, JFA or EMU) which in turn designate the mission to the unit that will provide the assistance.

As regards the areas of action, the Armed Forces have participated in security support missions, with actions of presence in streets and critical points, and in border reinforcements and surveillance of nuclear power plants. This activity has mainly fallen to the Army, due to its large number of troops and wide territorial deployment, but it has also been necessary to activate patrols of the Air Force, the Navy and the Civil Guard.

Action has also been taken in the area of logistical support, with missions of land and air transport, for transferring of the sick and deceased, and for reception and distribution of medical equipment. The EMU's Technological and Environmental Emergency Intervention Group (GIETMA in Spanish) has been responsible for the transfer of patients and the preparation and transport of the deceased in the Community of Madrid, supported by the Guadarrama XII and Parachute Brigades and the NBC Defence Regiment. For the transport of the bodies to the intermediate warehouses, very safe procedures have been developed for the transfer of the deceased in biosafety conditions, always with a respectful attitude. The transport teams were responsible for transferring them to the Ice Palace in Madrid and the Majadahonda Palace and to the Institute of Legal Medicine.

The procedure for transferring dead bodies to intermediate storage facilities has been developed in a very safe way in biosecurity conditions and always with a respectful attitude

Action has also been taken to disinfect health centres, retirement homes, airports, ports, railway stations, prisons, government facilities, public roads and shops. The effort, which was initially undertaken by the Military Emergency Unit (Technological and Environmental Emergency Intervention Group (GIETMA in Spanish), was joined by members of the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) Defence units and veterinary services of the Navy, Air Force and Royal Guard, acting mainly in health centres and retirement homes.

To date, more than 10,000 facilities and more than 5,000 nursing homes have been disinfected.

Finally, action has been taken in the area of facility support (field hospitals, triage areas, camps for the homeless, food bank collection and distribution) and also by providing military health means and personnel in the military hospitals of Madrid and Zaragoza, the Military Pharmacy Centre, the Military Veterinary Centre and the Psychology Unit of IGESANDEF (in Spanish).

QUESTION. All this work has shown that the Armed Forces are prepared to operate with limited resources and at short notice. What exercises or simulations do you carry out in the face of possible public health crises, such as the one we are experiencing?

ANSWER. In the framework of national security, it is essential to pay special attention to a number of areas that are of particular interest in order to preserve the well-being of citizens, their rights and freedoms. One such area is health security.

In this context, the **National Security System** has specific agencies that by carrying out the prospective analyses, define the possible scenarios for action based on the potential threats and the assessment of the associated risks.

In order to manage and successfully overcome the different crisis scenarios raised, a comprehensive and coordinated response from the different instruments of power of the nation is necessary.

For each of the scenarios proposed, the military instrument defines the possible military response options that, adjusted to the corresponding planning processes, give rise to the so-called "Contingency Plans", which set out the tasks, capabilities and military resources to be used in each case. The Armed Forces' Preparedness Plans include specific exercises for the practice and evaluation of the different scenarios contemplated in the contingency plans designed to face the materialization of threats to national security. This continuous effort of planning and preparation is what allows the quick, effective and efficient response to real situations, guaranteeing the resilience of the State.

QUESTION. A novelty in the operation has been the direct intervention of Army units specialized in NBC environment in support of certain tasks initially assigned to the EMU. Could you evaluate the participation of these NBC units and how has coordination with the EMU units been in this regard?

ANSWER. The action in Nuclear Biological and Chemical (NBC) environment is one of the special capabilities that the Army contributes to this operation, which has the qualified personnel of the **NBC Defense Regiment "Valencia" No. 1** and the NBC companies that each Brigade of the Land Force has. In addition to this capacity, there are 26 military veterinary teams, which have disinfection capabilities. These units are commanded by a veterinary officer, and their personnel are trained in the use and application of biocides.

Participation in Operation Balmis focuses on disinfection inside facilities with positive cases. This type of action requires expert personnel in biological threats, protection measures and decontamination. These are very demanding missions since NBC defence, as it is called in the military field, and requires a great deal of specialisation.

The Environmental and Technological Emergency Intervention Group of the EMU intervened in confined spaces where there have been coronavirus positives or, above all, in those spaces that have a high viral load and for whose disinfection the use of much more specialized and powerful decontamination solutions is required.

At the end of March, when it became clear that the health crisis required much more effort, Land Component Command launched over 100 non-specific decontamination teams to carry out preventive missions in the NBC area.

These teams are equipped with spraying equipment trained internally in the NBC companies of their Brigades and in the NBC Military Defence School. More than 1,600 decontamination operations have been carried out with this equipment.

With regard to the transfer of bodies, and in view of the large number of deaths in the first weeks and the saturation of funeral services, the Community of Madrid requested the assistance of the Spanish Armed Forces for the transfer of bodies. The Military Emergency Unit was in charge of this task, with the support of NBC units of the Army (the NBC Regiment Health Squad, highly trained in the extraction of victims or casualties from a contaminated area, and the NBC companies of the "Almogávares" VI Parachute Brigade, and the "Guadarrama" XII Brigade), with teams composed of nine military personnel, being reinforced in body handling tasks. Normally, they are divided into two teams; one is responsible for collecting the deceased, bagging him, and then the other team deposits him in the coffin so that another team can transport him to the provisional morgues.

The coordination of the members of these NBC Units of the Army with the EMU has been and is magnificent, since for some time now, and during their training periods, these units have been carrying out joint exercises and exchanging information and procedures in missions that are performed in this environment.



QUESTION. From European Union institutions to the smallest local authority, the action protocols applied so far are being evaluated in order to improve our preparedness for possible public health crises. How is this evaluation and improvement work carried out by the Lessons Learned Section of the Training and Doctrine Command?

ANSWER. In the Army we understand as Lesson Learned the knowledge extracted from the analysis of experiences in operations, exercises and other activities of the Army, sanctioned at the corresponding level, with the purpose of improving the organisation, preparation, equipment and use of the Army. We also understand as Good Practice the experience of proven effectiveness that can be replicated by others, in similar situations and conditions.

At the Army level, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), has for organizational reasons, the mission, among others, to establish the detailed precepts and procedures for obtaining lessons learned (LL) and best practices (BP) from the experiences of the units in operations, exercises and other activities of the Army. This mission is entrusted to one of its Directorates, the Directorate of Research, Organic and Materials (TRADOC), and specifically to the Lessons Learned Section, which I currently command. At a joint level and under the direction of the Defence Staff there is a committee called COELAMP (Executive Committee on Lessons Learned and Best Practices) in which we participate on behalf of the Army as a "LAMP ET Cell".

To implement and manage this process of lessons learned in the Army, a series of rules and instructions are available, which establish the detailed rules and procedures for obtaining lessons learned and good practices from the experiences of the units in operations, exercises and other daily activities. A computerized tool has also been developed to support this process of obtaining information, which can be accessed from anywhere on the Ministry of Defence's corporate network, and which makes it possible to collect, store and disseminate all those lessons learned and experiences in a centralized manner.

Likewise, an Annual Plan for Lessons Learned (PAOLA in Spanish) is established, in which the preferred topics of interest of the Chief of Army Staff (CSA) and therefore of the Army are determined, so that the Units take them into account when extracting the lessons learned and experiences during the execution of exercises and the preparation and training activities of the operations.

In general, the procedure for obtaining lessons learned consists of two phases; the analysis phase and the validation phase, in which the following stages take place: observation, analysis, internal approval, implementation, sanction and dissemination.

When Operation Balmis was launched, the Chief of Army Staff (CSA), through specific instructions, to the Lieutenant General, Chief of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) the need and importance of establishing a specific lessons learned system for that Operation.

To this end, the Land Army Doctrine Command regulated a lessons-learned procedure for the operation and adapted the web support tool, taking into account the priority capability areas arising from an operation of this type. Within the scope of the Land Component Command, all the Lessons Learned Management Officers (LLMO) of each of the units involved were activated, and are responsible for managing the cycle of lessons learned and best practices at their level. In turn, the Army Doctrine Command appointed a lessons learned analyst officer who joined the Land Component Command Headquarters, where he currently serves as an LLMO at that Command level.



We have a lot to learn from this type of mission, which, although are foreseen in the contingency plans that are made, are not the typical missions that the Army carries out, and of which we do not have much experience. That is why we need a system that allows us to learn from what has been done well, from what has been done badly and from what can be improved. Many people's lives could depend on that correct learning. All this information must be collected, compiled and disseminated at all levels and that is our mission.