

"Every time I see our soldiers off on their mission to Afghanistan, I thank them for their choice of profession. I thank them for their willingness to serve the Republic of Estonia on the front line – the battlefield – in the deepest sense of the word. I also thank their next of kin and friends who support them in their choice," said President Toomas Hendrik Ilves tonight at a charity dinner organised by the Carolin Illenzeer Foundation.

"To avoid gratitude being simply limited to words, Estonia needs a veteran policy that would involve the whole of society. I understand that this document is about to be completed, under the control of the Ministry of Defence, and as a consequence, I hope this year that we will be able to give more recognition and acknowledgment to those men and women who have chosen the profession of a soldier and have personal mission experience," said the President.

The Estonian Head of State emphasised that if the Estonian Parliament and Government adopt a thoroughly considered decision to send their defence force members to battle, the state also takes a huge responsibility. "Responsibility for both the defence force members themselves and their next of kin. The state will also take responsibility for units returning from battlefield; it must remain attentive and understanding of the fact that some of the battles or incidents may last forever in the head and soul of a soldier," said President Ilves.

"But the state also takes responsibility for the tragic cases that show war's darkest side to the fighters. Responsibility in situations where we receive news of people being killed or seriously wounded in some distant battlefield. In situations when an Estonian home is devastated by the unexpected notification of a husband, father, son or brother being killed in action," added the President.

According to the Estonian Head of State, it is the moral duty of a state and society to ensure support for a veteran and his/her family both before, during and after operations; support as extensive as possible for injured defence force members who wish to continue their careers in the Defence Forces; and a post-mission support system that stems, above all, from third sector activities. "I invite all entrepreneurs and active citizens to contribute their ideas in determining the best possible ways to achieve these results," he added.

At today's charity dinner, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves handed over a 15,000 USD donation cheque from the Estonian American Fund to the Carolin Illenzeer Foundation.

#### Background information

The purpose of the Carol Illenzeer Foundation, which was established as a charity fund, is to support the children of Estonian defence force members who were killed in action, have died or have been seriously injured. Donations will be used to cover the educational costs and hobby activities of the children of such servicemen. Carolin Illenzeer, whose name was used as the title for the foundation, is the daughter of Senior Warrant Officer Arre Illenzeer who was killed in 2004 in Iraq. Carolin's father saw his daughter only once, when he came home for a short break from the mission. The Foundation was established by the Estonian Atlantic Treaty Association, the Estonian Reserve Officers' Association and OSMITH, an organisation that brings together Christian officers.

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