

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Olympic winner Gerd Kanter met today at the British Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre Headley Court with six Estonian defence force members who were seriously wounded in Afghanistan.

"During these days when we speak a lot about the great achievements of our Olympic athletes, we must not forget about those who hold high the honour of the Estonian flag on the battlefield. You are heroes who deserve the extensive support of the state as well as support and understanding from society as a whole," told President Ilves.

He thanked Great Britain, Estonia's ally in NATO's operation in Afghanistan, for offering modern and successful treatment and rehabilitation opportunities to our injured defence force members.

"This will considerably ease the lives of our injured soldiers and has also helped us to develop the required systems in Estonia," told the Head of State.

President Ilves reminded that the Estonian Ministry of Defence is currently developing the basis for the "veterans' policy", which will serve to ensure the social acknowledgment and professional support of all our defence force members who have served in operations abroad.

"Supporting a veteran and his/her family both before, during and after a foreign operation must be a shared concern of the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Forces – so that no one who has fought for Estonia would feel abandoned by Estonia later," emphasised President Ilves. According to the President, we should also consider increasing the pension for incapacity for work that is paid to soldiers who have been injured in Iraq or Afghanistan.

"Many of them continue to work in the Defence Forces; however, not all can do this," added the Head of State.

Gerd Kanter, Olympic hero, encouraged our soldiers to move on with their lives, with vigour, despite their injuries and perhaps even in defiance of their injuries.

"You and I are alike, in ways – we both need lots of faith in ourselves, apart from training and practicing, and then the third attempt will be successful," told Kanter. "I am proud that Estonia has soldiers like you."

The Head of State and Gerd Kanter, a former Olympic gold medallist in the discus who won a bronze medal at the London Olympic games, gave sweatshirts of the Estonian Olympic team to the Estonian Defence Force members.

Approximately 2,300 Estonian Defence Force members have taken part in the foreign operations of the Defence Forces since 1995. 130 soldiers have been wounded in action, 34 seriously.

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