

Mr Neil Parekh Nimil Rajnikant asked the Minister for Defence (a) in what ways have the various overseas training detachments abroad helped to sharpen the training and warfare skills of the men and women of the Singapore Armed Forces in land-scarce Singapore; and (b) in what ways have these overseas training detachments boosted bilateral defence ties between Singapore and the host country providing the training facilities.

The Senior Minister of State for Defence (Mr Heng Chee How) (for the Minister for Defence): Mr Speaker, the primary purpose of overseas training detachments is to enable the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to train realistically and remain operationally ready. Singapore's limited land, air and sea space constrains the scale and complexity of military training that SAF can conduct locally. The Ministry of Defence and SAF are grateful to our foreign partners and their people who have extended valuable overseas training opportunities to us.

With access to overseas training spaces, SAF is able to hone its warfighting skills in complex scenarios, realistic conditions and varied terrain. For example, the Shoalwater Bay Training Area in Australia, which is the location for Exercise Wallaby, is about five times the size of Singapore. It allows SAF to exercise the full range of capabilities and cross-service integrated training. Its varied terrain, ranging from beaches to light forests and open fields, allows our commanders to hone their military training and leadership, and our soldiers to polish their execution and capabilities.

Long-term overseas training detachments also offer the added benefit of learning and benchmarking with our foreign counterparts. Our Air Force's overseas training detachments in the United States (US), for example, do not just provide our F-16 fighter aircraft and Apache attack helicopter pilots and crew access to large airspaces and live-firing ranges to sharpen their skills. They also provide our people valuable opportunities to participate in exercises and competitions to learn from and benchmark against their US counterparts.

In addition to conducting regular exchanges with their professional counterparts, SAF personnel in our overseas training detachments participate actively in local community life and contribute back to the local communities, thus contributing to the strengthening of bilateral ties. As an example, the RSAF's 150 Squadron based in Cazaux Air Base in France joins the French in Bastille Day flypast ceremonies and celebrations. Our personnel also stand ready to render assistance in times of need. Again, as an example, our CH-47 Chinooks in Queensland had done so last month, in supporting Australia's flood relief efforts.

We thank our foreign partner countries and their people who have welcomed us warmly into their countries and communities and extended valuable training opportunities to SAF.

Mr Neil Parekh Nimil Rajnikant (Nominated Member): I thank the Senior Minister of State for his response. Could I ask the Senior Minister of State to share the various safety protocols that are upheld when training is done overseas? And to date, how has the safety record for SAF been in its overseas training exercises in the last few years?

Mr Heng Chee How: I thank Mr Neil Parekh for the supplementary question. To begin with, I want to take this opportunity to also stress this point that, while we seek realistic training in order to hone our war fighting skills, we do so with utmost priority also accorded to the safety of our soldiers across different terrains and different scenarios, both locally as well as overseas.

SAF trains realistically in challenging terrain and tempo of drills locally and especially in overseas exercises. Safe training can only be achieved with a strong safety culture and robust safety management system which emphasises both leadership accountability as well as personal responsibility of soldiers. To achieve safety outcomes and zero fatalities in these exercises, detailed assessments of risks in

each part of each exercise are required, together with concrete plans to avoid injuries. Commanders lead in these measures and the safe conduct of exercises is a key deliverable. Safety standards and protocol procedures are specified for a range of training activities. Soldier training is conducted progressively to ensure that they master the basics before moving on to more demanding tasks and complex situations, and pre-activity safety briefs and drills are also conducted as reminders.

On top of the pre-planning to make sure that we lower any possible risk to the minimum, obviously, in the protocols, there would also be safety provisions on site in the event that, despite the planning, there could be certain injuries, in which case, then the response and the responsiveness will be very key. And in the case of overseas training, then there will be specific link-ups into the systems of our overseas partners, for example, where, if there is a need to further send the injured Serviceman to, for example, the local hospitals for more specialised treatment, that, too, was all planned in as well in terms of the protocols.

As I have said earlier, we take the safety of every NSmen very, very seriously locally and certainly overseas as well. So, in this context, if there ever was going to be any injury, or worse, the necessary enquiries would also be opened up in order to enquire into what happened in each case, so that we could then learn from it and put in the necessary measures to the extent possible to prevent recurrences.

On top of that, and as I have shared, each year now for several years at the Ministry of Defence's Committee of Supply debates, we also have external expert panels to help evaluate our protocols and so on to ensure that we remain robust in safeguarding the safety of our NSmen, even as we train robustly to ensure mission success.