



For Immediate Release
By: Capt. Amy B. Slinker, 134th Public Affairs Detachment

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Alaska Guard Participates in Family Support Exchange with Mongolians

U.S. and Mongolian military leaders and spouses share ideas for supporting families

FIVE HILLS TRAINING AREA, Mongolia—Alaska National Guard and Mongolian Armed Forces leaders and spouses exchanged ideas on caring for and supporting soldiers' families at a conference in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia Aug. 22-23.

The family support conference coincides with Khaan Quest 2009, a multinational peacekeeping operations training exercise at Five Hills Training Area Aug. 3-25. More than 20 Americans and Mongolians gathered in a community room at Star Apartments to discuss concerns Mongolia faces and look into aspects of the U.S. family support system Mongolia may want to adopt.

The conference brought experts on family support issues to Mongolia from Alaska, where conditions are very similar to Mongolia in many respects. Senior military leaders from the U.S. Army, Army National Guard, U.S. Air Force and Air National Guard also attended to present their perspectives on the importance of various aspects of family support. It was the first time the Alaska National Guard and Mongolia exchanged ideas on this issue.

Discussions explored several facets of family support in the United States, including family readiness groups, volunteers, chaplains and support from the business community. Participants also talked about the impact officers, non-commissioned officers and spouses can make within family support programs.

Lt. Gen. (Alaska) Craig E. Campbell, whose scheduled retirement date is Aug. 31, was able to take military leave from his position as Lieutenant Governor of Alaska to attend the conference as a traditional part-time Guardsman. In order to formalize the family support network that currently exists within Mongolian military families, Campbell recommended military leaders and spouses request support from the Ministry of Defense.

“If the Ministry of Defense doesn’t provide support, it will continue to be an informal program,” Campbell said. “It takes the leadership of the organization to validate what these families are doing.”

The group focused on how family problems are frequently magnified when soldiers are deployed far from home on extended deployments. Leaders explained that when a casualty occurs, proper care for the casualty and support for the casualty's survivors is critical; aiding families in grief can minimize damage to unit morale and can avoid projecting a damaging image of the military into civil society. All of these factors could affect possible future recruiting and retention, as well as funding, especially in a democratic society.

Jan Myers, Alaska National Guard state family program director, said that as Mongolia's Armed Forces becomes increasingly professionalized and as Mongolian military units undertake increasingly more and larger international missions abroad, the issue of family support will become more critical.

"If they have a program that's back in their hometown taking care of their family, their mind will be in the right place and increase safety for all," Myers said.

Lt. Col. Batbold Isheekhuu, senior officer for strategic planning with the Ministry of Defense, said that with deployments for the Mongolian Armed Forces on the horizon, now is a good time to consider formalizing a family program.

"I found that it would be very good to have such a program to support the families of soldiers," Isheekhuu said. "It's a good time to gather information about the American Army and Air Force family support program."

But Isheekhuu also noted that current Mongolian culture and perception brings challenges; it would be difficult to obtain funding, recruit volunteers and engage businesses for support.

Among the group of U.S. experts who responded to these concerns was Lt. Gen. Richard E. "Tex" Brown, retired U.S. Air Force. Brown is the former deputy chief of staff for personnel at Headquarters, U.S. Air Force and assistant vice chief of staff for the U.S. Air Force. He explained that it only takes one person to start an effort and shared stories of how the United States overcame negative views of the military and developed family support systems since the Vietnam War.

Brown described how Lt. Gen. Gregory "Hal" Moore's wife initiated family support in the United States during the Vietnam War.

When Julia Compton Moore saw the impersonal casualty notification process -- a taxi driver handing a death notice telegram to a Soldier's spouse -- she told the driver to start bringing the notices to her directly. She then began delivering notices herself to be on hand to offer comfort to the surviving spouse.

Moore's efforts prompted the U.S. military to set up family support networks and casualty notification teams of uniformed officers, which is currently used in today's units. The story was captured in Moore's book he co-wrote with Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once...And Young*, that was adapted into the film *We Were Soldiers*.

Besides the role of spouses and family readiness groups in the United States, Brown also addressed the prospect of adding chaplains to the Mongolian Armed Forces.

“The chaplain is the one who is there to boost up and help bring spiritual wellness,” Brown said. “We want to convey that freedom of religion is absolutely essential. In our chaplain programs, we can offer all types of religions and help people meet their spiritual needs however they want to have them met.”

Alaska National Guard Chaplain Richard Koch reflected on the potential impact of this initial discussion of adding chaplains to the Mongolian Armed Forces.

“This is a historical event,” Koch said. “If they actually do succeed in establishing a chaplaincy, it’s kind of neat that I was here to give a small shove and push them toward the future.”

One of the biggest challenges the Mongolians face is stimulating community support from businesses.

Rich Owens, director of Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve in Alaska, shared his experiences as a business owner who supports military in his community. Owens is the owner of Tastee Freez, an Anchorage restaurant and ice cream shop.

“In Alaska there’s a feeling of appreciation and esteem for our professional military,” Owens said. “I think if we take something out of this meeting, it would be to come up with a better understanding of how their [Mongolian] businesses work, look at their capabilities, and think of ways we could suggest how to incorporate a cooperative agreement between the business community and the military community.”

Khaan Quest 2009 is wrapping up, with a scheduled conclusion for Aug. 25. The purpose of Khaan Quest is to increase interoperability and planning expertise among participating nations, and to further develop the Mongolian Armed Forces’ training center at the Five Hills Training Area. Media can track the exercise and download photos, stories and video using the exercise website at <http://www1.apan-info.net/khaanquest>.

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Photo Cutlines:

Family Support1:

Lt. Gen. (Alaska) Craig E. Campbell of the Alaska National Guard, left, speaks at the Family Support Exchange Conference at Star Apartments in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia Aug. 22. Campbell gave his perspective from a senior leader’s view on the importance of family support programs in the military. Photo by Capt. Amy B. Slinker, 134th Public Affairs Detachment

Family Support2:

Rich Owens, director of Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve in Alaska, sets out gifts for the Mongolian participants at the Family Support Exchange Conference at Star Apartments in

Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia Aug. 22. Owens spoke to the group on how local businesses can support the military. Photo by Capt. Amy B. Slinker, 134th Public Affairs Detachment

Family Support3:

Jan Myers, Alaska National Guard State Family Program director, talks about family support systems used by the Alaska Guard during a Family Support Exchange Conference at Star Apartments in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia Aug. 22. Myers was part of a team from the Alaska National Guard who met with Mongolian Armed Forces leaders and spouses to discuss methods for supporting and caring for soldiers.

Photo by Capt. Amy B. Slinker, 134th Public Affairs Detachment

Family Support4:

Lt. Gen. (Alaska) Craig E. Campbell of the Alaska National Guard, left, speaks at the Family Support Exchange Conference at Star Apartments in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia Aug. 22. The Mongolian Armed Forces currently has an informal network of family support, and the conference addresses the advantages to having a formalized program.

Photo by Capt. Amy B. Slinker, 134th Public Affairs Detachment