

Keeping the peace, showing the flag

By ZHAOSHENGAN
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Even though he'd only been in Beijing for a few hours, Che Lijie was anxious to continue his journey home to west China, a distance of more than 2,500 km, to be reunited with his family after a stint in Syria.

"I am very grateful to my wife. She has been too worried to sleep more than five hours a night during the past two months and 10 days, the duration of my stay in Syria," said the 39-year-old army officer.

Che was one of four Chinese military observers to the United Nations' Supervision Mission in Syria who arrived back in China on July 25.

Intensive training

Six Chinese army officers traveled to Syria on May 14 to join the United Nations' peace-keeping mission and monitor the fragile cease-fire in Damascus. Their arrival meant that the number of Chinese military observers in Syria rose to eight.

Zhang Fu, Zhang Ming, Xie Hui and Che returned home after the UN decided on July 20 to temporarily downsize the scale of the mission from 300 observers to 150.

All the Chinese observers had participated in previous UN peacekeeping missions and received intensive training in anti-terrorism practices, anti-abduction techniques, identification of explosives, first-aid skills and vehicle repairs. They all have good foreign-language and driving skills.

Although the observers weren't required to visit the front, they were aware that they ran the risk of attack during their unarmed patrols in residential areas and a number of conflict zones, said Che.

During a period of a little more than two months, the UN mission issued seven temporary restriction orders, outlining the areas considered safe for observers, to ensure their safety, he added.

China's efforts

Zhang Fu, 33, arrived in the country on April 25, and experienced the intense fighting taking place within 1 km of the place where he lived. "The sound of explosions and gunfire was so loud, it was obvious that the fighting was close. To make sure I was safe at night, I slept between two beds and wore my bulletproof vest," he said.

Moreover, the Chinese observers faced more danger than those from other countries, because some of the opposition parties and the local people could not immediately understand why China vetoed three Western-backed UN resolutions at the Security Council.

Beijing opposed the imposition of sanctions on Syria and insisted that political dialogue and the mediation efforts of the United Nations-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan were the proper way to solve the crisis.

The observers were in constant danger because of the threat of bombings at their offices in downtown Damascus, they said. Moreover, the risk of attack was high. "In one incident, people dressed like civilians suddenly tried to pull one of our Chinese observers from the patrol vehicle. Fortunately, another observer pulled the door closed and the vehicle was able to quickly leave the scene," Che recalled.

Despite those difficulties, the Chinese observers worked hard to promote a peaceful resolution in Syria. Unlike most of the observers, who spoke French or Arabic, the Chinese staff's fluent English meant they shouldered much of the work at the mission headquarters.

As one of the first batch of observers, Zhang Fu often worked more than 15 hours a day.

"For quite a while, I relied on three boxes of cakes I brought from China because it was hard to get food amid the conflict. After a month of this regime, I'd lost about 7 kg," he said.

Under the complicated security conditions, the Chi-



JIANG TIEYING / XINHUA

Six Chinese army officers arrived in Damascus, capital of Syria on May 14 to join the UN peace-keeping mission and monitor the fragile cease-fire in the city.



Left: A fighter mans a mounted gun in the Salaheddin district of the restive Syrian city of Aleppo on July 29. Right: A bomb crater in a Damascus street.



PHOTOS BY PIERRE TORRES / AFP (LEFT) AND XINHUA

nese observers completed duties such as coordination, liaison, supervision and investigation, the Peacekeeping Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense told the People's Liberation Army Daily newspaper.

Actually, most of Syrian people were friendly to China and the observers, said Zhang Ming, a 38-year-old officer in the mission.

"A shopkeeper working near my base expressed his gratitude for China's mediation efforts on the Syrian issue. Although he only spoke basic English, I could feel his desire for peace," he said.

Civilians are the biggest victims of turmoil and children are the main victims among the

23

The number of missions that the PLA has so far participated, sending more than 20,000 troops

2,000

The number of Chinese military peacekeepers operating as part of 11 UN missions

civilians, said Che, the father of a young daughter.

"I felt sorry for the children at the kindergarten near our office, because of the high price of natural gas caused by the sanctions, they can't even get enough heat," he said.

"Those children deserve a peaceful life, instead of becoming a forgotten generation," said Zhang Fu.

China's role in the UN

Although the mission was controversial from the day it entered Syria to the conclusion of its deployment, after the period of duty was extended by 30 days, it was a demonstration of support for the country by the international community, said Che.

"Our existence means the UN and the world hasn't given up on Syria but are still striving for an early peace."

This is one of the few arrangements widely accepted by the international community and shows what the world can do for the Syrian people, said Zhang Fu. "As a responsible country, China has a duty to be part of this."

This year marks the 22nd anniversary of the PLA's participation in UN peacekeeping operations. The PLA has so far participated in 23 missions, sending more than 20,000 troops, according to the Peacekeeping Affairs Office.

There are currently almost 2,000 Chinese military peacekeepers operating as part of 11

UN missions, making China the largest troop-contributing country among the five permanent members of the Security Council, said the office.

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, said on July 17 that he was very grateful to the Chinese government and the young people who are working hard, demonstrating a strong sense of commitment to world peace and security.

"I hope that China will continue to dedicate itself to world peace and security," said Ban as he chatted on Sina Weibo, a popular Chinese micro blog.

When asked if they were willing to return to Syria as part of a future UN mission, all four officers said they'd be happy to participate.

Online military enthusiasts keep TV programs honest

By ZHAOSHENGAN

Directors of military-based TV shows cannot be too careful about plots and props. That's because an army of online military aficionados is ready to correct their every mistake.

The enthusiasts fired a warning shot across the bows when they confronted the broadcaster of *Bloody Battle, the Vast Sky*, a TV series about the Chinese air-force. They were able to prove that Chinese aircraft in the 1930s were not equipped with wireless communications, as claimed in the program, and also that the pilots were not as poorly disciplined as suggested. The director of the show, Gao Xixi, admitted the mistakes, but countered that his team had spent almost two years researching historical data and military affairs.

A wider perspective

"Netizens with expertise can correct faults that could mislead the audience, or at least they can



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Zhang Junwei, a retired soldier in Wenling, Zhejiang province, is addicted to making military models. During the past two years, he had made more than 50.

provide a wider perspective to help people think about these things more accurately," said

Chen Qing, a space industry engineer and aviation graduate.

Leading military forums in

China, such as *Tiexue*, or Iron Blood, established in 2001, have more than 15 million daily

page views. On micro-blogging platforms, the number of specialist military micro-groups has mushroomed during the past two or three years.

As a student, Chen, 28, was a regular visitor to a number of Bulletin Board Systems about aircraft, and online military history forums. He admitted that he occasionally spoke out when he read comments that were inaccurate or simply extreme.

"Highly specialized content and professional online discussions benefited my studies, but some netizens simply wanted to let off steam by being controversial — this is not good," he said.

The sometimes irrational posts irritated some military experts who participated in the discussions, said Xiao Dong, 21, who administers a micro-group.

"Actually it is easy to expose the fallacy of some radical opinions through analysis and reasoning. But to do that, you have to remain rational," he said.

Rational or not, Jin Huaicun, a 25-year-old military enthusi-

ast, said he just can't stop visiting online military sites. He believed that they allow him to fulfill his "dream of fighting or sacrificing my life as a soldier".

"I feel excited by online presentations of China's growing military strength, and I'm especially curious about the various discussions about issues where official information is scarce, he said.

Security concerns

However, there are concerns that some aficionados are unconsciously leaking military secrets and harming national security. This year, the government will accelerate cyber regulations to prevent the dissemination of inaccurate information.

The Internet Society of China released a written proposal on April 10 calling on Internet companies and websites to strengthen regulation to prevent the spread of online rumors.

In response, major websites have expressed their resolution to reduce online rumors,

especially on micro-blogging platforms.

Li Muyuan, founder and administrator of a micro-group about Chinese history and military, has occasionally deleted blogs unrelated to the group's core focus.

In the belief that a historical mindset would help people to think about issues in a more thoughtful and educated way, Li established the group in 2010. He now devotes his "total enthusiasm" to creating a good communications platform for micro-bloggers registered with the group. The micro-group has around 34,000 followers who have published a combined total of 83,000 blogs, so far.

For Li, the process should be interactive: "Administrators should not be bystanders, they should also participate in the discussions. I try to make voluble bloggers feel at home here, and I also try to encourage those who prefer to be silent to actively join in the discussions," he said.