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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

S.D. National Guard provides a ‘Women in the Military’ Workshop for Suriname’s armed forces

RAPID CITY, S.D. – Women from the South Dakota Army and Air National Guard recently traveled to the South American country of Suriname, as part of National Guard Bureau’s State Partnership Program, to take part in a ‘Women in the Military’ workshop with women from the Suriname armed forces.

Ms. Danielle Veira, deputy director of Suriname’s Ministry of Defense, kicked off the workshop by welcoming approximately 70 women serving in Suriname’s armed forces and four from the South Dakota Army and Air National Guard, saying it was “a day that we have been waiting for; a day that women that can come forward and talk about the issues that concern them.”

Vierra, who was the first woman to serve as advisor to the commander of Suriname’s armed forces told the women, “There is a season to sow, there is a season to water and there is a season to harvest. It took time to plant some seedlings in the ground, it took time to water them but we cannot harvest yet. But we are here today and we see the blossoms on the tree. We need to work now so that we can harvest.

“Let’s take the opportunity for the next two days to discuss with our friends from South Dakota the issues that we have in common and what we have not,” Vierra said. “They have started earlier in their process, so we can learn from them and when it’s time, we can harvest good fruits; women in the military in Suriname.”

South Dakota Air National Guard Lt. Col. Mary Rysavy, inspector general, began the first day with presentations from the South Dakota delegation with a brief history of women in the U.S. military, the barriers and restrictions that they have overcome and some that they still face.

“I think it really brought to light that a lot of the issues that women face in the military are universal,” Rysavy said. “We are all just at different points in how close we are to getting to the optimal balance.”

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Sandy Trohkimoinen, legal administrator in the South Dakota Army National Guard, next shared recent progress within the U.S. military for women.

“Within the last two years, the Pentagon has announced that it is opening 14,000 positions to women that were previously exclusive to males,” Trohkimoinen said. “In May, the Army opened six combat support military occupational specialties to women and in July, the Army announced the first female was recruited to serve in a combat support role.”

South Dakota Army National Guard 1st Lt. Billi Bierle, specialty branch officer for the 109th Regional Support Group, shared personal experiences as a woman serving in the National Guard. She spoke of being a woman deployed with an engineer company, being the wife of a deployed Soldier and being a mother in the military.

Lt. Col. Deb Bartunek, deputy director for the SDNG Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, also shared her experiences including being married to a Soldier and her mobilization experience, which included her oldest son who was four-years-old at the time being diagnosed with leukemia at the time.

“It was a very challenging time and took a lot of strength to continue to serve,” Bartunek told the audience. “I felt the pressure in taking care of my son, which I did. Your family has to come first. But I had good leaders that understood that and allowed me to personally take care of his medical issues.

“There were a lot of times that I’d say ‘I just want to go be a mother’ but then I look at my military career and there is myself and one other lieutenant colonel that are the highest ranking women in our South Dakota Army National Guard, so I felt the need to stay where I am, continue to be a professional and continue to be a leader so that those coming behind me can achieve even greater ranks than I am.”

Following presentations from each of the four South Dakota National Guard representatives, they each worked with a small group of women from Suriname, allowing them time to ask questions and discuss their concerns of women’s equality in the Suriname armed forces.

“We had a chance to talk about some of our struggles and some of our strengths regarding women in the military in the United States,” said Bierle. “Perhaps more importantly though, we were able to simply listen to their concerns and let them know that they’re not alone.”

A wide variety of topics were discussed but the primary focus was equal opportunity when it comes to positions and education opportunities.

“Women in Suriname’s military are restricted from holding any job where certain strength is needed, such as infantry, maintenance, heavy equipment operators and truck drivers,” said 1st Lt. Gwendoline Babel, human resource officer for Suriname’s deputy director. “Women are also not deployed.”

The fact that Suriname's women are not allowed to work in the infantry field was discussed at length.

"The infantry is the place where you can make a career," said Babel. "In the administration and logistics professions positions and rank are limited, but in the infantry you can become a colonel, the commander of the armed forces. We find our careers cut short because we cannot become a lieutenant colonel or a colonel. That is why we are so passionate about having opportunities in the infantry."

Sexual assault and harassment were also common topics brought up throughout the two days of discussion.

"They want to write and start to implement a sexual harassment and assault policy," said Bartunek. "I told them we can give them the foundation that we have used, but they would need to make it unique to their culture."

"We've been through the growing pains; we still go through some of them, so to be able to provide support and give them some of the tools they need to move forward and make their organization a better one is exciting."

On the second day of the workshop, a woman from each small group briefed Suriname's Minister of Defense Lamure Latour and Chief of Defense Col. Hedwig Gilaard in front of their peers about their concerns.

Lt. Col. John Weber, State Partnership Program director, said the two days will serve as a springboard to formulate policy.

"Suriname's Ministry of Defense asked specifically for this workshop," Weber said. "Their leadership was also very open to adding a follow up event. They would like to use these exchanges to develop and formulate policies on women's issues going forward."

"It was a great opportunity to get together and talk freely about these things," said Babel. "We don't expect big changes right away, but small ones. We need to take one step at a time."

"We hope that we gave them a foundation to start with, encouragement to keep pushing forward and encouragement to be patient," Bierle said. "They may not reap the benefits but the soldiers coming in after them will. And they will pave the way for future generations because that's what our women did for us."

Participants concluded the two days by speaking of the valuable partnership between Suriname and South Dakota.

"I want to thank the U.S. government and South Dakota's leadership for having a State Partnership Program," said Babel. "If it wasn't for this program we wouldn't be having this conference or these discussions."

PHOTOS: High-resolution photos for this release are available upon request or at: www.flickr.com/southdakotationalguard



120829-A-FO377-064: Women from the South Dakota Army and Air National Guard put on a 'Women in the Military' workshop in Paramaribo, Suriname as part of National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program, Sept. 28-29, 2012. Pictured left to right are the service members who supported the workshop: Capt. Shawn Abbas, bi-lateral affairs officer; Lt. Col. John Weber, State Partnership Program director; Lt. Col. Deb Bartunek, deputy director for the SDNG Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel; 1st Lt. Gwendoline Babel, human resource officer for Suriname's deputy director; 1st Lt. Billi Bierle, specialty branch officer for the SDARNG's 109th Regional Support Group; Lt. Col. Mary Rysavy, inspector general in the SDANG; and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Sandy Tohkimoinen, legal administrator in the South Dakota Army National Guard.(courtesy photo) (RELEASED)



120827-A-FO377-007: South Dakota Army National Guard Lt. Col. Deb Bartunek, deputy director for the SDNG Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, takes part in a 'Women in the Military' brief with Suriname's Chief of Defense Col. Hedwig Gilaard as part of National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program, Sept. 27, 2012 in Paramaribo, Suriname. (SDNG photo by 2nd Lt. Chad Carlson) (RELEASED)



120828-A-FO377-010: South Dakota Air National Guard Lt. Col. Mary Rysavy, inspector general, conducts a 'Women in the Military' brief to approximately 70 women from Suriname's armed forces as part of National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program, Sept. 28, 2012 in Paramaribo, Suriname. (SDNG photo by 2nd Lt. Chad Carlson) (RELEASED)



120828-A-FO377-039: South Dakota Army National Guard 1st Lt. Billi Bierle, specialty branch officer for the 109th Regional Support Group, conducts a 'Women in the Military' brief to approximately 70 women from Suriname's armed forces as part of National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program, Sept. 28, 2012 in Paramaribo, Suriname. (SDNG photo by 2nd Lt. Chad Carlson) (RELEASED)



120828-A-FO377-013: South Dakota Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer 2 Sandy Trohkimoinen, legal administrator, conducts a 'Women in the Military' brief to approximately 70 women from Suriname's armed forces as part of National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program, Sept. 28, 2012 in Paramaribo, Suriname. (SDNG photo by 2nd Lt. Chad Carlson)

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