

## **What If There Were No Olympics? The People Who Make Events Possible and Keep Societies Safe Need More Than An Annual Thank You. They Need Change.**

Opinion by Stefan Huber, Director General, International Security Ligue, and Catherine Piana, Director General, Confederation of European Security Services (CoESS)

July 24<sup>th</sup> is International Security Officers' Day, a time when we pay our collective thanks to the millions of people who perform this vital work. This year, the honor fittingly falls as the world turns its collective eyes toward Paris and the Olympics, because security officers are among many behind-the-scenes heroes that make such events possible. No large event—or even an ordinary day's business—would be feasible if not for frontline security workers making sure it can happen safely.

But what if we turned to security workers for help and found they weren't there? Today's security technology is amazing, and security firms are investing heavily in it, but the human element is (and will continue to be) irreplaceable. Lamentably, because frontline security work is misunderstood, unappreciated and underpaid, there is a burgeoning talent crisis.

Make no mistake, we need private security officers. Globally, there are more of them than police, and in some countries, they outnumber public law enforcement by 3 to 1. That fact alone describes just how valuable they are to the security governance of nations. It is, therefore, worrisome that some countries are finding that the need for officers outstrips supply, especially where wages have not kept pace with inflation. Confronting this perilous situation has become a global imperative, with ramifications for both economies and public safety.

Whose fault, is it?

The media, for one. Decades of stereotyping have done lingering harm to the industry's image. Though played for a laugh (and, yes, they can be funny), portraits of a snoozing guard or the oblivious "mall cop" are both unfair and inaccurate. The work of protection professionals has changed—becoming more business-minded, diverse, and technical—but you wouldn't necessarily know that from representations in the media. The occupational prestige of security work is poorly aligned with how vital that work is to the people it serves—and unkind media portrayals have had a hand in that.

To be sure, it has gotten better, and more accurate portrayals can now be seen, often focusing on the private security industry's technological sophistication. But there is also a new type of misrepresentation in news stories, in which security officers are portrayed akin to labor victims—underpaid and exploited by big business.

There is some truth there. Security workers often *aren't* paid enough. But it is inaccurate (and lazy) to report that the security industry is at the root of that problem. Like in any other sector, there will unfortunately always be companies that try to cut corners, but the core problem – one that continues to hold the industry back in its pursuit of greater professionalism – is that "cowboy companies" still win contracts, including with public entities.

Interestingly, this is not often the case with blue chip companies, who typically recognize the business value of security and choose to partner with firms that invest in their own personnel. But it is a substantial problem in government and public security contracts, where the focus is often on one thing: cost per hour.

For years, the industry has freely shared best practices and procurement tools to drive up quality and improve industry wages, including the EU-funded 'Selecting Best Value' contracting manual from CoESS and its trade union social partner UNI Europa, but persistent industry prodding often goes ignored by public entities that instead gamble with public safety by allowing bid price to hijack their security

contracting process. Governments may espouse commitment to empowerment and poverty alleviation, but their actions often penalize companies that are committed to those very goals.

Public entities should commit to only contracting with security firms that meet certain non-negotiable criteria, for example full compliance with collective agreements, and go further by building security partnerships around quality rather than cost – for example by setting quality awarding criteria related to working conditions, staff qualification and innovation. Governments should also promote free, fair, and open security markets to allow competition to enhance labor conditions. After all, organizations should have the right to partner with whatever security firm they think is best suited to protect their people, property, and assets.

In preliminary results from the Global Security Barometer®, a research endeavor spearheaded by the International Security Ligue, data show that the public image of security officers varies around the world. This is important, because negative views of frontline protection professionals limit their authority and status in the eyes of the public, hurts the legitimacy of the private security sector, and diminishes the ability of the industry to attract the increasingly skilled worker that it needs.

Private security has a growing role in defending public interests, such as the control of disorder, crime, and terrorism, but these important contributions are undercut by negative public perception. There is a persistent disconnect between the importance of security officers to peaceful societies and how the public regards them, which must be addressed to forge a safer world.

This Global Security Barometer finding—that the status of security officers varies globally—underscores the fact that government actions give shape to those attitudes. Considering the critical role of security officers in ensuring safe societies, governments must develop regulatory frameworks to improve public trust and enhance the industry's image; create responsible standards designed to promote occupational prestige and ensure an adequate baseline of quality and training; and enforce regulations to effectively sanction non-compliant actors.

This is not to say that the private security industry is blameless. As a significantly fragmented industry, we have our share of firms that do not adhere to the rules. But forcing such operators to comply should be easy, if we can convince public and private buyers to have security contracts that reflect rhetoric.

Recipients of private security services must universally resist partnering with security providers that provide abnormally low bids. Where there is solid legislation or generally binding collective agreements, there should be regular inspections to check that employers comply with these laws and agreements. In the absence of such legal framework, there should be means to support industry efforts to align compensation with the vital role of frontline security work, with shifting economic conditions, and with the greater specialization and training that is now demanded. Failing to pay private security officers at a reasonable rate puts public safety in peril in the near term and risks lasting harm to societies.

*Stefan Huber is Director General of the International Security Ligue, an association of leading security firms represented in more than 90 countries and employing more than two million security professionals, and which actively works to elevate ethical and professional standards and shape global codes of conduct.*

*Catherine Piana is Director General of the Confederation of European Security Services, which brings together 22 national associations across Europe, representing 45,000 private security companies, with a mission to support the growth of an industry that delivers solutions of high quality and professionalism.*