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EDITORIAL

## Intolerable Rise in Soldier Suicides

Nearly the entire military corps at Fort Campbell, Ky., was summoned last month to hear an anxious general make an extraordinary plea about the alarming rate of suicide by soldiers. “Don’t take away your tomorrow,” the general beseeched his audience of thousands of men and women at the base, where 14 suicides in the first half of this year leads what many fear could be a record toll across the military services.

The woeful challenge reaches far beyond Fort Campbell, as Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, emphasized in Washington last week. He predicted the toll this year will top the record of 2008, when the Army suffered 133 suicides. That was twice the number in 2004, before the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns turned into a slog of repeated tours.

“Leaders must address this,” the admiral said, speaking to Congress as much as Pentagon brass in an interview with the newspaper The Hill. He conceded there may be no study establishing an “overwhelming” connection between combat stress and suicide, “but I just can’t believe that it is not very much related.”

Troops in the field already know this the hard way. About one in five returning home privately admit to post-traumatic stress disorders, but only half seek treatment. Soldiers fear their careers will be compromised if they reach out for help. Admiral Mullen offered a promising idea: mandatory early screening of all soldiers to ease any stigma. But much more is needed.

Military suicide is the nation’s problem, not just the Pentagon’s. There is a shortage of mental health professionals in the military. The Obama administration and Congress must quickly address this, perhaps with bolstered programs of tuition assistance and volunteer professionals — two ideas Admiral Mullen raised.

At Fort Campbell, crisis counseling and “battle buddy” programs designed to identify severe depression saw a positive stretch of six weeks dashed by three suicides at the end of May. “It will be better tomorrow,” the shaken general vowed to his troops — a risky promise as his audience faced more combat stress ahead.

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