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Danes design singing pillows for soldiers

By Garentina Kraja, Associated Press

KOSOVSKA MITROVICA, Serbia-Montenegro — Getting a good night's sleep in the Balkans can be rough for peacekeepers bunking in a military camp far from home and family for months at a time. Now Danish researchers have come up with an unusual solution — MusiCure, a soft pillow that chirps like a bird and is designed to sing soldiers to sleep in Kosovo, Iraq and other hotspots.



MusiCure, a soft pillow that chirps like a bird and is designed to sing soldiers to sleep in Kosovo, Iraq and other hotspots.

Visar Kryeziu, AP

With built-in speakers, the white pillows release sounds from nature combined with acoustic instruments such as cellos to provide a serenade designed to help stressed-out minds shed unpleasant thoughts.

Its designers say that if it works, the pillow one day could join rifles, flak jackets and helmets as part of the basic equipment soldiers carry into conflicts.

In Kosovo, 10 pillows provided by Denmark's Defense Academy have become popular among the 340 Danish soldiers deployed here, said Maj. Helmer T. Hansen, the battalion surgeon at the Danish military clinic in the province.

Soldiers can keep the pillows for two weeks, said Hansen, ticking off their benefits with the air of a hypnotist.

"You will not think about what is maybe happening with your wife at home, or your children," he said. "All thoughts will disappear, images will be created — forests, beaches, mountains. And then you will fall asleep."

The pillows are part of a trial that began a month ago. So far, about 20 Danish troops in need of relaxation and some quick sleep in the often ethnically tense province have used them to get some shuteye.

The Danish troops are in Kosovo as part of the 17,500-strong NATO-led peacekeeping force that has been deployed in the province since the fighting between Serb forces and ethnic Albanians ended in mid-1999.

The province since has been run by the United Nations. But scattered violence persists and sometimes it has targeted foreigners.

Nowhere in the province are tensions higher than in the town of Kosovska Mitrovica, where the Danish

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soldiers are based. The town, which is divided by a river and ethnic animosities into a Serb-dominated north and an ethnic Albanian south, has been the scene of frequent violent clashes.

Last year, Kosovo saw three days of ethnic rioting that left 19 people killed and more than 900 injured. Now, as the province prepares for U.N.-brokered talks on its future status, there are fears of a backlash of violence.

Soldiers assigned here can't escape that stress, Hansen said as he gently squeezed one of the warbling pillows.

"I will recommend that this will be a part of our equipment in the future," he said.

Some soldiers that have tried the pillow sing its praises.

"The problem was I fell asleep too quickly," one wrote jokingly.

"It is good to keep the noise out of my mind," wrote another. "It's a very good way to relax. But the pillow is too thick."

First created nearly 10 years ago, the MusiCure pillow originally was intended for use in psychiatric wards and to help patients recover from surgery while minimizing the need for medicine, Hansen said.

Music therapy is just as handy at a military camp, where sleeping pills can't be used to ensure soldiers are ready to deploy in case of emergency, he said.

"It's the first time we're using it," he said. "But my advice will be that we have it for a long time."

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