

Help for Beleaguered Peacekeepers

By Doug Brooks

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In the past five years, while warfare in Kosovo, Iraq and Chechnya has drawn attention worldwide, a far more deadly struggle has raged in Africa, largely ignored by international news media. The multinational war in the Democratic Republic of Congo has claimed more lives than any since World War II -- at least 3.2 million, according to the International Rescue Committee. The contending armed forces are not huge, and military casualties are light. But the civilian death toll rises by more than a thousand per day. Most victims aren't shot or knifed but instead are chased away from their farms and homes by armed thugs. The most vulnerable, especially the very young or weak, simply die of starvation or disease in the bush. Ethnic cleansing, systematic rape, cannibalism, child soldiers and massive illegal exploitation of natural resources are all outrages of this war.

Despite various political agreements, peace has been elusive. Factionalized rebel armies, foreign troops and warlords continue to fight among themselves and against pro-government militias. Since 1999 a small U.N. peacekeeping unit has been operating in Congo. It was formed with the best of intentions: to help implement nascent political agreements. But it is badly overstretched. A recent increase from 5,700 to 8,700 troops will have minimal effect in a country more than five times the size of Iraq. While it is technically a peacekeeping operation, the U.N. mandate allows the use of armed force to protect U.N. personnel and operations, and in certain cases to protect Congolese civilians. Unfortunately, the mandate has been exercised sparingly, and the gangs of armed teenagers making up the majority of the warring factions murder, rape and plunder with impunity.

Congo is not the only place where U.N. peacekeeping has failed to stanch a hemorrhage of civilian deaths. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone suffered from much the same situation: populations dying of disease and malnutrition while international peacekeeping efforts floundered due to lack of credible force. But when rebels in Sierra Leone routed 8,000 U.N. troops three years ago, the British needed only 800 soldiers to restore U.N. authority.

On Friday, the U.N. Security Council authorized 1,200 multinational troops led by France to deploy to a town in eastern Congo where rampaging ethnic militias have besieged hundreds of U.N. peacekeepers and thousands of Congolese civilians. This welcome Western interest will stem the violence temporarily, but the troops' firm departure date of Sept. 1 means the U.N. peacekeepers will again have to address Congo's brutal conflict with inadequate capabilities in the near future.

Humanitarian groups make the case for more troops and a stronger mandate but face the perplexing problem of today's "Westernless" peacekeeping: Stronger mandates make states less inclined to contribute troops. Worse, the professionalism of troops eventually proffered to U.N. operations is often questionable. Reportedly some deployed troops have made special

arrangements with the United Nations specifically stating they will not use armed force for any reason.

There is another solution. A number of for-profit companies with years of experience in peace operations have been formed into a consortium and are prepared to fill the vacuum in Congo. In recent years international peace operations have increasingly relied on the private sector to provide essential services, with impressive success thus far. Aviation companies have proven willing to brave bullets to support peacekeepers in West Africa, and logistics companies have provided remarkably efficient services even in the midst of widespread chaos where little else functions. This private consortium is offering the most comprehensive package yet assembled to assist U.N. peacekeeping.

The consortium would operate under the U.N. commander and would bring the means and motivation to carry out the full mandate by providing key services to fill the gaps in the Congo unit's capabilities: high-tech aerial surveillance and armed rapid deployment police (including nearly 500 former British Gurkhas from Nepal) who could bring years of peacekeeping experience and NATO-level professionalism. They would be assigned specifically to protect vulnerable populations, while a helicopter firm would be able to quickly transport the police to hot spots as well as assist with emergency evacuations and humanitarian supply. Another firm would give Congolese gendarmes police and human rights training so they could gradually take over the quick reaction duties, control the international borders and ultimately supplant the U.N. peacekeepers. The private consortium would be a "force multiplier," making the U.N. operation substantially more effective for a fraction of the cost of its current budget. This private sector option could even be a model for improved peace operations in the future.

The ultimate solution, of course, must be Congolese, and the U.N. nongovernmental organizations and political bodies should be the ones to facilitate the peace process, not the private firms. Likewise, once security has been restored, reconstruction and reconciliation are better handled by the many innovative and knowledgeable nongovernmental and international organizations experienced in those tasks.

Critics of the concept, especially those in the United Nations' own Department of Peacekeeping, worry about the precedent of using armed private companies for tasks traditionally reserved to national armies. Yet the United Nations itself hires armed private security to protect its warehouses and offices. In light of the continuing carnage, many wonder why similar firms are not allowed to protect people as well. Plans for reforming U.N. peacekeeping are at least a decade from fruition. Until then, the status quo is a death sentence for millions.

The writer is president of the International Peace Operations Association, an organization founded to promote greater use of private firms in international peacekeeping. It operates as a nonprofit association and is funded by companies involved in peace operations.

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