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HEADLINE: THE BUSINESS SIDE OF KEEPING THE PEACE

BODY:

US Presidents rarely make visits to Africa, so George Bush's current trip indicates an unusual interest in the continent. US interest comes from the post 9-11 imperative to fight terrorism and a genuine desire to do more good in Africa.

This is clear from the HIV/AIDS initiative, but also from a possible US peace-keeping operation in Liberia. But while a US deployment to Liberia would be a positive development, African militaries are increasingly capable of doing peace operations themselves given the essential military services of private companies. African militaries do not lack the resolve to do complex interventions; indeed they have shown a far greater willingness than the West to put their troops in harm's way, to hold nascent peace agreements together, to prevent humanitarian catastrophes from becoming worse, and to protect fledgling democratic governments. But Western troops are considered essential since they bring key military capabilities and resources that African militaries cannot match.

This means critical peace operations are too often delayed or abandoned if the West deems them unworthy. Fortunately, global privatisation offers an opportunity that could empower African militaries with the niche military skills and services they need to do effective 'Westernless' peace operations. Using private companies, Africans could gain more control over when, where and how such missions will be carried out.

Sometimes called 'military service providers' (MSPs), specialised private companies enhance militaries by providing critical services including de-mining, logistics, aerial surveillance, military training and more. A number of these companies have worked successfully with African militaries in the past and their flexibility and experience enable regular military units to focus on their core missions while the companies support them with professional services.

Helicopters, for example, are often better hired from MSPs than purchased and maintained for years by cash-strapped African armies that rarely use them in actual operations. Hiring helicopters on an as-needed basis is infinitely more cost-effective. While it might be preferable to have Western 'boots on the ground' in peace operations, MSPs can offer boutique services that can make African militaries more effective and credible.

The reprehensible Western reluctance to deploy significant troops from their own militaries does make them far more willing to provide other forms of support for worthy interventions. This support can be financial or in the form of these critical MSP services. And while peace operations can be dangerous, private companies usually employ former military personnel, often ex-Special Forces soldiers, with the experience and training to ensure they

are able to do their jobs effectively in the midst of chaotic conflicts.

Liberia is a classic example of where African nations especially from the Ecomog countries can take the lead. In the 1990s, Ecomog gained a great deal of experience in operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone and also received useful training from programmes such as ACRI (African Crisis Response Initiative) and Operation Focused Relief. Ecomog is perfectly capable of doing a Liberian peace-keeping intervention with the addition of a few MSPs provided by the US.

There are a number of key differences in Liberia today from when Ecomog intervened in the 1990s. Currently, the rebel groups appear focused on removing Charles Taylor, and have not shown hostility towards each other. If this holds true, it would simplify the peace-keeping mission once Taylor departs to Nigeria. In such a case, Ecomog would simply be providing stability while new elections are arranged and a new government settles in. This would make Western troops even less of a necessity.

The estimated Ecomog deployment budget to Liberia is just over \$ 100m. A possible MSP support package for 4,000 Ecomog peace-keepers would cost something less than \$ 30m for an initial six-month deployment. This package might include four medium lift helicopters, two heavy lift helicopters, two heavy fixed wing transports, a company-strength quick reaction police force with light armoured vehicles, and high-tech surveillance aircraft. An initial deployment could be done within two weeks, and full deployment no later than six. The MSPs would provide the services that would most facilitate Ecomog capabilities and provide the mobility, intelligence and back-up to ensure that they are properly equipped, supported and supplied once in the field.

The same concept could also be used in Burundi to strengthen the African Union (AU) peace-keepers working in that extremely volatile peace operation. Former president Pierre Buyoya has been openly apprehensive of the AU's ability to ensure the success of that mission. Most of the troops committed to Burundi have adequate training and with MSPs acting as 'force multipliers' the operation's credibility would be enhanced.

African states are developing their own military capabilities, which will do much to improve peace operations on the continent. While the international community should stay involved and provide essential financial support and reconstruction services, using MSPs would allow African militaries to be able to bear greater peace-keeping burdens. While a core of truly professional Western troops can go far to stabilise a situation like the British did in Sierra Leone, with the support of MSPs African militaries can do this as well, making truly African peace operations a reality.

Doug Brooks is president of the International Peace Operations Association, an organisation founded to promote greater use of private companies in international peace-keeping. It operates as a non-profit association and is funded by companies involved in peace operations. [Dbrooks@IPOAonline.org](mailto:Dbrooks@IPOAonline.org)

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