

The UN and Peacekeeping: *taking the strain?*

In this article, the author examines the realities, the constraints and the evolution of peacekeeping protocols in relation to current peacekeeping operations. He also argues that greater devotion of resources by EU countries should be expected.

by Richard Gowan

The summer of 2006 was open season for political sniping at United Nations peace operations, bookended by wrangling over the Darfur conflict and the Israel/Hizbollah conflict in the Lebanon. In early June, a delegation of Security Council ambassadors visited Sudan to negotiate the deployment of around 15,000 troops to Darfur. They were promptly followed by the organisation's Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping, Jean-Marie Guéhenno. But a combined total of a month's negotiations failed to deliver any deal.

Simultaneously, Australian troops were attempting to bring a halt to widespread rioting in Timor-Leste, which UN troops had vacated less than half a year earlier. The emergence of the new state under international tutelage since 1999 had been hailed as evidence that peacekeeping works. This new burst of violence was soon cited as proof that, on its own, peacekeeping doesn't work.

These events combined to doubly grim effect. International forces seemed unable to get on the ground where they were most desperately needed – yet where they had managed to deploy, their impact appeared (at best) temporary. The UN had called 2005 a “banner year” for peacekeeping, culminating with its withdrawal from a stable Sierra Leone as well as Timor-Leste. Such self-confidence now began to look like naïve optimism.

And worse was to follow as fighting between Hizbollah and Israel in Lebanon left the UN's twenty-eight year old mission there taking casualties and ostentatiously impotent. This was compounded by protracted delay and debate over a UN resolution to end the conflict and the ongoing discussions as to what shape any new UN deployment to the region will take.

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Facing page: Irish UNMIL peacekeepers on patrol in Liberia. The UN deployment in the West African nation is one of the largest currently undertaken.

This sense of deflation has been exacerbated by the fact that 2006 was meant to be the year that the international community resolved major defects in UN peace operations.

In September 2005, heads of government gathered in New York to mark the institution's sixtieth birthday and agree significant reforms. They approved a new UN Peacebuilding Commission to help coordinate the long-term development of countries such as Timor-Leste (once widely expected to be a feel-good first item on the new body's agenda). And they accepted a much-vaunted “responsibility to protect” civilians from mass slaughter.

A year on, the nascent Peacebuilding Commission – already hampered by poisonous diplomatic negotiations over its composition – has been overshadowed by both the Middle East crisis, although it has now chosen to take on Burundi and Sierra Leone as test-cases. And while voices across the political spectrum from George Bush to George Clooney have condemned the steady slaughter in Darfur, its population remains painfully unprotected.

Yet if the UN has been publicly damned for what it hasn't done, it has also been damned for what it has. While international interest in Africa has typically focussed on Darfur, the UN's largest mission has struggled with safe-guarding



civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It now has some 17,000 troops based there, with a mandate to use “all necessary means” to disperse the militias that have terrorised the country’s east.

But while committing to the responsibility to protect in New York may be one thing, fulfilling it in the Congolese forests is a rather uglier one. In January, eight Guatemalan commandos were killed in a militia ambush in the north-eastern province of Ituri. In May, fears of a similar massacre were raised when another rebel group kidnapped seven Nepali soldiers – all were eventually freed, although most were held hostage until July.

While they were in captivity, the Western press was also growing concerned by the UN’s readiness to use force in the Congo. Having previously highlighted stories of sexual abuse by peacekeepers there, journalists now questioned their robust approach to the militias. In mid-June, the London Observer published a graphic account of an assault on a rebel village housing civilians. “South African and Pakistani units of the UN force,” it claimed, “broke UN rules by opening fire using mortars and heavy machineguns when women and children were present and by giving no warning of their attack.”

Following up on this story, the New York Times probed the aftermath of such efforts to

clear away the militias. “We were starving in the bush,” it quoted one villager who had returned to her home after a UN contingent had secured it. “We are also starving here.”

Faced with such a litany of negative news stories about UN operations on both the local and strategic levels, advocates of the organisation have only limited sources of comfort.

And the first really isn’t much comfort at all: while a number of other organisations have staked their claim in peacekeeping, they have had an equally difficult year. The flurry of international visitors to Sudan was necessitated by the parlous state of the African Union’s (AU) 7,000-strong mission in Darfur, which even AU officials admitted to be “at the limit of its capacity.” And while NATO has expanded its presence in Afghanistan, its decision to take on duties from US forces in the south sparked fierce debates in Britain, Canada and the Netherlands. A run of NATO fatalities have fuelled public criticism.

But more positively, there is still evidence that peacekeeping can make a political difference in countries emerging from conflict. In 2005 alone, UN peacekeepers oversaw elections and referendums in countries with an estimated total of 56 million registered voters. At the time of writing (July), the UN, backed by a European Union mission, still hopes to facilitate relatively peaceful polls in the Congo this year. It has kept expectations low: Kofi Annan has warned that voting could prove a “nightmare”. Even a partial success might be written up as a miracle for a country broken by years of war.

The UN’s best success story is the competent management of elections in Liberia – and their convenient delivery of a charismatic pro-Western leader in Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf – which has had a similarly positive impact on its standing in 2005. The Irish Battalion in Liberia has played a key role in this success by bringing with it a high level of expertise in international peacekeeping. But short-term good news stories are hostages to fortune, as efforts to trumpet Timor-Leste as a tale of UN

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Security Council rejected requests to increase the size of forces in both Congo and Côte d'Ivoire. The UN is increasingly resorting to switching troops from one mission to another to meet rising challenges – it has been able to bolster its Congolese presence by taking units from Burundi. In turn, plans for a hypothetical mission to Darfur involve shifting forces north from the Congo. The overall expansion in UN manpower rests on such improvisations.

This is a matter of particular concern where new missions are being deployed and old ones drawn down. There is evidence that deployment is becoming significantly harder. In 2000, the UN mission to Sierra Leone was able to get over 12,000 troops in the field in the space of nine months. Last year, the UN mission to southern Sudan was able to deploy just 3,600 troops (40% of its intended strength) in the same period. Even by this summer, many were still living in tents, frequently succumbing to illness.

UN planners have warned that any Darfur deployment would face similar set-backs: it might take six months to dig enough wells to

success demonstrated.

To understand whether UN peacekeeping is succeeding or failing overall, it is necessary to step back from the flow of news stories to see a very much bigger picture indeed.

For the most startling feature of UN operations today are their sheer scale. Whereas there were just 12,700 troops under UN command in late 1998, it now has over 60,000 spread across eighteen missions worldwide. This rise of nearly 500% has been driven by African operations, which now account for four-fifths of UN manpower. As of late 2005, the UN had more personnel in the field than the AU, EU and NATO combined – with its deployments routinely mandated to use force to protect civilians (i.e. UN Chapter VII peace-enforcement operations). If the UN were a single state, its foreign military deployments would be second only to those of the US.

But this comparison is flawed (and not only because US deployments still outnumber the UN's by ten to one). No state would unilaterally take on the range of peacekeeping tasks the UN currently contends with, or with the constricted resources it is able to deploy.

In 1998 – before deployments to Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste began to alter the UN's global profile – its largest single deployment was of 4,800 troops in the Lebanon. By early 2006, it already fielded five missions of over 5,000 military personnel (in the Congo, Liberia, Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire and Burundi) and was trying to build up a force of nearly 10,000 in southern Sudan while planning a larger deployment to Darfur.

The international community has grown accustomed to directing the UN to prepare for such large-scale missions. As the Lebanon crisis escalated this July, the Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi suggested (admittedly off-the-cuff) that the UN force there should be expanded from its current strength of 2,000 to up to 10,000 personnel.

But while these figures may look high, UN planners often fear that their forces are insufficient to undertake their mandated tasks. In 2005, the

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provide the proposed operation with water.

But officials are also frustrated by the fact that where forces are deployed, they come under pressure to leave. Many blame Timor-Leste's reversion to violence on an excessively rapid exit by the UN demanded by governments (including the US and UK) unwilling to continue paying for the mission. In New York, warnings are circulating of the dangerous consequences of another hasty departure from the Congo after its elections.

Such problems are not unique to UN missions. The AU has encountered major manpower and financial difficulties since it first deployed to Darfur in 2004. Its force there was originally intended to pass the 12,000 mark by late 2005, but it is still to reach that level. With European governments reportedly indicating that their patience with funding the force was diminishing, the AU threatened to withdraw its troops in September. Only personal appeals by Kofi Annan to troop suppliers and financial donors averted this.

While EU and NATO operations may be more reliably funded, they share other difficulties

Top: UN troop numbers have leapt from 12,700 in 1998 to 60,000 today.

common to the UN and AU. All four organisations suffer from shortfalls in hi-tech equipment and specialist units. UN operations in the Congo and Sudan have been persistently hampered by a lack of air assets, but the London Times reported in July that NATO forces in Afghanistan also only have two-thirds of the helicopters they need.

The countries capable of supplying robust assets remain limited. UN officials would like to receive more support from Europe, which now supplies just 7% of UN forces (by contrast, South Asia and Africa contribute roughly a third each). Within the UN framework, the Irish-led rapid reaction unit deployed in Liberia since 2003 is often cited as the sort of tough and versatile component many missions need. But supply cannot keep up with demand: when faced with the proposition whether to assign the group for operations in the Congo or Darfur earlier this year, Dublin decided to keep Irish troops in Liberia for the time being.

While NATO and the EU have both indicated a desire to give greater support to the UN (and both have also assisted the AU in Darfur), inter-institutional problems remain.

In December 2005, the UN requested EU back-up in the Congo for the country's summer elections – it took more than four months to get a positive answer. While German troops will lead the mission, it enjoys only mixed support in Berlin and there have been complaints that it is largely cosmetic. Other EU members, such as the Czech and Slovak Republics, have indicated that they are unwilling to deploy significant forces to Africa.

Outside Europe, efforts to build up African peacekeeping capacities have won political support from the G8, UN, European Commission and

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the Pentagon – in spite of this, operational progress is reported to be hindered by inter-institutional frictions. Plans to develop standing reserves of South Asian forces for the UN are less well-developed. Nonetheless, new sources of troops can still emerge: China has more than doubled its military contribution to the UN to more than 1,600 troops and police in the last year.

Yet for all these capacity issues, the real challenge for both UN and non-UN peace operations in the near-term may not be one of resources, but of political credibility. For the Sudanese government's refusal to let UN troops into Darfur was one symptom of a worrying trend. If peacekeeping has emerged as a tool for stabilising states, especially in Africa, a growing number of governments are

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finding ways to block peace operations. While the media concentrates on the use of violence against and by peacekeepers, there are more subtle ways to undermine UN and non-UN missions. In 2005, the UN oversaw a constitutional referendum and elections in Burundi – with turnout reaching 90%, this operation seemed a straightforward success. But the new government, believing that the UN mission had favoured its rivals, has asked it to leave ahead of schedule. Although the country still experiences sporadic violence, the UN has had little choice but to agree.

Similar political resistance to the UN emerged in Côte d’Ivoire, where President Laurent Gbagbo has accused the international forces of favouring his opponents, warning that the UN “should remember that they are here because we want them.” With the UN and other organisations straining to find sufficient forces to project strength, it is easy for their opponents to play on their sense of sense of international weakness with implicit threats.

Such threats take on an even greater resonance in cases such as Sudan, where anti-UN voices borrow rhetoric from the War on Terror to stoke doubts about peacekeeping. “We have witnessed what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan and learned lessons that shouldn’t be repeated on the African continent,” warned President Omar al-Bashir in June. Soon afterwards, Osama bin Laden declared that jihadis should fight the UN in Darfur.

Above: Long term peace building is the main aim of current operations



Peacekeepers have always risked being branded colonialists – now they may be crusaders too. Even if international organisations were able to project greater force than they do today, the political implications of this shift would make many governments shy away from peace operations. Building military capacity without political legitimacy is futile.

For the UN, the key to legitimising peace operations has increasingly become long-term peacebuilding: bringing together the financial and civilian resources that can lay the foundations of inclusive states. In New York, the Peacebuilding Commission is intended to be a clearing-house for major powers, international financial institutions and regional organisations to develop consensus on these questions on a case-by-case basis. But it threatens to prove unwieldy, involving more than thirty members at any given time.

Calls for better peacebuilding often come from those trapped in violence. In Timor-Leste, officials lament the lack of economic development on the UN's watch. In Darfur, all factions have told UN staff that chronic water shortages must be addressed.

Nonetheless, it is not clear how promises of peacebuilding can be used to induce deep consent where – as in Khartoum, Côte d'Ivoire and Kandahar – crucial players are strongly opposed to international interference. It remains to be seen if the Peacebuilding Commission will be able to exercise influence in Burundi once the peacekeepers leave.

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Participation in large scale missions by well equipped and experienced nations is an ongoing problem for the UN.

In such situations, UN officials sometimes echo Bill Clinton's much-maligned phrase that the “UN must learn to say no”. Perhaps it should. But that does not mean it shouldn't have the military and civilian resources to say “yes” with more confidence elsewhere.