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The Challenges of Peacekeeping in the 21st Century

(Background note prepared by the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations)

Overview

United Nations peacekeeping is at a critical juncture. In mid-2004, the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) was managing 17 field operations, with around 60,000 men and women serving in civilian and military capacities. Although the UN has been striving to improve its capacity to support existing operations and plan for new ones, meeting the demand for peacekeeping operations has stretched the organization's capacity to the limits.

Evolution of Peacekeeping

The traditional model of UN peacekeeping developed during the Cold War era as a means of resolving conflicts between States and involved the deployment of unarmed or lightly armed military personnel between belligerent parties. The rise in the number of intra-state conflicts, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, has resulted in a shift towards multidimensional peacekeeping operations that are often mandated to support the implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement between parties to a civil war. This has, in turn, led to an expansion of the non-military component of peacekeeping operations whose success is increasingly dependent on the work of civilian experts in key areas such as the rule of law, human rights, gender, child protection, and elections.

The difficult experiences of the mid-1990's in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda prompted the UN to reassess its approach to peacekeeping. In March 2000, a Panel on United Nations Peace Operations issued a report that has come to be known as the "Brahimi Report" (A/55/305-S/2000/809), named after the Panel's chairperson, Under-Secretary-General Lakhdar Brahimi. The report offered an in-depth critique of the conduct of UN peace operations and made specific recommendations for change. The report also underlined consent by the warring parties, a clear and specific mandate and adequate resources as minimum requirements for a successful UN mission. Consequently, the UN and Member States initiated a number of reforms aimed at improving UN peacekeeping, such as the establishment of a pre-mandate financing mechanism to ensure that adequate resources are available for new mission start-ups.

Challenges to Successful Peacekeeping

In 1999, the UN was tasked with setting up an interim administration in East Timor and assumed the transitional administration of Kosovo in the same year. In 1999 and 2000, the Council authorized the establishment of new operations in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Eritrea / Ethiopia. The latest surge in demand for complex peacekeeping operations has placed new strains on an already overstretched system. In the past year the Security Council has authorized four new missions in Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi and Haiti, while planning has already begun for a possible mission in Sudan, and the operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been significantly expanded.

A robust military presence is considered essential during the initial stages of a peacekeeping operation in order to deter potential spoilers and establish the mission's credibility. Finding troops with the necessary training, equipment and logistical support to effectively undertake the complex and often dangerous tasks required of UN peacekeepers remains a key determinant of an operation's success. However, this is easier said than done, since the member states who possess such troops have often proven unwilling or unable to make them available for UN peacekeeping operations. Threats to the safety and security of UN field personnel has also become an issue of great concern, particularly after the 2003 terrorist attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad, prompting the Secretary-General to order a review of the entire United Nations security system. Improvements are ongoing in this area and require further support by Member States.

Restoring some semblance of a functioning state is an increasingly important aspect of complex peacekeeping operations. There is a growing consensus on the need to shore up basic state services, including the judiciary, civil administration and public utilities, in order for post-conflict societies to return to normalcy as quickly as possible. In this regard, the rule of law component has become a critical part of mission planning and considerable progress has been made in establishing capacity to support police, judicial and corrections activities in post-conflict societies. Additionally, in recent years it has become increasingly apparent that elections, which are often identified as the end point of post-conflict transitions, are not a quick fix and can only serve as an exit strategy for the UN if other conditions have been fulfilled.

Budgetary Requirements for Peacekeeping Operations

UN peacekeeping is far cheaper than the alternative, which is war. In 2003, UN peacekeeping cost about US\$2.6 billion, while, in the same year, Governments worldwide spent more than US\$794 billion on arms. The approved peacekeeping budget for the year 2004-2005 is US\$2.8 billion. However, with the additional requirements of the new and recently expanded missions, as well as the possibility of a new mission in Sudan, that amount could grow by a further US\$2.38 billion. All Member States are legally obliged to pay their share of peacekeeping costs under a complex formula that they themselves have established. Despite this legal obligation, Member States owed approximately US\$1.2 billion in current and back peacekeeping dues as of June 2004.

How Can IPU Help?

The Inter-Parliamentary Union has a major role to play in ensuring that Members of Parliament around the world are aware of the importance of UN peacekeeping and the enormous, political, logistical and financial challenges involved. At a time when the UN is faced with acute shortages of personnel and equipment for ongoing and upcoming peacekeeping efforts, parliamentarians can encourage Member State governments to assist the Organization in filling the “troop commitment and equipment gaps”.

Furthermore, legislators can support UN efforts by urging their respective governments to honour current and past assessed contributions and respond to requests for troop and other personnel contributions to missions, particularly in critical specialties such as forensics and investigations.

Additionally, as a focal point for world-wide parliamentary dialogue, the IPU could use its influence to ensure that governments that have not yet done so ratify the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel.

Finally, aside from encouraging Member States to continue providing the UN with the human and financial resources needed to conduct successful peacekeeping operations, the IPU can also assist the UN politically by supporting peace processes in countries where peacekeeping operations are deployed.

The way forward

In the past four years, the UN has undergone some profound changes aimed at improving its ability to meet the new peacekeeping challenges of the 21st century. However, if peacekeeping is to continue serving as a tool for maintaining international peace and security, Member States will need to ensure that missions are given clear mandates and the necessary human and financial resources to implement them. In order to deal effectively with the lingering forces of war and conflict, the UN, Member States and other key stakeholders must continue working together to develop the right tools to make peacekeeping work.
