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UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD¹

Background

Peacekeeping has witnessed significant growth since the 1990's and has evolved to become a cornerstone of the international community's response to international crises. It helps countries torn by conflict create conditions for sustainable peace. Peacekeeping began with a primarily military model of observing ceasefires and separating combatants after inter-State wars. Today, peacekeeping has evolved and expanded into an integrated system of many elements, military, police and civilian personnel, working together to build peace in the dangerous aftermath of conflict.

UN peacekeepers —soldiers and military officers, police and civilian personnel from many countries— monitor and observe peace processes that emerge in post-conflict situations and assist conflicting parties to implement the peace agreement they have signed. Such assistance comes in many forms, including promoting human security, confidence-building measures, power-sharing arrangements, electoral support, strengthening the rule of law, and economic and social development. Since the end of the Cold War, United Nations peacekeeping has often combined with peacebuilding in complex multidimensional operations deployed into settings of intra-State conflict.

UN electoral assistance has become an increasingly essential feature in UN peace operations. Recently, UN peace missions have supported elections in seven post-conflict countries – Afghanistan, Burundi, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, the DRC and Timor-Leste.

Basic facts about UN peacekeeping

There are almost 110,000 personnel serving on 18 peace operations led by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) on four continents – a seven fold increase in UN peacekeeping since 1999. In addition, the newly established Department of Field Support (DFS) supports another 12 special political and/or peacebuilding field missions. Women are increasingly performing key leadership functions in peacekeeping. Their numbers grew by 40% in the course of the last year and a half alone.

The approved peacekeeping budget for the period from 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008 is approximately US\$7.2 billion. This represents about 0.5% of global military spending

¹ Background note prepared by the IPU Secretariat drawing from official UN reports and other materials available to the public.

(estimated at US\$1,232 billion in 2006). The UN does not have its own military force: it depends on contributions from Member States. As of March 2008, 118 countries contributed military and police personnel to UN peacekeeping. Most troops are provided by developing countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and several others. In contrast, developed countries provide most of the funding (the USA tops the chart with 26% of total funding, followed by Japan, Germany, UK and several others).

Mandate and authority of peacekeeping missions

Under the Charter of the United Nations, it is the United Nations Security Council that normally creates and defines peacekeeping missions. It does this by providing the mission with a mandate—a description of the mission's tasks. To establish a new peacekeeping mission, or change the mandate or strength of an existing mission, nine of the Security Council's 15 Member States must vote in favour. However, if any one of the five permanent members—China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom or the United States—votes against the proposal, it fails.

Most peacekeeping operations are established and implemented by the United Nations itself with troops supplied by member states serving under UN operational command. In other cases, where direct UN involvement is not considered appropriate or feasible, the Security Council authorizes regional and other international organizations such as the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or “coalitions of willing countries” to implement certain peacekeeping or peace enforcement functions.

Benefit of UN peacekeeping

UN peacekeeping is both effective and cost-effective when compared to the costs of conflict and the toll in lives and economic devastation. Peacekeeping missions deploy where others cannot or will not and play a vital role in providing a bridge to stability and eventual long-term peace and development.

As an investment, UN-led peacekeeping operations—as opposed to those conducted by ad-hoc coalitions—are cheaper and have the distinct advantage of a built-in mechanism for globally sharing the financial, material and personnel costs. Another distinct advantage of UN peacekeeping is its multinational nature, which provides impartiality and legitimacy; staff members experienced in post conflict peacebuilding operations; and a well-oiled structure for coordinating international assistance.

Experts have pointed to a strong inverse correlation between peacekeeping deployments and war casualties, that is, as peacekeeping goes up, war casualties go down, in both the short and long term. A major independent study found that the UN provides the most suitable institutional framework for all but the largest and most demanding of nation-building missions, due to the UN's comparatively low cost structure, high success rate and high degree of international legitimacy.

Challenges and recommendations for further reform of UN peacekeeping

Since the late 90s, under then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, efforts have intensified to improve the capacity of the UN to conduct peacekeeping operations. Still, in the face of the dramatic increase and complexity of peacekeeping missions, many problems remain:

- Finding troop contingents and increasing the participation by “northern” countries remain major concerns. Most peacekeeping troops are supplied by developing countries. This often creates an imbalance between those states that have the authority to order troops to a mission and those supplying the troops. When those with the most authority are not directly invested in a mission the result is a lack of political ownership of the peacekeeping process in a given country. At the receiving end, the commitment of the international community to help keep the peace may be perceived as weak.
- The UN does not dispose of a standing army that can be promptly dispatched to secure the peace anywhere around the world. Every time a peacekeeping mission is authorized the UN needs to put together a multinational force. This logistical effort may take a long time. Rapid deployment may be facilitated if troop contributing countries were to establish and train a reserve army for UN peacekeeping purposes to be deployed on short notice. This however carries its own costs as well as, potentially, political implications.
- A larger challenge is meeting demands for the recruitment of thousands of skilled police officers and civilian staff with expertise in justice, civil administration, economic development or other specialized fields. UN peacekeeping must also secure other capabilities such as tactical air support, field medical facilities and movement control operations. Again, the logistics of all this are very complex and the resources available to the UN are short of the mark. The problem is compounded by the fact that major contributors to the peacekeeping budget are often late in paying their dues.
- The 110,000 personnel serving today come from a variety of military cultures and training. Imposing a common code of conduct and discipline to such a heterogeneous force poses a huge challenge. The problem has been highlighted by several cases of sexual abuse by the hands of UN personnel in recent years. The UN has adopted a comprehensive three-pronged strategy (prevention, enforcement and remediation) to address this issue which involves, among other things, the establishment of conduct and discipline units. It is also working with troop-contributing countries to ensure effective follow-up and full implementation of the recommendations of a Special Adviser on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.
- Another problem potentially besetting peacekeeping missions today is that of the “spoilers” of the peace. This arises most often when peacekeepers are sent to keep the peace within a country where several factions are involved. A peace agreement signed in such a context may not last long if one faction does not

adhere to it or decides to dispense with it some time after peacekeepers have come onto the scene. When this happens peacekeepers can then find themselves enmeshed in a war zone, which would radically alter the purpose of their mission and also create a situation of heightened risk of casualties among the peacekeeping forces.