

Lebanon, Sudan: Who You Gonna Call?

By Don Kraus | August 30, 2006

The world is holding its collective breath. Will the Lebanon ceasefire hold? Will war and ethnic cleansing escalate again in Darfur? UN peacekeeping, described by Secretary General Kofi Annan as “the only fire brigade in the world that has to acquire a fire engine after the fire has started,” will be key in both situations to preventing further death and destruction. Prompt UN protection of civilians in war-torn regions, however, requires a new institution: a rapidly deployable UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS).

Currently the UN is hard-pressed to get boots on the ground quickly enough to keep the peace. In Lebanon much rests upon the UN’s ability to rapidly ramp up a force that can, together with the Lebanese army, secure the southern Lebanese border with Israel. Ambassador John Bolton punted the U.S. role in securing peacekeepers by saying it “really is a responsibility of the Secretariat.” Four days after the Security Council authorized a 15,000-strong force, not one nation committed to sending peacekeepers.

In fact, it took almost two weeks after the UN ceasefire resolution passed before France, the supposed backbone of the operation, finally caved in to international pressure generated by Secretary General Annan and agreed to supply 2,000 peacekeepers as part of a 7,000 European Union (EU) force. Although the UN hopes to have some troops on the ground by early September, the entire EU force won’t be fully deployed for two to three months. Filling out the rest of the mission will depend on several factors, including a Bangladeshi offer of 2,000 peacekeepers that runs up against Israel’s refusal to accept troops from countries that do not recognize its existence.

In Darfur, the lack of cooperation from Sudan’s government has prevented the UN from rapidly deploying peacekeeping forces, which has contributed to the unraveling of the May peace accord. “We oppose the deployment of American, British, or other forces imposed by the Security Council,” Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir says. “We are determined to defeat any forces entering the country just as Hezbollah has defeated the Israeli forces.” Sudanese opposition will complicate Kofi Annan’s efforts to secure commitments from nations to supply the over 18,000 troops needed for an October deployment of UN peacekeepers. These troops are scheduled to replace the under-resourced African Union observer force.

Historic Incapacity

These problems are not new. In the past, UN peacekeepers took three to six months to arrive at a conflict. While this response time has recently improved, “rapid deployment” is still defined as 30 days for a “traditional” peacekeeping mission (where all parties agree to allow in peacekeepers) and 90 days for “complex” missions (where some spoilers are prepared to derail a peace agreement). This delay can prove fatal for civilians whose lives depend on fragile accords. In addition, UN missions are still hampered by troops from multiple nations who speak different languages, have different levels of training, use different communications and weapons systems, and who must work together in confusing circumstances. Also complicating the situation is the lack of coordination between the military and essential non-military elements of a peace operation including humanitarian relief experts and international civilian police.

One answer to the UN’s lack of capacity to respond rapidly to these crises is to create UNEPS. Working within a single command structure, UNEPS would employ 12-18,000 military personnel, civilian police, legal experts, and relief professionals from various countries. This force would be carefully selected, expertly trained, and coherently organized, so it would not fail due to a lack of skills, equipment, experience in resolving conflicts, or gender, national, or religious imbalance. The new body would operate out of mobile field headquarters that would enable deployment within 48 hours of a UN authorization. UNEPS would complement existing peace operations capacities and operate according to a “first in—first out” deployment philosophy.



From Idea to Implementation

Support for UNEPS is growing in the United States. Representatives Albert Wynn (D-MD) and Jim Leach (R-IA), have introduced bipartisan legislation supporting the proposal. Wynn estimates that UNEPS would cost the UN \$2 billion to create and less than \$1 billion per year to sustain. For the international community, this would be a bargain. According to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, donor countries could have saved \$130 billion of the \$200 billion they spent on conflict management in the 1990s by focusing on conflict prevention rather than post-conflict reconstruction.

Although the Bush administration has not commented on the Wynn-Leach legislation, the administration has supported the creation of standing UN police. Despite Security Council veto power, the Bush administration is concerned that such an international force would be perceived as encroaching on U.S. sovereignty. Even if such resistance is overcome, U.S. support could still hurt the proposal's chances at the UN. Some developing nations fear that the great powers could use UNEPS as leverage against weaker countries.

In response, many UNEPS supporters believe that a nation from the Global South should introduce the proposal at the UN. The responsibility for breathing life into UNEPS now lies with civil society, working with allies in the UN and interested governments. A growing number of citizens' organizations and leaders of civil society are determined to follow the examples of the International Criminal Court and the Ottawa Land Mines Treaty and develop a global network of NGOs and like-minded nations to push for UNEPS.

The Road Not Yet Followed

With UNEPS in place, the conflicts in Lebanon and Darfur would have evolved differently.

In Lebanon, UNEPS would already be on the ground, providing a sufficient stabilizing presence while the UN solicited a replacement force of more permanent peacekeepers. UNEPS civilian police and disaster relief experts—knowledgeably equipped to work with the military, humanitarian organizations, and UN agencies—would facilitate reconstruction efforts with promptness and efficiency.

In Sudan, the Security Council would have deployed UNEPS in May to solidify the peace agreement while there still was political momentum to make it work. By the time national peacekeepers were ready to replace UNEPS, the situation on the ground would have stabilized or, at minimum, become more manageable.

While no international force can guarantee an immediate peace, UNEPS would give the UN the rapid response system that it needs. For the people in Lebanon, Darfur, and throughout the world, this development cannot come quickly enough. "There is one overwhelming argument for the United Nations Emergency Peace Service," says former UN Under-Secretary General Sir Brian Urquhart. "It is desperately needed, and it is needed as soon as possible."

Don Kraus is the executive vice president at Citizens for Global Solutions. More information about UNEPS is available at <http://www.globalactionpw.org/unepls/index.htm>.

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