

Web-exclusive comment

Despite our commitment in Afghanistan, the Canadian forces still have the capacity to make a big difference in Darfur, says conflict specialist Peter Langille.

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SPECIAL TO GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

"It's deeply shocking to anybody who's familiar with it," said Prime Minister Stephen Harper. United Nations officials describe the situation in Darfur as the "greatest humanitarian crisis in the world." Mass murder, systemic rape, a thousand villages torched, more than 2.5 million displaced people, many still under attack in refugee camps in Darfur, even cross-border incursions to kill more in Chad. Now reports confirm this crisis is becoming even worse.

From the outset, the African Union faced a massive challenge in the Darfur region, one of the organization's first military peace-making missions. Lacking sufficient troops and transport to cover an area the size of France, few could expect more than a good effort to monitor and report. Finally, after three years of duplicity from Khartoum, and without a sufficient mandate or capacity to protect civilians or prevent ongoing attacks, the onus for further help has come around again, with renewed urgency. The clock is ticking toward a critical decision next week.

The UN is in a desperate search for countries that share the commitment and have the capability to act. If Secretary-General Kofi Annan can present the Security Council with a viable option for making the transition to a UN operation in September - including governments willing to step up to stop the genocide - many more lives could be saved.

Many recall an eerily similar situation in Rwanda more than a decade ago. There is no question that we and others failed then. The new question posed by our Prime Minister is whether any initiative will be effective?

So, we hear Canada "might" provide further help.

Confronted by an emergency, "might" appears far from sufficient. This is one occasion where thousands of lives depend upon decisive leadership and action to uphold our values and obligations.

Canada could and should commit to an expanded UN mission. It isn't simply because successive governments urged others to improve their responses to UN peacekeeping or that our officials now urge other countries to share a responsibility to protect civilians: We actually have a promising win-win option.

After the genocide in Rwanda, Denmark, Canada and the Netherlands took the lead in developing something called the Multinational Standby High-Readiness Brigade (known as SHIRBRIG), to be used for UN operations. Fifteen countries agreed to participate.

SHIRBRIG is designed to provide the UN with prompt access to 5,000-6,000 well-trained, well-equipped troops in a coherent formation for rapid deployment worldwide. Most participants already have experience in robust Chapter VII peacekeeping operations. A SHIRBRIG headquarters and a security company were in another part of Sudan last year, helping to monitor the ceasefire between North and South. Their headquarters has repeatedly proven to be an exceptional asset in the critical early stages of mission start-up. Their staff is familiar with this crisis. In co-operation with their counterparts in the UN, SHIRBRIG planners have already developed contingency plans for Darfur.

SHIRBRIG is the most advanced mechanism conditionally available to the UN. There's only one snag: Access to national armed forces and resources is subject to the approval of each participating government.

Unfortunately, while a few governments want to help, others are quite adept at saying no slowly, while standing by from a long, safe distance. As a result, SHIRBRIG has yet to deploy at full brigade strength.

Could a more substantive SHIRBRIG deployment be arranged for Darfur? A concerted effort from Prime Minister Harper might sway the key contributors. In addition to providing the brigade commander, Canada is well-placed to lead the effort and to host a meeting with other participating heads of state to secure additional commitments. Notably, the recent international policy review stated that Canada would take a lead role in SHIRBRIG. Isn't it about time we really led?

In Darfur, there is less risk of SHIRBRIG being bogged down in another long-term commitment. This mechanism is simply a "first responder," designed to sustain a deployment of six months, until others have adequate time to prepare and replace them.

The SHIRBRIG headquarters would help to ensure a prompt, effective start, when the transition is made from the African Union to a UN operation.

A robust, mobile brigade group of professional soldiers might be sufficient to augment African forces, secure their own safety, help to offset further attacks and assist with the delivery of humanitarian aid. Notably, the Janjaweed carry out their attacks with light arms on horseback, (reportedly supported by the Sudanese army in jeeps and an air force that rolls bombs out the back of transport planes onto villages). Combined, they represent a real threat, but for professionals, they are a manageable threat.

Inevitably, a few will question whether the Canadian Forces have the personnel and capacity to help in another crisis? Yet a battle group, based on a mechanized infantry battalion, with Coyotes and Lav IIIs, as well as 30-50 personnel in a headquarters for six months is quite manageable. Aside from a stabilizing presence, which might encourage others to commit, such a contribution would definitely help.

Little doubt, SHIRBRIG members would be more confident if the Dutch agreed to provide their helicopters for surveillance and close air support. The European Union and NATO are already providing logistic support.

As Darfur represents the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century, the U.S. administration might also be willing to help. As their polls suggest, 80 per cent of Americans expect a stronger response; they would notice and appreciate our contribution. Canadians may not know much about SHIRBRIG, but they do support the UN, as well as the responsibility to protect civilians at high risk.

In the words of the SHIRBRIG's Canadian commander, Brigadier-General Greg Mitchell, "If the political situation clears, we feel the SHIRBRIG could make a huge difference." In co-operation with others, Canada could put a stop to a human disaster, stem a wider war, as well as the culture of impunity, and save people who have already suffered far too much.

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