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Call UN 911: A Better Way to Prevent Mass Atrocities and Protect Civilians?

By Peter Langille

What might the international community do to prevent mass atrocities and to protect civilians at risk? Like the word ‘peace’, the laudable norms of protection and prevention appear suspect when applied by traditional military means. In Libya, NATO’s demonstrations of high-tech war with the initial shock and awe were too reminiscent of Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. Each failed to provide sustainable security.¹

So where does this leave us? At the last World Summit, the UN Security Council expressed support for timely and decisive responses to stem mass atrocity crimes. This summer, the issue will be the focus of the UN General Assembly. Syria has heightened the urgency. Sudan magnifies it. Brazil renewed interest in the lingering questions of how and with what to prevent mass atrocities and protect civilians by suggesting a ‘responsibility while protecting’.² For now,

NATO remains the default choice as we lack a reliable alternative for the more demanding operations. Officials may soon be under pressure to deliver better policy options.

Numerous challenges complicate the problem. Increasingly, people face overlapping crises due to accelerated climate change and flooding, financial crashes and resource scarcity, inequality and desperation, refugee flows and pressure on weak states, arms proliferation and the attendant probability of armed conflict. Our global support systems are slow to adapt.

Of course, it's essential to address the underlying causes and core problems of each, with work on deep prevention. Yet too many of the big issues have moved close to the tipping point where it's also imperative to address the triggers and implications of worse.

Emergencies by their very nature require rapid, reliable and effective responses. Frequently, they demand that diverse services are pre-planned, well-coordinated and promptly available. Complex emergencies also necessitate more comprehensive, integrated services to address the wider array of requirements and human needs. Almost anything can happen in the absence of a coherent effort or one lacking the appropriate tools.

At the domestic level, people in much of the world can be relatively confident that their immediate safety needs are secured through a call for '911' emergency services.³ What's needed is something equivalent at the global level. Yet nothing of this nature currently exists.

The UN system attempts to help in preventing armed conflict and protect civilians. Indeed, the UN is almost unique in having effectively coordinated multiple emergencies. But oddly, our one global Organisation with the responsibility, authority and legitimacy derived from universal membership has no capacity of its own for responding in a timely and decisive manner.

For peace operations—even the majority, which are now authorised under Chapter VII with mandates to protect civilians—the UN relies on a standby arrangement system that is helpful in normal circumstances, but is insufficient, even prone to fail under more demanding crises. The standby arrangements are non-binding, conditional agreements that depend on national governments. National interests and whims, political will and decisions, as well as the availability of national personnel and resources determine whether the UN will be able to help. Unfortunately, there has been a marked tendency to stand by instead of standing up incurring routine delays of four to six months, rather than timely, decisive responses.

It's hardly comforting that UN peacekeeping is now confined to post-conflict stabilization, with scant support for preventive action or deployments.⁴ A few modest improvements may follow from the UN's New Horizon's initiative and the official preference for pragmatic incremental reforms to existing arrangements—new partnerships among regional actors, more standby arrangements and more early warning systems.⁵ But that's only a slight variation on the same menu offered since 1993.

The outcome is largely predictable. With the same arrangements merely modified, there will still be slow, unreliable and mixed responses; still little to protect civilians or stop violent conflicts from escalating and spreading. When confronted by fast-breaking events the political choice will

be limited to inaction in the short-term with a subsequent requirement for later, larger, more expensive efforts or worse — traditional military approaches, which destroy and divide, seldom providing effective responses or sustainable solutions.

Perhaps in the face of overlapping global crises and an appreciation of our current system, we may begin to understand the urgent need for a UN ‘911’.

A UN Emergency Peace Service

The proposal for a United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) is intended to create a permanent “911” first-responder. A UNEPS is to complement existing UN and regional arrangements by filling the critical gap of managing the initial six months of demanding operations. This option was specifically designed to help prevent armed conflict and genocide, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up of demanding peace operations, and to address human needs where others either cannot or will not.

The core principles underlying the UNEPS proposal are that it be: a standing, integrated UN formation; highly trained and well-equipped; ready for immediate deployment upon authorization of the UN Security Council; multidimensional (civilians, police and military); multifunctional (capable of diverse assignments with specialised skills for security, humanitarian, health and environmental crises); composed of 16,000 dedicated personnel (recruited professionals, selected, trained and employed by the UN); developed to ensure regional and gender equitable representation; co-located at a designated UN base under an operational headquarters and two mobile mission headquarters; at sufficient strength to operate in high-threat environments ; and, a service to complement existing UN and regional arrangements.

Five questions arise.

First, could a UNEPS help to prevent armed conflict*? Ideally, any preventive system works best when it seldom has to intervene to stem crises. As with any police or defence effort, it’s best to be known to have credible means to deter aggression and the worst of crimes. In practice, this usually works by having a legitimate capacity that is recognised and ready to respond when needed.

A presence matters. To illustrate, the International Criminal Court (ICC) is now recognised worldwide. Having begun to hold individuals accountable for war crimes, it’s started to curtail a culture of impunity and criminal behaviour. Similarly, a UNEPS would complement the ICC, existing UN and regional arrangements, with the presence of a reliable, standing formation, immediately available to help. The deployable elements of a UNEPS should be sufficient to deter most, if not all individuals, organisations or parties inclined to mass atrocity crimes.

Second, could a UNEPS help to protect civilians? Although neither designed for, nor capable of war-fighting, it includes a sufficiently robust military service to provide self-defence, defence of the mission and protection of civilians in most, if not all cases.

A UNEPS is not at the size or composition for directly engaging the Sudanese, Libyan or Syrian armies. But that doesn't suggest such a formation couldn't help. If specifically trained and developed for protection tasks, could a UNEPS do a better job in managing mission start-up, securing safe havens, guarding humanitarian corridors, countering spoilers and militias, restoring security, law and order, improving the prospects for rapid deployment into harsh, even hostile environments?⁶ These are tough jobs although hardly mission-impossible for those committed. Appropriate preparation for assigned tasks tends to make them more manageable.

Notably, smaller formations helped to protect civilians at various stages of the conflicts in East Timor, Sierra Leone, the DRC, and Côte d'Ivoire.⁷ In others, like Rwanda and Srebrenica, it's also acknowledged that a well trained force of 5000 would likely have been sufficient to stem the ensuing slaughter. [8]

Would a UNEPS alone be sufficient to ensure 'responsibility while protecting'? While definitely helpful, such a mechanism would complement, and depend on the wider UN system. There would still be a need for more binding arrangements to secure reliable rotations within six months, air-lift, augmentation and close-air support, if necessary, as well as a deeper commitment to the follow-on peacebuilding efforts.

Third, could a UNEPS help to generate the deeper cooperation and political will to respond?

Frequently at the forefront of dubious excuses for inaction is the claim that there is a lack of political will, particularly within the UN Security Council. Clearly the "will" to do a job often depends upon having an appropriate tool for the job, preferably one that is readily available and reliable. At least when you have a well-designed tool there are fewer excuses for failing to attempt a task.

Plus, governments would have an available UN option. Rather than rely on members of their own national services, a UNEPS would be composed of dedicated individuals who volunteered to serve and work directly for the UN. People would be recruited globally to provide gender balance and universal representation. By drawing on the very best of professionals worldwide, the UN could screen, select and train participants to high common standards, ensuring higher sophistication and readiness for various assignments.

The benefits of such a service have been understood for a long time. As Canada's 1995 study on the subject noted, "UN volunteers offer the best prospect of a completely reliable, well-trained rapid reaction capability. Without the need to consult national authorities, the UN could cut responses times significantly, and volunteers could be deployed within hours of a Security Council decision". "Ultimately", the report acknowledged, "a UN rapid reaction capability can be truly reliable only if it no longer depends on Member States of the UN for supply of personnel for peace operations."⁹

The need for timely and decisive responses is hardly new. Repeatedly, officials have stressed the urgent need for a UN rapid deployment capability, well-integrated responses, a UN strategic

reserve a force multiplier, a robust deterrent capacity, an over-the-horizon security guarantor, a means to protect civilians and attend to human needs in areas of high risk.

Most of these needs were actually recognized in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. In the ensuing national studies and multinational initiative it was also understood that a UN army, a UN Legion or a UN rapid reaction force were neither appropriate to address the diverse requirements of complex emergencies nor sufficiently appealing to attract a broadly supportive constituency.¹⁰ Then, the best of available ideas still lacked the political traction required.

Fourth, might a UNEPS do a more cost-effective job in a more appealing manner?

Complex emergencies may share similarities, but most have distinct needs. As it's multifunctional, a UNEPS is designed to address a wider spectrum of emergencies with a variety of useful services.¹¹ With a modular formation, deployments can be tailored to various mission-specific requirements.

With a multidimensional composition, there is a better prospect of providing the array of services needed and appreciated by people in desperate circumstances. This tends to improve the reception and support required. A UNEPS is intended to deliver more assistance faster and, in a more sophisticated manner. Small teams of experts and planners are included to co-ordinate the larger formations' immediate and subsequent responses to disaster assistance, environmental crisis, health and humanitarian emergencies.

As an integrated service, it's not limited to simply stopping direct violence, but also extends to initiating quick-impact and long-term projects. Aside from addressing human needs, this should help to counter structural violence (exploitation and exclusion), and stem cultural violence. With specialists in conflict resolution and mediation, human rights monitors and educators, peacebuilding advisory units, and medical teams, there is a far better prospect of establishing the basis for follow-on efforts to restore good governance and sustainable security.

Of course, a UNEPS would incur costs, as well as benefits. As proposed, it entails a start-up cost of approximately \$2 billion and annual recurring costs of about \$1 billion, to be shared by 192 member states. That's clearly an enormous amount of money, which demands serious justification and context. However, this year, the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations noted that the 15 largest countries had spent \$1.6 trillion on armaments in 2010, while total expenditure on peacekeeping operations from 1948 to 2010 amounted to \$69 billion.¹² By contrast, a UNEPS would require a relatively small investment.

Given a UNEPS' potential to prevent and deter, it should help to reduce the number of operations required. With the potential to respond rapidly and reliably, it might also stem the need for later, larger and more expensive operations. In return, the cost savings should be substantive.

At least, a UNEPS is deemed to be a more appealing idea, more politically feasible, more cost-effective and arguably, capable of timely and decisive responses to critical challenges.¹³

Finally, might there be more to this that attracts some and challenges the interests' of others?

The wider potential of a UN Emergency Peace Service or similar entity (for prevention, protection and more) has been understood for over fifty years. As officials in the U.S. State Department formerly acknowledged,

There is an inseparable relationship between the scaling down of national armaments on the one hand and the building up of international peacekeeping machinery and institutions on the other. Nations are unlikely to shed their means of self-protection in the absence of alternative ways to safeguard their legitimate interests. This can only be achieved through the progressive strengthening of international institutions under the United Nations and by creating a United Nations Peace Force to enforce the peace as the disarmament process proceeds.¹⁴

Can we continue to afford 192 competitive national military establishments and the unwarranted influence of a global military industrial complex? Efforts at disarmament and de-militarization, development and global governance remain imperative, but like a UNEPS, each needs the help of a cooperative, cosmopolitan agenda.¹⁵

Arguably, the lack of support for a UNEPS stems less from concerns that it might not work as intended, but more from a fear that it might. As acknowledged, these are inseparable relations. So far, a UNEPS has been an easy option for politicians to ignore.¹⁶ The opposing arguments hold sway in every capital and national defence establishment.¹⁷ As the need becomes more evident, a familiar pattern is likely; the idea will be studied by commissions, ridiculed as inadequate, then, attacked as dangerously radical. Yet occasionally, circumstances align favourably.

In his seminal 1957 study, *A United Nations Peace Force*, William R. Frye provided an insight that is worth recalling: "Establishment of a small, permanent peace force, or the machinery for one could be the first step on the long road toward order and stability. Progress cannot be forced, but it can be helped to evolve. That which is radical one year can become conservative and accepted the next."

Of course, a UNEPS is no panacea or cure-all. It's a first responder that would simply help. And, it's an idea that's evolved into a global initiative.¹⁸ If broadly supported, a UNEPS could begin to revitalise a semblance of collective, common and sustainable security.¹⁹ That's a step toward saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, but it's also another means by which 'we the people' might free up enormous resources to address a host of pressing problems.

In the words of Sir Brian Urquhart,

"This venture is of the greatest importance both to the UN as a responsible institution and to the millions as of yet unknown, innocent victims who might, in the future, be saved by this essential addition to the UN's capacity to act on their behalf. There is one overwhelming argument for the United Nations Emergency Peace Service. It is desperately needed, and it is needed as soon as possible."

Together, we might make a difference in mobilizing wider support. Ideas don't work unless we do.

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Notes

¹ An earlier version of this article was in Langille, "A UN Emergency Peace Service?", *Open Democracy / Open Security*, May 14, 2012. Available:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/h-peter-langille/un-emergency-peace-service>

² See, United Nations, General Assembly, "Letter dated 9 November 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General", A/66/551-S/2011/701, November 11, 2011.

³ The analogy to a '911' world emergency service was also made by the former British Minister for International Development. See, Hilary Benn, 'Humanitarian and Conflict Reform – An Emergency Service for the World', 2nd White Paper Speech, UN, New York, 23 January 2006. Available: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/development/story/0,,1693708,00.html>.

The 'UN 911' analogy was elaborated upon in Howard Peter Langille, *Bridging the Commitment-Capacity Gap: A Review of Existing Arrangements and Options for Enhancing UN Rapid Deployment* (Wayne, N.J.: Center for UN Reform Education, August 2002). Available: <http://www.globalcommonsecurity.org/gcs/initiatives/united-nations-emergency-peace-service-uneps>

See also Langille, "Preventing Genocide: Time for a UN 911", *The Globe and Mail* online edition, October 19, 2004.

Available: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/article945596.ece>

⁴ See United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines*, 2008. Available:

http://www.un/pbpu.unlb.org/pbps/library/Capstone_Doctrine_ENG.pdf

⁵ See United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *A New Partnership Agenda: Charting a new Horizon for UN Peacekeeping*, New York, July 2009. Available:

<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/newhorizon.pdf>

⁶ For an overview of the related options and roles (operational requirements) for protecting civilians in Libya and Syria see, Mary Kaldor, "Libya: war or humanitarian intervention?", *Open Democracy*, March 29, 2011. Available: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/mary-kaldor/libya-war-or-humanitarian-intervention>

And see, Kaldor, "What to do about Syria's new war?" *Open Democracy*, February 12, 2012.

Available: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/mary-kaldor/what-to-do-about-syrias-new-war>

⁷ For a thoughtful African perspective on a UNEPS applicability see, Hussein Solomon and Amelia Du Rand, “Constraints in African Peacekeeping: The Need for a United Nations Emergency Peace Service”, CIIPS Briefing Paper, no 75, 2006. Available:

http://www.cips.up.ac.za/.../75-2006_Constraints_in_African_Peacekeeping.

For a review of a UNEPS potential and limits with respect to Darfur see, Langille, “Preventing Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity: One innovation and new global initiative”, Amanda Gryzb, (ed.) *Darfur and the World*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009). For a German diplomatic perspective on “The Urgent Need for a UNEPS” see, Detlov Wolter, *A United Nations for the 21 st Century: From Reaction to Prevention*, (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2007). Excerpt available:

<http://www.detlevwolter.de/unepts.html#nachoben> An Australian perspective is within Annie Herro, Wendy Lambourne and David Penklis, [Peacekeeping and peace enforcement in Africa: The potential contribution of a UN Emergency Peace Service](#)”, *African Security Review*, 18: 1, Institute for Security Studies. Available:

http://sydney.edu.au/arts/peace_conflict/research/Herro%20and%20Lambourne2009-UNEPTS%20in%20Africa.pdf

Indian, South American, African and American perspectives are included in the overview of the UNEPS proposal coordinated by American NGOs. See, Robert C. Johansen, (ed.), *A United Nations Emergency Peace Service: To Prevent Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*, (New York: Institute for Global Policy, 2006), pp.75-88. Available:

http://www.globalactionpw.org/UNEPTS/UNEPTS_PUBLICATION.pdf

Elaboration may also be found within the thoughtful report of Kavitha Suthanthiraraj, Mariah Quinn and Juan Mendez, *Standing for Change in Peacekeeping Operations*, (New York: Global Action to Prevent War, 2009). Available: <http://www.globalactionpw.org/.../standing-for-change-final-may-09.pdf>

⁸ See, “Rwanda, OAU Report, 07/07/00.” UN Department of Public Information. July 8, 2008. University of Pennsylvania -African Studies Center. April 21, 2008. Available:

http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic-070800.html. Also see, United Nations, *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations During the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda*, (S/1999/1257), December 16, 1999. Available:

<http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/rwanda.htm> And, United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35: The fall of Srebrenica, (A/54/549) November 15, 1999. Available: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/54/549

⁹ Government of Canada, *Towards A Rapid Reaction Capability For The United Nations*, (Ottawa: 1995), pp.60-62. Available:

<http://www.worldfederalistscanada.org/programs1unepts.html>

¹⁰ The author served as an office of primary responsibility on the core working group of the Canadian study. That report was presented to the UN General Assembly on its fiftieth anniversary and subsequently became the back ground document for the 28 member states participating within the Friends of Rapid Deployment (FORD). Much of the subsequent work in developing the concept, case and model for a UNEPS was undertaken while the author was a PhD candidate in the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. See for example, Langille, James Hammond, and Carleton Hughes, “A Preliminary Blueprint of Long-Term Options for Enhancing a United Nations Rapid Reaction Capability” in David Cox and Albert

Legault (eds.), *UN Rapid Reaction Capabilities: Requirements and Prospects*, (Cornwallis: The Pearson Peacekeeping Press, 1995). Also see, Langille, “Conflict Prevention: Options for Rapid Deployment and UN Standing Forces”, Special Issue of *International Peacekeeping*, Tom Woodhouse and Oliver Ramsbotham, (eds.), vol. 7. no. 1, Spring 2000, pp. 219-253.

¹¹ Preventing genocide and mass atrocity crimes would be central to a UNEPS. Yet these are not routine, frequent crimes, which alone would suffice to attract the constituency of support and ongoing funding required to develop or maintain a substantive new UN service. To appeal globally and justify the investment, a UNEPS must have a capacity to address its other related primary roles with various services. In short, the more useful and appreciated by the majority, the more likely the prospects of its realization.

¹² See, Remarks of HervÉ Ladsous, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations to the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, February 21, 2012.

¹³ This reflected the wider consensus of representatives from diverse sectors in both the South and the North who met at the first global conference on a UNEPS in Cuenca, Spain, convened by Global Action to Prevent War in February 2005.

¹⁴ United States, State Department, “Freedom From War”, Washington, D.C., 1961.

¹⁵ For an early attempt in this respect see, Report of the Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For recent elaboration that places a UNEPS central to the cosmopolitan agenda see, David Curran, “Operationalising Cosmopolitan Arrangements: A Role of the United Nations”, (forthcoming 2012).

¹⁶ The initiative for a UNEPS has also been hampered by insufficient support for research and educational outreach. Although the idea has attracted prominent endorsements, the absence of institutional support and funding continues to impede development of an inclusive, equitable process, an up-to-date proposal, a detailed blueprint of the requirements, and 4-5 regional UNEPS centres.

¹⁷ For a serious review of the opposing arguments see, Adam Roberts, “Proposals For UN Standing Forces: A Critical History”, in Vaughan Lowe, Adam Roberts, Jennifer Welsh and Dominik Zaum, (eds.), *The United Nations Security Council and War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp. 99-129.

¹⁸ The UNEPS initiative is now being co-directed by Global Action to Prevent War and the World Federalist Movement-Canada. The origins of this initiative are summarized in Justine Wang, “_ The Challenge of Prevention and Enforcement”, A Symposium on Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity, The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, January 8, 2004. Available: <http://www.globalcommonsecurity.org/gcs/initiatives/united-nations-emergency-peace-service-uneeps/origins>