

GLOBAL

UN 911 first-responder system is overdue

By DR. PETER LANGILLE APR. 1, 2020

A UN first-responder system's most distinctive feature is that it would be a standing formation, prepared and ready to serve in diverse operations, immediately available upon authorization of the UN Security Council—and able to address the critical first six months of an emergency.



Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne, along with other government officials, are still campaigning for one of two rotating seats in the UN Security Council. The election is slated for June. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

If it feels like someone hit the pause button on normalcy worldwide, you're not alone. As with many of the world's big challenges, we're all in this together, mutually vulnerable, and interdependent on interconnected global systems.

Perhaps this collective pause from the daily race will allow time for reflection about other threats we face. Climate change has become the ultimate [threat multiplier](#), with nuclear weapons also a constant threat. Meanwhile, millions of people are caught in unsustainable conditions, with 72

million forcibly displaced by violence and persecution, and an [estimated](#) 168 million needing humanitarian assistance and protection in 2020.

With big changes brewing, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau believes that with a seat on the United Nations Security Council, Canada might make a difference. His team are trying to convince other leaders that Canada could make a better contribution than Norway and Ireland—both UN stalwarts.

Arguably, what matters most is what a country plans to put on the table.

Small steps won't do. It's now a choice between big and bold ideas for a more effective UN, or fold and head home.

So, how might we persuade others that we're serious about a UN that can inspire the co-operation to address our shared global challenges?

Restoring a little respect might be a start. To the UN's credit, it works non-stop worldwide on all the big challenges, with an annual regular budget of \$3-billion that's considerably less than the New York City police department's \$5.6-billion. UN peace operations, now cut to \$6.5-billion, often attract unfair criticism. Despite a few tragic failures, the UN still has a success rate of more than 90 per cent in 71 operations since 1956. No national military can claim a similar record. That UN peacekeeping saved millions of lives, billions of dollars, and stemmed wider wars is no small feat.

On the less positive and more urgent side, UN peace operations continue to be plagued by insufficient funding and national contributions of personnel and equipment.

Carrying our share wouldn't be too tough. Canada was once a leading UN contributor and not solely in providing troops and police, but also with innovative plans to improve operations. But not lately: Canada currently [ranks 73rd](#) in contributions, with a total of 45 personnel deployed.

The Canadian Armed Forces have the capacity to contribute transport aircraft, helicopters, armoured personnel carriers, a mobile hospital, and formed units of professional soldiers. But like the quick-reaction force that Canada pledged to the UN, defence officials have, with few exceptions, delayed and refused even modest UN requests. It doesn't help to claim that "Canada is back."

The UN and its member states now confront a dilemma that demands a new approach. UN peacekeeping has been relegated to post-conflict stabilization after wars wind down. [Deploying a UN operation](#) may take six to 12 months or more.

Instead of being proactive in conflict prevention, this is a shift back to a reactive posture, often providing "too little, too late." In the absence of a rapid and reliable UN capacity to prevent and protect, violent conflicts tend to escalate and spread, incurring vast human suffering and destruction. Then they require larger, longer UN operations at far higher costs. With this approach, problems will escalate.

Last year, the [Global Peace Index](#) reported the annual cost of war and armed conflict at a staggering US\$14.1-trillion. Those resources are urgently needed to address the climate emergency, global health and sustainable development.

Three years back, the president of the UN General Assembly conceded the obvious: 70 years after its founding, the organization is [still not equipped](#) to meet its primary objective—"to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

We know what's needed. Few, if any countries, have explored this as deeply as Canada. A former Liberal government conducted an in-depth study of UN rapid deployment and the option of establishing a standing UN force.

One option that stemmed from that [official study](#)—submitted to the UN General Assembly on its fiftieth anniversary—is the proposal for a [United Nations Emergency Peace Service](#) (UNEPS).

With this one development—effectively a standing UN 911 first-responder for complex emergencies—the UN would finally have a rapid, reliable capacity to help fulfil four of its tougher assigned tasks. A UNEPS is designed to help prevent armed conflict and mass atrocity crimes, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt startup for peace operations, and to address human needs where others either can't or won't.

Arguably, its most distinctive feature is that it would be a standing formation, prepared and ready to serve in diverse operations, immediately available upon authorization of the UN Security Council—and able to address the critical first six months of an emergency.

A UN Emergency Peace Service would complement existing UN arrangements, with a new capability; one that is both multidimensional (composed of civilian, police and military elements) and multifunctional (for security, environmental, health and humanitarian emergencies), as well as gender equitable.

With its modular design, deployments could be tailored to the mission-specific requirements of various emergencies offering, among others, medical teams and a mobile hospital, disaster assistance and environmental crisis response teams.

Dedicated individuals would be recruited by the UN from those volunteering to serve. They would be screened and selected on the basis of merit, skill and commitment, then trained and hired on a basis similar to UN civil servants, and co-located at a designated UN base.

Such a service would encourage higher standards systemwide. It would also help to offset the political pressure many governments face when confronted with awkward decisions about whether to deploy their people into potentially high-risk operations at the outset. As well as saving lives, a UNEPS is also to help save costs.

In Canada, and elsewhere, costs tend to be assessed against preferred priorities and interests. The total cost of developing a UNEPS is considerably less than what the Federal Government plans to pay for each of its 15 new naval surface combat ships (Type 26 frigates), [estimated at](#)

[\\$4.6-billion per ship](#). If Canada proceeds to purchase 88 F-35 fighter jets, the estimated cost per plane has soared to \$250-million, which totals to more than \$22-billion. Both are advanced war-fighting platforms that might be briefly useful in WWII; a war that few can expect to survive. Yet they offer little, if any, help where Canada's help will be needed most.

Creating a UN Emergency Peace Service is likely to entail \$3-billion in startup costs, and an annual recurring cost of \$1.5-billion, shared proportionally among 193 member states. Yet this asset should help to prevent the escalation of volatile conflicts; deter groups from violence; and cut the size, length and frequency of UN operations. Even with success in just one of those areas, it would provide a substantive return on the investment.

A UNEPS is no panacea, but it's evident that this option has more potential. Aside from a more effective UN, with an overdue step toward a global peace system, a UNEPS is an acknowledged [prerequisite to a wider disarmament process](#), another step that would help to free up substantive resources. Further, it might encourage the deeper cooperation urgently required on an array of crucial issues.

As the 1995 Canadian study [noted](#), "no matter how difficult this goal now seems, it deserves continued study with a clear process for assessing its feasibility over the long term." Although official interest waned, the idea is simply too important to drop. Here, the plans continue to be updated to ensure a UNEPS corresponds to recent developments and future requirements.

Nobody expects such a development will be easy, but it's no longer mission impossible. Aside from attracting prominent endorsements worldwide, the proposed UNEPS was previously supported by 30 members of the U.S. Congress (in [H-Res 213](#)). The [British Labour Party](#) also backed the idea and it was recently supported by Canada's [New Democratic Party and the Green Party](#).

Much of the inspiration for this initiative came from Sir Brian Urquhart, the Canadian study's co-chair and former UN under-secretary general for political affairs. In his words:

“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.”

Dr. Peter Langille specializes in peace and conflict studies. He wrote the initial proposals for converting CFB Cornwallis into a Canadian-multinational peacekeeping training centre, subsequently developed as the Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre, and is the primary author of the plans for a United Nations Emergency Peace Service.

Editor’s note: This op-ed has been updated to correct an editing error that referred to a quick reaction force pledged to Mali.

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