

UN Emergency Peace Service Question Goes Unasked

by H. Peter Langille

Published January 7 2009

On Dec. 1, the *Globe and Mail* and CBC co-sponsored a high-powered debate on humanitarian intervention at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Days before the event, the public was asked for its preferred question, and the clear winner was: "Should the UN have its own intervention capability such as the proposed permanent UN Emergency Peace Service?"

While the question should have been asked, and organizers privately acknowledged that it won, it was not. It may not be unsurprising that former U.S. ambassador to the UN John Bolton and former Canadian chief of defence staff Rick Hillier did not ask about or support such an option. But even actress Mia Farrow only came close in suggesting the need for a UN rapid reaction force, while International Crisis Group CEO Gareth Evans and moderator Brian Stewart of the CBC should have had a little more to offer.

It may be recalled that the idea of establishing a standing UN Emergency Group was developed in this country in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. UN peace operations have definitely improved over the past decade, but several worrisome gaps remain. The international community is incapable of responding promptly and effectively to urgent violent crisis.

If anything, the late and lame "hybrid" response to Darfur confirms how little has been accomplished since the Rwandan genocide. The Munk debate demonstrated little, if any, useful answers to the central questions of "how" or "with what" to prevent armed conflict and genocide, or to protect civilians at extreme risk.

Most officials concede that the existing standby arrangements for UN peace operations are helpful yet far from sufficient. All share the same limitation: these are conditional arrangements that depend upon the decisions of national governments and the availability of national personnel and resources. Sadly, there has been a marked tendency to stand by instead of up, incurring routine delays of four to six months, rather than rapid deployment.

With slow responses, there is little to stop violent conflicts from escalating and spreading, necessitating later, larger, more expensive efforts. As a result, the prevention of armed conflict remains an elusive aspiration.

Now, the most advanced mechanism to date, the multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG), appears unlikely to survive the year. Its demise stems largely from political neglect, a reluctance to contribute substantively and military preferences in NATO.

Over an eight-year period, participating governments and national armed forces could not agree on a brigade-sized deployment anywhere. Despite an earlier Canadian offer by the Liberals to take a lead role in the SHIRBRIG, the Harper government was not inclined to follow suit.

Repeatedly, officials have stressed the urgent need for well-integrated responses, a rapid deployment capability, a strategic reserve, a force multiplier, a robust deterrent capacity and one that might protect civilians and attend to human needs in areas of high risk.

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.

Yet most are also aware that the UN tool box does not include a permanent service or its own capacity to fulfill assigned tasks. That suggests a need which merits wider support.

One innovation: a permanent United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) specifically designed for such challenges.

As proposed, this service would be composed of approximately 15,000 personnel. They would be assigned to a designated UN base under two mobile mission headquarters. Aside from providing a robust military presence to maintain security, there would be sufficient police to restore law and order, as well as an array of civilian teams specializing in areas such as peace building, conflict resolution, human rights monitoring and education. Small teams of experts and planners could also help co-ordinate the larger formations' response to disaster assistance, environmental crisis, health and humanitarian emergencies.

What is more striking than the absence of any mention of UNEPS in the Munk debate is how this option might help with most of the reservations floated about intervention. Although John Bolton claimed sympathy for humans in desperate circumstances, he simply could not accept the notion of any country's sons and daughters being sacrificed for such a vague cause as the responsibility to protect people (when it entailed intervention).

Rather than rely on sons or daughters within national services, a UNEPS would be composed of 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 dedicated professionals worldwide, the UN could screen, select and train participants to high common standards, ensuring higher sophistication and readiness for various assignments.

The benefits 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 response 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 the supply of personnel for peace operations.

This service is to complement existing arrangements by ensuring the UN has a "first-responder" to help deter armed conflict, prevent escalation into wider and deeper violence and manage the initial six-months of an operation/intervention.

A permanent, well-trained, well-equipped service would vastly improve the prospect of rapid, reliable and cost-effective responses to diverse emergencies, ultimately saving millions of lives and billions of dollars. Last year, a poll of 14 diverse countries suggested 64 per cent favoured a permanent UN peacekeeping force. Even 72 per cent of Americans were supportive. We are in the midst of a serious shift.

A UNEPS would help address a number of critical challenges. The global initiative for a UNEPS is moving widely yet it also needs help. We—the people—simply can't afford to have such key questions ignored. With wider support, we have the option to give peace a chance.

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