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Preventing genocide: Time for a UN 911



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Despite evidence of ongoing ethnic cleansing, gang rape, mass murder and, once again, early official reluctance to even mention the word "genocide" with reference to Darfur, the "never again" promise now echoes back as "again" and "again."

Lessons learned and lessons spurned: With more than 1.2 million internally displaced people in western Sudan's Darfur region and reports of 10,000 dying each month, intervention is now desperately needed to stop the violence, the starvation and the scorched-earth campaign. By their nature, emergencies usually require prompt, reliable and effective responses. Such a response is, alas, unlikely.

Let's look more closely at what is being done.

With a good dose of pressure and modest incentives, the African Union has agreed to the deployment of its standby peacekeeping contingent (announced in 2002). Fifty AU monitors are now being protected by 300 troops. Recently, AU chairman and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo conceded that the AU's command and control role had strained all of its resources. Now plans are under way for the deployment of another 3,200 AU soldiers and an expanded mandate to protect civilians in a region the size of France.

But even the United Nations Secretary-General's special representative, Jan Pronk, has questioned whether the AU is up to the job. Michael Gaouette, an official in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, observes, "The A.U. has never done anything like this before and it's a massive undertaking." An informed assessment might have labelled this "mission impossible."

Even with massive support, which is far from assured, there is a high risk of failure - which will lead some to scapegoat the AU first and the UN second.

At this point, it's not helpful to argue that there must be an African solution to African conflict. Despite warnings that the AU force would not be ready for another five to seven years, a regional multinational force might be enough to allay Western political concerns and some of the continuing human suffering.

Over the past few years, AU members have repeatedly called for help with the front end - the critical early stages of peace operations - but few, aside from the UN secretariat, really listened.

For its part, the UN simply doesn't have the resources to help. With 14 UN peace operations under way, it has also faced unprecedented demands to plan, deploy, manage and support another four missions over the past year. And Western member states have been remarkably stingy. Many NATO members similarly claim they are overstretched, with the International

Security Assistance Force in Kabul and the Pentagon's demands for more help in Iraq. Although far from depleted, the massive U.S. military machine is simply focused elsewhere.

Clearly, few, if any, member states are prepared to deal with another emergency. The rhetoric-reality gap should be a cause of concern to Canadian officials. Our actual record speaks volumes, particularly after all our tall talk about the need for the UN to develop a rapid-reaction capability and our more recent effort to encourage the responsibility to protect civilians at risk.

Has Canada contributed more than a dozen troops to one of the four recent UN operations authorized under Chapter VII with a mandate to protect civilians? Has our defence effort demonstrated a capacity for rapid deployment to a UN operation since this allegedly became a Canadian priority in the mid-1990s? Have we retained our hard-earned leadership role and reputation for consistent support at the UN?

No. For the past seven years, Canada has ranked between 31st and 37th in contributions of personnel to UN operations, with 190 to 250 troops deployed in UN missions. No wonder UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently begged Canada to "aim higher."

Hopes had been raised by the Multinational Standby Force High Readiness Brigade for UN peace operations (SHIRBRIG), which Canada helped to form and in which we still participate. It was notified last October to prepare for a potential deployment to monitor a ceasefire between northern and southern Sudan. Here's the reality: A few SHIRBRIG members are willing to provide a composite mission headquarters for that pending operation but only one company (120 troops) to protect their headquarters.

One would think that a multinational brigade, formed in response to the Rwandan genocide, would jump at the opportunity to assist a UN operation that might help stem another genocide. Think again! Each participating member state retains the right to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to provide assistance and troops.

We know the SHIRBRIG members are not volunteering. Further, it is understood that the combined commitment of the SHIRBRIG members is not sufficiently deep to mount a deployment at brigade strength (5,000 troops) - and many governments are unwilling to participate without full brigade strength. Despite being the most advanced mechanism for UN peace operations to date, the SHIRBRIG is not sufficiently reliable to mount an effective response to stem Darfur's continuing genocide. In short, the need for a more prompt and reliable option is apparent; the current option looks half-baked.

For now, a few officials in Khartoum may sleep easily, comforted by their callous but correct assessment of the world's response to their activities. Instead of rapid deployments, we see a pattern of routine delays (usually three to six months), regardless of how dire the emergency.

By now, it's clear that governments will exhaust every dubious option before moving on to develop the sort of permanent UN mechanism that could be immediately deployed when urgently needed. The 1995 Canadian study *Toward A Rapid Reaction Capacity for the United Nations* acknowledged that, if all existing arrangements failed, further consideration would have to be given to the idea of a standing UN Emergency Group. We now know the existing arrangements have a tendency to fail when most needed.

In January, the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel examining *New Threats, Challenges and Change* heard of a far more promising option: A UN emergency service (effectively a multidimensional, multifunctional UN 911), composed of military, civilian and police volunteers, ready and willing to perform the diverse tasks essential in complex emergencies.

Rather than await the next horror, it is time for supportive parties, in Canada and abroad, to press for a dedicated UN service, one specifically designed to prevent deadly conflict, to protect civilians and to ensure rapid deployment to diverse emergencies.

The advantages of a UN emergency service are increasingly evident. It would be permanent, based at a designated UN site, with two mobile field headquarters. It thus could move to quell an emergency within 48 hours after authorization from the UN Security Council. With individuals recruited from the best volunteers worldwide, it would not suffer the reluctance of UN members to deploy their own national units. With 14,000 personnel, carefully selected, expertly trained and well-equipped, it would not fail in its mission due to a lack of preparation, skills or enthusiasm to engage in robust operations.

It could provide a capacity to deter violence and provide immediate protection for those at risk, as well as a range of assistance for addressing critical human needs - a vital function not provided by any existing agency. By providing a wider range of services, it would likely appeal to a wider range of parties, in theatre and abroad. Kofi Annan's recent comments supporting "European Union/United Nations battle groups" may be a step in the right direction, but a multifunctional UN emergency service would be a far more civilized response.

In contrast to the current options, such a service would be far more rapid, reliable, legitimate and credible. As such, it would likely be more cost-effective and a better investment toward our common human security.

A stronger UN - one with appropriate new tools for its assigned tasks - remains our best hope for avoiding a more divided, dangerous and heavily armed world. Waiting will not stop genocide from occurring again. Together, we could and should be doing more to ensure the promise of "never again" is accompanied by a UN capacity to enforce "never again."

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