

Not enough peacekeepers?

● *Peace News*

The word at the UN is that there is a "commitment gap" – that is, the world's militarily most powerful countries want to see more military intervention around the world, but are reluctant to send their troops on missions run by the UN.

Each month the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operation (DPKO) publishes a list of how many troops, military observers and police each country supplies to UN operations (see following "tools" pages for latest details). Who heads the list of contributors? You'll find out later in the article.

Not Nato

Lets be clear right now that there is not a single NATO member in the top 20. This is because the operations most heavily supported by NATO countries – Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo – are led by NATO, not run by the UN.

More than once, UN officials have noted the striking contrast that since 1999 Kosovo, with its population of two million, has been host to an international force that at its peak has had more than 50,000 troops and more than 5,000 police (the figure now is 18,500 troops and 4,400 police). In more or less the same period, however, perhaps as many 3.5 million people have died because of armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo where, until recently, the ceiling for peacekeeping troops was set at 10,700.

Counter-terrorism

It is in this context that we have to see George W Bush's Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). Announced at June's G-8 summit, and given prominence in his September speech to the UN, the initiative aims to train 15,000 African troops a year for the next five year to participate in peacekeeping missions – a total of 75,000 soldiers.

In addition, African police would be trained at the Centre of Excellence for Stability Peace Units in Italy. These forces would be deployed initially in Africa but later generally. The training programme, running from 2005 to 2010, would receive US\$600 million from the USA plus contributions still to be pledged from other G-8 governments.

Oxfam-USA has welcomed GPOI, noting that in the past decade more than three-quarters (77%) of all deaths caused by war or armed conflict were of Africans. One of the riders they add, however,

is that "peacekeepers should not be used as part of counter-terrorism operations, and training should focus on civilian protection and stabilisation operations".

Perhaps, a more sceptical response is required.

Strengthening relationships

First, we should note that whereas African countries already supply more than 20,000 troops to UN-run operations, the US currently contributes a mere fraction of that number – 12 soldiers, 17 military observers and 336 police. In short, the US prefers to deploy its own troops outside a UN framework, either under its own command or with NATO leadership. Even if the African troops would not be directly used in the "war against terror", they would help maintain the US's freedom to concentrate its forces where its government wills and not according to needs decided multilaterally.

This thinking is by no means unique to the USA, and even where British and French troops have operated outside a NATO context – the French in the Ivory Coast and the main contingent of British troops in Sierra Leone – they have been independent of the multi-national peacekeeping forces

Second, we should note that not only does the US military itself have a rather grim human rights record, but the militarily most powerful African state, Nigeria is the subject of a US Congress restriction on training because of Nigeria's violations of human rights. Would the GPOI entail Nigeria's rehabilitation, or at least the lifting of this particular sanction?

Third, peacekeeping operations do not only contribute to the military budgets of the sending countries, but also strengthen the position of the military within their own countries – a move that carries dangers in countries where the military have a record of interfering in politics or where recruitment policies are designed to strengthen the president's power base (for instance, by favouring one ethnic group).

Fourth, we should note that relationships forged in training often carry over into various others forms of cooperation. It is enough to mention Sandhurst in England (the English military academy that probably has trained a majority of Africa's military dictators) and the US's School of Americas – so notorious for the "counter-insurgency" techniques it taught Latin American military that it has now changed its name. (See events listing for next SOA/WHISC demonstrations.)



An UNTAC soldier from Ghana holding a Cambodian child, March 1993.

PHOTO: UN /ISAAC

And fifth, given the US tendency to "outsource" military contracts to private companies remote from public scrutiny, we cannot ignore the possibility that the training would involve one of the several firms of US ex-military personnel who now offer training.

Comments by African journalists have also pointed to the problems of the high incidence of HIV among African troops and the involvement of African peacekeepers in various forms of smuggling and other types of corruption. These, however, are not exclusively problems of deploying Africans but rather go with the whole terrain of sending in foreign peacekeepers.

War profiteers

If GPOI is Bush's and G-8's response to the shortfall in peacekeeping troops, private enterprise too is looking to play a role.

For instance, the Global Partnership Project (a British company) has offered to draw up a database of 5,000 former soldiers willing to be paid at the UN daily rate to take part in peacekeeping operations. Meanwhile private security firms playing a support role to UN missions have already used lethal force – DSL, a British subsidiary of Armcor, which supplied armed guards in Angola, and Dyncorp in East Timor.

Moving even further towards privatisation was the 2002 ceasefire in Aceh, Indonesia, where a Swiss foundation – the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue – deployed 50 out-of-uniform soldiers (mainly from the Philippines and Thailand) as monitors. They were withdrawn after a few months when the ceasefire broke down.

And so back to the current contributors to UN operations. Pakistan heads the list with 8,629 soldiers, followed by Bangladesh with 8,016. The top NATO contributor is Poland with 591.