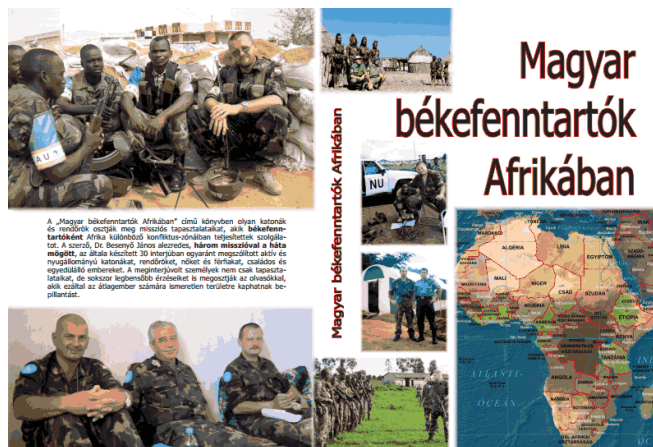


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REVIEW of “Magyar békefenntartók Afrikában”.

written by János Besenyő

A publication of the Hungarian Military National Security Service. Budapest, 2013. ISBN 978-963-08-5497-9. 488 pages, 30 interviews [plus an introductory chapter and annexes] as well as a large number of colour photo illustrations [in Hungarian].



This book, a collection of thirty semi-structured interviews, will be of great help to those researching the personal experiences of military and other peace support personnel. As such it is an enormously valuable material for students and scholars of state- and peace-building, peace support operations, military diplomacy, and conflict resolution. Given its focus on African peace support missions, it is also a required reading for those studying contemporary politics in Africa, those who may be pursuing Regional Studies, and those who are interested in Hungary's relationship with the continent in general. The book probably ought to be translated to English as well, as it would merit and most likely rightly expect wider readership.

At the same time it provides a very useful overview of Hungarian military and police officers' lessons learned in the dynamic environment of foreign missions. These people are some of Hungary's finest, people who have served their country and their respective missions to the best of their ability, often encountering unexpected challenges and dangers, the overcoming of which demanded good use of all of their knowledge as well as their instincts – and sometimes a little luck as well. Utilising this experience is clearly a great opportunity and a must for a country like Hungary.

One of the book's main overarching themes is exactly this. A recurring question posed to interviewees is if they have been debriefed upon coming home from their foreign missions and if their experience has been methodically collected and built into the training and the preparation of newly departing

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personnel. As the volume makes it clear, there is still room for improvement in this respect, and in fact the collection of interviews presented here serves as a major step in just this direction.

The volume groups the interviews very conveniently for the purposes of researchers. Officers who have served in the same country or in the same mission are heard from in succession. The interviews are loosely structured in such a way as to present a comprehensive picture of the interviewees' path through preparation (including biographical data on their previous career), the mission itself, and after coming home. The questions posed related to their mission involvement addresses the respondents' set of tasks they had to deal with, their assessment of the politics and the outcome of the mission concerned, the everyday difficulties they were accustomed to and how best to overcome them, as well as what one may learn from outstanding problems solved and dangerous situations overcome during the interviewees' time in the field. At the end of the volume, researchers are further aided by the annexed complete list of the names of personnel from Hungary who have served in African peace support missions so far.

Moreover, the interviews are not simply presented out of context. They are preceded by an introduction by the author, János Besenyő, outlining the most important trends related to Hungary's peace support involvement in Africa, including a strategic assessment of the importance of this. It may be surprising to note for some readers that trends are anything but linear. Whilst there is at the present growing interest in Africa, and the indications are that Hungary may see more involvement there in the future, the country was in the past more intensely engaged, largely through UN missions, in various conflict zones around the continent – this period came to an end as Hungary joined NATO and the EU and became involved in their missions instead. A re(con)naissance of some of this experience is therefore required, and the volume undertakes to assist with this in a timely manner.

Through the large number of precious anecdotes about their service shared by the soldiers and policemen who account of their experience in the volume, one may well grasp why this is important even for a small country such as Hungary. In the contemporary environment no one can afford to look the other way and not share in the burdens of mitigating the human suffering in unstable parts of the world – this is possible neither in a moral, nor in a strategic sense. Idealism and realism ought to be soberly seen as organically interwoven in this context. The missions discussed in the volume serve to improve a country's reputation and build goodwill for it in both the host countries where the missions take place and the partner countries with whom Hungary jointly operates. It is noteworthy and telling how in one of the interviews a respondent

tells of a chance encounter with a Hungarian road construction engineer in Uganda. It may be useful example of how globalisation requires the building of all-channel contacts everywhere, and a country that isolates itself from such engagement stands to lose in various ways. Even the strategic aspects of this are manifold. A good example is the last interview in the collection, with Ensign József Csorna who has served as a web administrator in the EU NAVFOR mission off the Horn of Africa (operating from the United Kingdom). Through his experience insights are gained related to practical challenges to the contemporary networked approach to security, and learning from this ought to better prepare a country for the 21st century.

Last but not least, the book is required reading for all personnel preparing to take part in foreign missions in the future. Such personnel show real thirst for as much information as possible from those who have served in similar functions before them. It clearly transpires from the interviewees' own experience how for them as well this was the kind of knowledge they most eagerly sought. Thanks to the publication of this book, that experience is very conveniently available now.