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Peacekeeping and the UN: lessons from Rwanda

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Abbreviations

ECOWAS Economic Cooperation of West African States

OAU Organisation for African Unity

RPF Rwandese Patriotic Front

UN United Nations

UNAMIR United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda

UNO United Nations Organisation

This paper assesses the peacekeeping operations of the United Nations (UN), using the 1992–94 UN peacekeeping operation in Rwanda, code named United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), as a test case. It argues that the UNAMIR could not maintain peace because it was ‘professionally disarmed’. The paper considers UNAMIR in light of three basic military professional principles—orientation to offensive or combat, command and control, and intelligence information. From the outset it should be noted that although these principles differ, they are in practice interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Here they have been separated for the purpose of clarity. Before assessing the peacekeeping operations, the paper discusses the basic objectives of the UNAMIR and the brief background of events leading to the deployment of the UNAMIR forces.

Rwanda, a tiny central African country, was plunged into civil war in 1992. The two warring factions were the government forces and the ‘rebel forces’, the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). After protracted negotiations mediated by the Tanzanian government, the two parties signed an agreement involving a ceasefire, the establishment of a transitional government, and the return of the refugees. After a request by the mediators and two warring parties, the UN adopted Resolution 872 on 5 October 1993, which effectively established UNAMIR. The objectives of UNAMIR included contributing to the security of the Rwandan capital, Kigali, ensuring the observance of the ceasefire, overseeing the repatriation of refugees, and monitoring the security situation under the transitional government leading up to the general elections (Makinda 1995:113). However, by April 1994, the situation in Rwanda had become uncontrollable and the UNAMIR forces were unable to fulfil their mission. The crucial question is why UNAMIR could not achieve its objectives despite its backing.

Background and current debate on UN peacekeeping missions

The United Nations Organisation (UNO) was primarily established to address international conflicts. In particular, the aim was to promote world peace after two devastating world wars this century. Although remarkable progress has been made, the realisation of world peace is an ongoing objective, as the nature of world conflicts becomes increasingly complicated. Although the focus of UNO is predominantly on inter-state conflicts, some of the provisions within the UN charter may be applied to internal conflicts. Indeed, on several occasions UNO has launched peacekeeping operations aimed at restoring order in internal conflicts.

UN peacekeeping forces are established and operate under Chapters VI (Pacific settlement of disputes) and VII (Collective enforcement against threats to, or breaches of, peace) of the UN Charter. The Chapter VI mandate is generally the UN standard operating procedure, because the deployment of peacekeeping forces is conditional on the warring parties consenting to such deployment. Under the same chapter, the peacekeeping troops observe the principles of neutrality and impartiality, using force only in ‘self defence’ (Kuperman 1996:229). Such impartiality prevents the troops from losing the trust of the

warring parties (Diehl 1995:224). Chapter VII is an extension of the Chapter VI mandate. When any party's actions potentially breach the terms of the peace agreement, peacekeeping troops may use force against that party. However, resorting to Chapter VII of the UN Charter is likely to compromise one of the principles upon which the UN was established, namely respecting the sovereignty of member states, and this situation has raised the question of whether international peace can be realised within the current UN framework.

Following the events in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia and Rwanda, there has been divided reaction towards the UN peacekeeping operations. Some observers believe that UN peacekeepers have failed to settle international conflicts, let alone internal conflicts. Others, for example Diehl (1995:224), express some praise for peacekeeping operations in the past, but warn of the challenges ahead, especially with internal conflicts such as civil war, in which the UN is likely to be called to intervene. Explanations for the failure of UN peacekeeping operations include tension about the notion of peace itself, the veto clause within the UN Security Council, and the Cold War.

According to the 'pessimists', the tension arises because the effort to devise operational collective security has been thwarted, since only the prospect of war between powerful states, or their involvement in quarrels between minor parties, could pose a threat to international order. To avoid this, the UN made the great powers permanent members of the Security Council and gave them the ability to veto any action implemented by the Council. This limited the decision-making capacity of the Council. Although the Cold War is cited as one of the inhibitors to world peace, there are several cases where this explanation does not hold, especially in civil conflicts. The conflict between the Nigerian government and the secessionist forces in Biafra in the 1960s, the Tamil Tiger separatists in Sri-Lanka, and the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland cannot be explained in the Cold War context.

The end of the Cold War, however, may have created internal conflicts which the UN will need to address. Ruffin (1993:112) argues that the loss of support of the former Soviet Union has led to rapid disintegration of guerrilla groups. Left with no clear political objective, they become bandit and criminal groups. Ruffin attributes the difficulties faced by UN peacekeeping forces in countries like Afghanistan and Cambodia to these armed groups. Perhaps this explains the failure of the UN to resolve the political crisis in Rwanda and the failure of the UNAMIR.

The issue of tension about the notion of peace seems to have been dealt with by the UN in the case of UNAMIR without undergoing normal legislative procedures. The UNAMIR resolution was adopted in accordance with the precedent already established in cases where similar missions took place. The argument put forward by the then UN Secretary General was that 'peacekeeping operations are UN inventions as the UN Charter does not make for such provisions' (Makinda 1996:112). The veto clause was not resorted to by any member of the Security Council and the resolution authorising UNAMIR was

adopted after the peace agreement was signed in Arusha, Tanzania on 4 August 1993. There is no clear evidence to suggest that Rwanda had been a target of Cold War confrontation. The only western power with any influence in Rwandese politics was France, whose position as a major force in international politics, and hence in the politics of the Cold War, has been the subject of debate (Mineer 1996:4). Thus, it appears that there was full support for the UNAMIR deployment and operation in Rwanda. Why did UNAMIR fail? Some of the explanations for the failure of UNAMIR follow. They include a lack of equipment, and some individual countries' withdrawal from the UNAMIR forces. It will be demonstrated, however, that similar to other UN missions, military 'professional principles' were not adhered to, and this explains the failure of UNAMIR.

Some consider that the problems with UN peacekeeping operations are due to the nature of the UN itself. Because the UN is founded on the principle of national sovereignty, it is ill-equipped to cope with civil conflict. UNAMIR was authorised under Chapter VI of the UN Charter (Pacific settlement of disputes). However one of the 'professional principles' in this chapter was not adequately considered. The deployment of UNAMIR troops was subject to the consent of the warring parties and such consent had been obtained. However, under the conditions of the chapter the UNAMIR troops, like other UN peacekeeping forces, were 'constrained from using force except in self defence' (Kuperman 1996:229). Therefore, the success of a military operation depends on the goodwill of the warring parties to respect the peace terms. A simple attack, as it will be demonstrated shortly, demoralises and frustrates the entire peacekeeping mission.

Another problem faced by UNAMIR was that it was ill-equipped (Department of Peacekeeping Operations 1996:6). It was difficult for the UNAMIR troops to fulfil their mission when they were confronting two armies with sophisticated weaponry. Furthermore, UNAMIR numbers were small compared to the number of troops they were required to contain. The ratio of the size of the armies in any operation determines its success or failure. The higher the ratio, the more likely the operation is to fail. The UN peacekeeping mission in Bosnia ought to have served as a lesson in terms of equipment and personnel. The UN assumed that goodwill would prevail and failed to take the precautions necessary in any military operation. When goodwill breaks down, the effect on peacekeepers is devastating. The killing by Rwandan soldiers, of ten Belgian soldiers serving in UNAMIR was blamed on the diminutive size of the UNAMIR contingent, and its poor equipment (US Committee for Refugees 1995). Following this incident, Belgium withdrew its forces from the operation. Such dilemmas have been responsible for some governments' reluctance to contribute troops to the UN missions: they would prefer their soldiers to fight a battle, rather than only engage in self defence.

Other key aspects of a professional military operation include command and control, and intelligence information regarding the battlefield. Command and control are both political and military concepts, and for a military to function well, it ought to have both political and military command and control embodied in a unitary form, something which

seems to be lacking in UN peacekeeping. Raevsky (1995:193–222) discusses exhaustively the importance of these aspects and the associated problems intrinsic in the UN peacekeeping operations. For example, the importance of unity of command is highlighted by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali, as quoted in Raevsky (1995:195): ‘Unity of command...is a necessary condition for the operational effectiveness, especially in difficult missions. If an operation fails to function as an integrated whole, both the mission’s ability to reach its objective and the safety of its personnel are jeopardised.’

There is evidence to suggest that these aspects were not observed in the case of UNAMIR. Technically, UNAMIR was supposed to be under the control of the UN Secretary General as its Commander in Chief (political control) and General Dallaire as its operation commander. Examination of UNAMIR suggests, however, that it was not under the control of the UN Secretary General, nor did the field commander have full control of the operation. This was manifest in the way Belgium and France withdrew from the mission without consulting, let alone obtaining the consent of, the UN Secretary General. UNAMIR lacked a focal point of allegiance. Such a force with allegiance to no political authority, was likely to suffer from a lack of operational responsibility. Furthermore, an operation built on a ‘freedom of entry and exit’ criterion made it hard for the UN to exercise meaningful authority over the UNAMIR troops. Above all, the field commander could not pursue coherent operational planning because under the circumstances he could not be sure of the number of personnel at his disposal.

The role of a military intelligence unit is to obtain information necessary for war. This aspect was summarised by James Clavell in *The Art of War*: ‘[To] fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting’ (1983). To be successful at gathering intelligence information, the army develops a standardised form of information gathering and dissemination. With sufficient information, operation commanders can realise their enemies’ strengths and weaknesses, and determine the necessary strength of their own weaponry and personnel. Raevsky (1995:194) argues that one of the problems faced by UN peacekeeping operations is that they rely on contributing countries for information. He observes that some countries are reluctant to release such information because of conflict between the UN and these countries’ defence or security interests (Raevsky 1995:194). UNAMIR had this problem in Rwanda.

Kuperman (1996:237) believes that if the UN had been well informed of the forces at work in the Rwandan crisis, it could have acted cautiously and hence avoided the bloodshed. His observation suggests that the UN assumed that the government forces and the RPF were the only participants in the peace process. On the contrary there were other actors such as the local militia, Interahamwe. Kuperman suggests that there was a need for the UN to take a broader perspective, because there were divisions among the government itself, with a group of ministers reluctant to accept the peace deal. These divisions also penetrated the civilian population (1996:237). It could be argued that the Ugandan

government was also involved in the process. Although it has persistently insisted that it was not, it is difficult to believe that some of its high-ranking generals could leave Uganda without government knowledge. Thus, in addition to their small numbers and poor equipment, UNAMIR was not fully aware of who they were confronting. This was a fatal miscalculation in military terms.

Conclusions

Following the recent poor performance of UN peacekeeping missions, particularly that of the UNAMIR, the issue is what can be done to improve the peacekeeping process. Two options should be considered, although both have their limitations especially at the implementation level. One of the propositions has been dealt with in this paper, namely that the UN ought to consider adopting professional military principles—orientation to offensive, command and control, and intelligence information. Justification for this lies in the fact that some countries would prefer to see their soldiers engaged in combat missions rather than merely practising self defence. More importantly, both the UN and the respective field commanders would be in a better position to deal with unanticipated events. In the case of UNAMIR, the commander knew that Rwandese government troops planned to execute the Belgian soldiers, but failed to save them because he had insufficient troops and inferior weapons. However, even if it had been practically possible to save them, the provisions of the UN Charter would have been an inhibiting factor. In particular, the legislation covering sovereignty under the international law, and the alteration of Chapter VI to extend the mandate to include combat as well as self defence would need to be changed. Without these, the UN could be accused of acting outside its power and authority.

Another factor is whether the UN has command and control over peacekeeping troops. It is unlikely the UN will have its own standing army under its pay roll because it is a body without sovereignty. Thus the peacekeeping troops are likely to continue to be drawn from member states which means those troops cannot fulfil their responsibility to their citizens. Furthermore it would require the UN to embark on training and payment of salaries at a time when the UN is facing a cash flow crisis. Nevertheless, where the UN approves military peacekeeping operations after the consent of member states, it should consider a more professional approach in order to avoid problems such as those encountered in Rwanda. The UN ought to incorporate the three principles of professional military operations into its strategy.

There are other recommendations for improving the UN peacekeeping structure. These include the view of Ramesh who sees an alternative in which the UN ‘could enact a new clause giving constitutional sanction to peacekeeping’, but he is sceptical about such a move because ‘it has to start from scratch while the UN faces a cash flow crisis’ (1995:17). Others like Acharya (1995) argue that the regional organisations like the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and Arab League should establish their own mechanisms to

complement the UN effort. However, differences within these regions, coupled with weak economies, make it difficult for some regions to have their own peacekeeping troops. For example the Economic Cooperation of West African States (ECOWAS) launched its own peacekeeping force known as ECOMOG to maintain peace in Liberia, and recently in Sierra Leone. Despite the success of ECOMOG, it, like the UN peacekeeping forces, has been criticised for being dominated by the stronger nations. In the case of the UN, criticisms centre on the United States which is seen as pursuing its foreign policy through the UN, while ECOMOG is said to be dominated by Nigeria.

With such contending views, future peacekeeping missions ought to be looked into carefully, taking into account the experiences of the past, and the suggestions given above. The problem is who is to initiate these changes within the UN. Despite the failures, where goodwill has prevailed, the UN has been instrumental in bringing about peace, for example in Mozambique. The proposals made in this paper aim to mitigate the problems in cases where goodwill collapses, as it did for UNAMIR in Rwanda.

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