

Leap of faith

America needs to remain staunchly behind U.N. peacekeeping process.

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Story ran on Tuesday, October 24 2000

It is sadly clear that the need for United Nations peacekeeping will continue and, indeed, will probably grow. And it is very much in America's national interest to support an international response to conflicts - even those that seem remote - because, in today's interconnected world, they seldom remain confined to one country or even one region.
- U.N. secretary-general Kofi Annan

People everywhere bleed when cut, suffer nightmares after being subjected to brutality and grieve when they lose those close to them. Sadly, people everywhere in the world can also be taught to hate so intensely that they are willing to brutalize and kill those who are different from them. Although these are obvious observations, they have taken on a special personal significance for me after meeting and talking with victims of conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Armenia, Pakistan and Rwanda. Most of us, when we see pictures of victims of sniper fire lying dead in the street, think someone should do something. That is what U.N. peacekeeping is about.

The evolution of U.N. peacekeeping

The United Nations didn't start out to be a worldwide peacekeeper. The interventions we are seeing in Kosovo, East Timor and the Congo are the result of successes and failures in stopping conflicts over the past 50 years. The evolution of how to best intervene in wars continues, and the United Nations still has not learned everything it needs to know to be the mediator of the world's conflicts.

In the beginning, the United Nations only sent international military and civilian personnel into a war zone after the belligerent parties had agreed to a cease-fire. The U.N.'s role was to supervise the carrying out of a peace agreement. Initially, as peacekeepers, they did not have the power to enforce a cease-fire by the use of arms. Their success depended upon the cooperation of the adversaries in the conflict.

Watching for infractions of a cease-fire turned out to be too limited a role, given the complexity of most conflicts. As a result of cease-fires that ended in disasters, whole new demands are being placed on U.N. peacekeepers. Their responsibilities include disarming the conflicting forces, providing security to the civilian population, the supervision of elections, training and leading de-mining teams and protecting humanitarian aid convoys.

Along with this increase in functions comes a need for a markedly larger number of peacekeepers. During the Cold War, before 1989, the average operation had only a few thousand personnel. Operations since then have been larger, with 30,000 troops in Cambodia and 60,000 in the NATO-sponsored mission in Bosnia. As the duties have

grown, the job has become more dangerous, and 1,450 peacekeepers have been killed since 1956.

A peacekeeping force has to be authorized by the U.N. Security Council. During the Cold War, opposition by either the USSR or the United States could prevent any action being taken regardless of how critical the conflict might be. In 1987, a summit meeting between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev led not only to a treaty eliminating intermediate-range nuclear missiles but also to a joint effort to contain regional conflicts. Thirty-five of the United Nations' 53 peacekeeping operations have taken place in the past 10 years. Peacekeeping expenses since 1990 have been four times greater than during the United Nations' first 45 years.

Several factors in recent years have influenced how cooperative the superpowers will be with the U.N. Security Council in providing troops and equipment to control a conflict. The first factor is the operation's cost. Sending large numbers of troops with appropriate equipment is expensive. The increase in the number of troops has brought a corresponding increase in expenses, and the costs now exceed the regular budget of the United Nations. This becomes a major problem since while sending in fewer troops cuts costs, it can also lead to major disasters such as we saw in Somalia, Angola, Rwanda and Bosnia. A second factor is the likelihood of intervention resulting in the death of troops. Since the crisis in Somalia, the United States and the Western European nations have been reluctant to send troops into situations where there are likely to be casualties for the peacekeepers. This seems based on the principle that one American or European life is more valuable than that of hundreds of people in a foreign country.

Changing nature of war

There has been a major change in the nature of the conflicts since the breakup of the USSR in the late 1980s. Previously, conflicts were between nations. With the growth of international commerce, there is a belief in some quarters that we are fast becoming one world. But closer interconnection between countries commercially has resulted in a corresponding fragmentation within countries. Ethnic groups have revived their demands for separate status as countries. When denied, they strike out against the larger unit, as Chechnyans have done in Russia.

Or, what seems more frequent nowadays, a larger group practices ethnic cleansing against a minority, as we have seen in Rwanda and Kosovo. In the past five years, I've been aware of two dozen civil wars and personally talked with professionals from at least 12 of them. Having worked closely with professionals and victims in Bosnia and Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia, I am aware of the high cost in lives and human misery of the breakup of a country. In wars between countries, the major victims are military personnel; in internal conflicts, up to 90 percent of the victims are civilians.

In some of these civil wars, it isn't just two forces against each other, but multiple forces. That means that while some groups might agree to a cease-fire, others might not. This places the U.N. peacekeepers in situations where cease-fires are ignored. Somalia is one

such conflict. In 1993, the U.N. Security Council set up an operation to restore the rule of law and to disarm various Somali militias that had devastated the country and caused widespread famine. First, 25 Pakistani soldiers of the U.N. peacekeeping force were ambushed and killed, and U.S. troops were sent in to capture the guerrilla leader who was responsible. Eighteen of our soldiers were killed in this operation, and the tragedy of one of our men's bodies being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu brought about a strong reaction from the U.S. public. In reaction, President Bill Clinton announced the withdrawal of our troops. He then issued a new policy that we would support U.N. peacekeeping operations only if they served our national interests.

It is generally agreed that this led to the failure of the United Nations to prevent the genocide in Rwanda in which it is estimated that the majority Hutus killed nearly a million Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers. When it was decided that the U.N. peacekeepers would re-enter the scene, it took seven months to get equipment and troops back into the country. Speedier action might have saved half a million lives.

While in Bosnia, I talked with several aid workers from Holland. It was their troops under the U.N. banner who were guarding a safe zone around Srebrenica. The Bosnian Serbs were not deterred and, having heavier arms, simply overran the peacekeepers and killed 7,000 male civilians in defiance of Security Council resolutions.

After these experiences, secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali recommended in 1995 that peacekeepers under the U.N. should not attempt peace enforcement but should stay with peacekeeping as their role. He felt the Security Council would do better if they delegated the responsibility for enforcement to member states or a group of member states such as NATO. This is the approach that has been followed with some success up to now.

The future

Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, has said that the United Nations will ultimately be judged by its peacekeeping scorecard more than anything else it does. He said in a speech on U.N. peacekeeping reform that these "systems are desperately over-stretched. Without fundamental reform, the strings will snap. ... But in considering whether we can together afford to keep this system in business, we must also consider whether we can afford not to. In real terms, spread equitably among those who can afford it, the cost of U.N. peacekeeping barely registers against what we pay for national defense expenditures. The cost of refusing to pull our weight, on the other hand, will be measured in innocent lives and in peace and security worldwide."

At present, the United Nations has nearly 150,000 personnel from more than 80 countries on standby who can be called on for peacekeeping duties. The weakness is that a country can decline to send troops, and many do.

Besides finding a better way to finance operations, there are serious suggestions that some countries such as Russia, England and the United States should train and have available 5,000-person forces that can be sent into a crisis situation within seven days after the Security Council gives approval.

Given the presence of media showing us atrocities around the world, we are no longer in a position to stand idly by and allow whole groups of people to be annihilated. The lessons learned in the last decade will hopefully enable the United Nations to develop techniques to prevent the destruction of civilian populations.