

# Looking for a sweet peacekeeping spot in Africa? Don't do it.

by *Lew MacKenzie*

In the beginning there was UN peacekeeping. Well, not really, but in 1948 the first UN observer mission was deployed to monitor the fragile ceasefire zone between India and Pakistan in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and shortly thereafter in 1949, a similar mission deployed to assist the UN mediator supervising the truce in Palestine. As an aside, and that's another story, 66 years later both missions are still there, and the death toll in both mission areas has

the debate over what to do.

Our then Minister of External Affairs, Lester Pearson, did not “invent peacekeeping,” a sub-component of our Canadian peacekeeping myth. There were multiple ideas under discussion regarding deploying a neutral military force in a neutral zone between warring country's front lines. Pearson richly deserved the Nobel Peace Prize because, with the backing of the Soviet Union and the US, and to the great relief of Britain and France, he stick-handled the decision to deploy the UN's first lightly armed force between the warring countries military forces on the ground through the UN General Assembly. This was no small feat indeed, and gas dropped one penny to 4 cents a litre.



been high. Go figure.

Shortly thereafter, on the heels of the 1956 Suez crisis, a leading Canadian myth and our love affair with UN peacekeeping was born.

In 1956, Egypt's President, G. A. Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal (which happened to transit his country), thereby removing its control from the British and the French. It looked as if the price of gas was going to escalate to eight cents a litre from five cents, and destroy the world's economy. As a result, Israel invaded Egypt by land, and the British and French arrived by parachute to take back control of the Canal. Russia and the US, on opposite sides of the crisis, were highly upset with each other, which was a serious problem for Canada. If any intercontinental ballistic missiles, albeit in their technological infancy, were exchanged they would meet somewhere over Edmonton, Regina and Heaven forbid, Toronto. The situation was a “bit sticky” as two of the protagonists, and two of their supporters, were members of the Security Council's Permanent Five, which removed the Security Council from

What followed until the end of the Cold War in 1989/90 were a series of UN missions in Lebanon, the Congo, West New Guinea, Yemen, Cyprus, Egypt (again), Golan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq-Kuwait, Angola, Central America, Angola (again), El Salvador, Western Sahara and Cambodia. Canada contributed personnel, both military and police, to the vast majority of these missions, although sometimes in single digit numbers (at least not as inconsequential and ridiculous as our one, very fortunate, individual currently serving with the UN in Cyprus just to make sure our Canadian flag is on the UN power point showing the participating nations in UNFICYP).

With the exception of the 1960s mission in the Congo, where 245 UN soldiers were killed, the majority of the missions during the Cold War were relatively low risk, and the majority, but not all, fatalities resulted from vehicle accidents or equipment failures. While the failure in the Congo should have been a lesson to those decision makers who thought the UN could keep the peace in a civil war, the Security Council's attention span was somewhat limited.

During the Cold War, UN military commanders had access to the highest levels close at hand, frequently in the office next door, to help restore calm in the face of escalating violence. Most missions had a Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG), who was the overall head of mission. He or she had access to the political levels on each side of the conflict, and a phone call away, were the warring countries delegations at the UN which could be approached by the Secretary General himself. In the case of high profile UN missions where the military component was commanded by a Canadian (UNEF1—Gen E.L.M. Burns; UNFICYP—MGen

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C. Milner, Rwanda—MGen R. Dallaire), this relationship worked well with the exception of Rwanda, wherein Romeo Dallaire was saddled with an grossly incompetent SRSG who was, in fact, more hindrance than help.

By chance, I commanded a mission—ONUCA in Central America in 89/90—which had no SRSG. That said, I was surprised how many avenues were open to resolve the few breeches of the Agreement we were required to monitor. The door was open to every one of the five Central American presidents, none wider than the one to the Nicaraguan President, Violetta Chamorro, a McGill University graduate, along with three of her cabinet ministers. Needless to say, their military commanders were equally available. It was a “no-brainer” to thwart any escalation. As an aside, at the end of my tour I recommended the mission be shut down, as peace had broken out in the region. The UN civilian employees were furious, as many anticipated spending a comfortable career in Central America. The UN compromised, and moved the mission to the shaky security situation in El Salvador. Easy to get in, hard to get out.

The dramatic changes to peacekeeping that have emerged since the Berlin Wall came down have been well explained to Canadians, although it seems many are not paying attention. There are no longer conflicts where countries “go to war”. While they might ferment conflict via proxies, direct confrontations are rare. On the other hand, factional conflicts within countries are actually too many to count, and are prevalent in massively large swaths of Africa.

What has changed is related to the foregoing comments regarding access to decision makers who can help the military commander on the ground resolve escalating violence. By chance—yes, my good fortune again—as the situation deteriorated in Sarajevo during the summer of '92, where I was merely the Sector Commander, it was decided that I would report directly to the UN HQ in New York. No civilian diplomat wanted to come to Sarajevo and so, for the second time, I had no SRSG. While access to the two factions—Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats—were open (as was the door to the brand new country’s president, Alija Izebegovic) the problem was actually *finding* the doors to the first two. They had no delegation at the UN, no flag flying in front of the UN Headquarters in Manhattan, no ambassadors, no static headquarters, and no government *per se*. We brokered numerous ceasefires, but could hold no one to account when they were broken given that it was impossible in many cases to find two of the three belligerents.

It appears that our current government is anxiously looking for a high profile, low risk, and inexpensive UN mission in—wait for it—Africa. In my view these three conditions are not compatible. While the new term to describe such operations is elusive, “peacekeeping” doesn’t apply, nor do “peace ops” or “peace missions.” In considering the four most “popular” possibilities—Democratic Republic of the Congo; Central African Republic; South Sudan, and Mali—current

missions on the ground there at present are making very few contributions to the “peace process”. These missions should be identified for what they are: protection missions. Arguably, while some are doing relatively well protecting civilians, others are not. They all involve factional war, with some focussed on natural resources. While others involve eliminating “infidels,” some are proxies for neighbouring countries, involving insurgents and/or terrorists. Some fight just for the fun of it or for personal gain.

Following the immediate post-Cold War UN-led disasters in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda, and the apologies that followed, countries that used to be at the head of the list of volunteers during Cold War peacekeeping, including Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, France, UK, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and others, dramatically reduced their military contributions. That vacuum was filled by numerous Third World countries, some, but not all, motivated by the \$1,330 US per soldier paid per month to the providing country.

Don’t get me wrong. I have led soldiers from many of the countries currently on UN duty. Some are excellent, and most are good enough, although many are grossly underpaid which raises the issue of temptation. Prostitution rings, black-marketing, human trafficking and other criminal acts are all too common, as some peacekeepers seek to complement their modest salaries. In addition, the fact of national mandates and rules of engagement that frequently trump UN direction, you have a dog’s breakfast of conflicting directions. This has resulted in incidents, such as the example of peacekeepers in South Sudan standing idly by while witnessing the rape and murder of civilians just outside the front gate of their UN compound.

If Canada wishes to deploy ground troops to one of the African missions, and decides to “penny-packet” specialists throughout one or more UN missions, it is essential that adequate security for worst case scenarios be deployed with each and every group. Security should not be left to the non-Canadian contingent hosting our personnel. This prerequisite also should apply to any Royal Canadian Air force component or components—unless of course, they are operating from a secure country.

In conclusion, I noted that a recent poll of Canadians indicated that if that our troops were to be shot at on an African UN mission, support for our participation would suffer a significant drop. It appears to me that this indicates that little attention is being paid to the potential mission’s role. If the mandate is to protect the innocent, then the risk may well be worth it. If, however, it is to contribute to a non-existent “peace process” then we’re better off, and our troops will be safer, staying at home. ✦

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute or its members.*