

Rescuing the blue helmets

By Thorsten Benner, Stephan Mergenthaler and Philipp Rotmann

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BERLIN: A French diplomat, Alain Le Roy, has been appointed by the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, as the world's chief peacekeeper. With UN peace operations facing the most serious crisis since Rwanda and Srebrenica, the timing could not be more critical.

UN peacekeeping is the victim of its own success: Never before in their 60-year history have blue helmets been in such high demand. About 110,000 personnel are deployed in 20 peace operations around the world, more than a six-fold increase from 10 years ago.

However, UN member states have neglected making crucial investments in the support infrastructure for an expanding network of large peace operations with increasingly complex tasks, from protecting civilians to rebuilding defunct institutions in post-conflict states. As a result, the UN apparatus is severely overstretched, exhibiting increasingly serious pathologies ranging from sluggish deployments to shocking sexual abuse scandals.

Worse yet, the Security Council has returned to the ill-fated practice of sending peacekeepers into ever-more hostile environments where there simply no peace to keep.

Recent reports from Darfur, the largest and most expensive UN mission to date, are reminiscent of the news from Bosnia in the weeks before the fall of Srebrenica: UN peacekeepers, facing a logistical and political nightmare, are unable to defend themselves, let alone protect the civilian population. Were further large-scale atrocities to occur under the UN's watch in Darfur, the repercussions would threaten to undermine the entire business of peace operations.

There is a risk of an all-out anti-UN backlash overshadowing the good work UN peacekeepers have done in exceptionally difficult circumstances over the past decade. UN members need to act now and give the new head of peacekeeping the tools and support necessary to pull UN peacekeeping back from the brink.

To accomplish this, member states need to clearly commit to the doctrine that a UN peace operation should only be deployed if there is actually a peace to keep, underwritten by a credible commitment by the major conflict parties to work toward a political solution. If taking the "Responsibility to Protect" seriously in some cases requires military intervention, member states should not rely on the instrument of peacekeeping, which is ill-suited for this task.

Therefore, under present circumstances the UN should not deploy peacekeepers to Somalia or Chad, where the absence of political will among rival parties renders peacekeepers as little more than turquoise targets.

Key member states must also lower expectations on what peacekeepers can realistically achieve in Darfur. They must make it crystal clear to the public that the absence of peace in Darfur is not the fault of UN peacekeepers but a result of the international community's inability to force the conflict parties into a lasting political settlement.

In addition, UN members urgently need to invest in the infrastructure for peace operations worldwide. Resources need to match the grandiose rhetoric and ambitious goals set out in Security Council mandates. This includes seriously enlarging the UN's standby blue helmet capacity - with a clear manpower commitment on the part of the United States, Canada and Europe, not just Asian and African states who currently supply the vast majority of peacekeepers.

It also means expanding the team of rapidly deployable police officers and complementing it with a team of judicial and legal experts who can play a critical role in struggling peace operations worldwide.

UN members should also approve a permanent cadre of civilian post-conflict reconstruction professionals. Last but not least, UN members need to boost the Secretariat's ability to gather and analyze intelligence, develop doctrine, draw lessons and provide training. All governments should have an interest in ensuring that their own soldiers, police and civilian experts on loan with the UN have access to the best information, guidance and training.

At the same time, the new head of peacekeeping will have to demonstrate sound leadership to convince member states to trust the organization with further resources. He should press forward with the plan that his able and dedicated predecessor, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, put in place to professionalize peacekeeping through performance-based career development, better accountability, and knowledge management.

Most importantly, Le Roy and Ban Ki Moon need to muster the courage to say "No" to UN member states when presented with impossible mandates.

If UN member states and the Secretariat live up to their responsibilities, they can save UN peacekeeping from the perfect storm that is looming. They owe this to the peacekeepers who put their lives on the line for the UN's mission - and to the millions of people for whom the blue helmets are often the only hope for help and protection.

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