

Peacekeeping

by Richard Sidaway

What is it?

Wherever there is conflict in the world and enemies have agreed to let a third party or neutral force come in to try and maintain the peace, it is usually the familiar blue helmets of the United Nations that we see on the scene.

The actual definition of peacekeeping is a bit unclear and it was never written into the original UN Charter, but it goes something like 'using military personnel from different countries under the command of the UN to control and resolve armed conflict either between or within states'. Peacekeeping is neither just finding out the facts nor full-scale military intervention, but something in between.

Over the last ten years it has become clear that for peacekeeping to work certain things must already be in place – the conflict must actually have finished and there must be a genuine desire for peace on both sides. The peacekeeping force must have clear international support and a mandate that shows it is strictly neutral; and it needs adequate resources to do the job.

How long has it been going on?

There have been 56 UN peacekeeping operations in total since 1948, although over 30 of those have happened since 1990.

Two of these operations have in fact never stopped since 1948: the interventions in the Arab/Israeli conflict following the foundation of the state of Israel, and in the dispute between Pakistan and India over the Kashmir region.

Another that has been going on for over forty years is on the divided island of Cyprus, where peace has been maintained between Greek and Turkish Cypriots since March 1964.

Are all UN peacekeeping missions similar?

There are different types of intervention, some more discrete than others:

Observation/monitoring only, for example of Cuban troops leaving Angola or of the Iran-Iraq ceasefire in 1991

Assisting a country to independence, for example in Namibia 1978-1989

Armed intervention, for example in the Suez Canal region 1956-1967 to keep Egypt and Israel apart and supervise the withdrawal of troops from the UK, France and Israel

Who are the peacekeepers?

They are professional soldiers, civilian police and military observers from any member country of the UN. These countries also provide supplies, transportation, telecommunications, and administrative help, amongst other things.

Who pays?

These forces are paid for by all UN member countries. The budget is currently \$2.82 billion, although they have been a bit behind in their payments recently- \$2.3 billion is still owing!

What do they actually do?

The typical image of a peacekeeper is a soldier sitting in a watchtower with a pair of binoculars keeping an eye on a border, but they also organise the clearing of mines, supervise elections, monitor human rights and oversee the return of refugees to their homes.

It is a risky occupation and sometimes they have to resort to force to defend themselves, recently for example in Liberia. Since peacekeeping began there have been 1,879 fatalities, the highest being between 1993 and 1995 when over 500 UN peacekeepers were killed.

Give me some success stories

UN peacekeeping missions have intervened very successfully following the end of civil wars such as in EI

Salvador 1991-95, Mozambique 1992-94 and Cambodia 1991-93 where they verified agreements on ceasefires, elections, land and electoral reform, organised the demobilization of soldiers and helped create new police forces.

In East Timor in 1999 they restored order after the violent reaction to the vote for self-government and they were the transitional administration that helped Timor to create new structures after independence in 2002.

Didn't peacekeeping get a bad name in the 1990s?

Somalia was the first big failure for UN intervention in 1992. In Srebrenica in 1994, a Dutch force under UN command failed to prevent a massacre of the local population, and in Rwanda in the same year there was full-scale genocide of nearly a million people, despite a peacekeeping force of 5,000.

Four UN missions to Angola failed to stop civil war breaking out again and again. It seems only if there is a real will to turn away from war, can peacekeepers be effective.

The future

Now that the Cold War is over and small localised wars break out ever more frequently, there have been calls for the establishment of a UN Rapid Response force, so that it doesn't take the international community six months to assemble a peacekeeping mission, by which time it is often too late.

The attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad in 2003 has also called into question the respect for being impartial which the organisation thought it had.

Nevertheless, most people agree that the world still needs some kind of neutral body, backed by force if necessary, for helping former enemies make the transition from war to peace.

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