

The blue helmet blues

UN peacekeepers are being killed and need support, says Richard Gowan

Imagine a dystopian future in which NATO, struggling against Islamist terrorism, has to deploy troops on a constant basis across Africa and the Middle East. Then all of a sudden it is struck by a series of calamities: more than 40 personnel are taken hostage in the Middle East, soldiers start dying on a weekly basis on the edge of the Sahara and an operation to handle an outbreak of ebola begins to spiral out of control. NATO, you might expect, would give up in exhaustion. After Afghanistan, western powers have little appetite for quagmires.

Yet this list of disasters is not imaginary. United Nations peace operations suffered every one of these blows in August and September, highlighting both the organization's contribution to global security and its growing vulnerability.

In a matter of weeks, the UN saw its long-running operation on the Golan Heights paralyzed after an Islamist group seized 45 Fijian troops. Bombings by other Al-Qaeda affiliates in northern Mali killed 12 African peacekeepers between mid-August and mid-September, stoking tensions in a mission that was meant to keep order after France defeated the terrorists in 2013.

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, and the Security Council had little time to absorb these challenges before attention switched to the growing menace of ebola in West Africa. The UN has been patrolling the region since the Sierra Leone crisis in 2000, and won plaudits for deploying attack helicopters to put down post-electoral violence in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011. Its mission in Liberia has been credited with nursing a reasonable democracy since 2003. Yet it now finds itself at the epicentre of the ebola crisis, and UN headquarters has been scrabbling to keep up with events.

The peacekeepers' summer rather confirms Shakespeare's fear that when sorrows come, they come not as single spies but in battalions. While West Africa



A UN peacekeeper on duty in Goma

and the Middle East dominate headlines, the UN is still trying to get a grip on the half-forgotten crises in South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The blue helmets are on the front line in the struggle against a mix of challenges that threatens to cause greater global disruption – resurgent radical Islam, endemic disease and state collapse. The UN has acquitted itself decently in rebuilding many weak states since its worst days in Bosnia and Rwanda in the mid-1990s but, as I argued earlier this year, it has tended to do so by cobbling together 'more-or-less reliable and more-or-less-affordable' missions in cases where big powers have not been willing to invest. That may have been sufficient somewhere like Liberia a decade ago, but is it sustainable any longer?

There is a consensus that the UN has to do better. Ban Ki-moon announced a comprehensive review of peace operations this June, harking back to a study led by the UN veteran diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi in 2000 that helped revitalize peacekeeping after Rwanda and

Srebrenica. The Obama administration, which has always made nice noises about UN, is expanding its assistance to those states that supply peacekeepers.

In private, UN officials mutter that they need more direct support from the West if they are to meet a new generation of threats such as Al-Qaeda in Mali and ebola.

The Netherlands and the Nordic countries have sent special forces and intelligence experts to Mali, while Irish troops have propped up the Golan mission. The US, Britain and other NATO members have deployed military personnel to West Africa to help the fight against ebola. Ban Ki-moon has announced a new regional UN mission to coordinate the response to the disease. Yet there is still a sense that the West's commitments are selective and fleeting. The European Union sent a small military mission to the Central African Republic earlier this year, but none of the countries involved proved willing to contribute to a longer-term UN presence that launched this September.

Beset by crises, the UN could easily see one or more of its hard-pressed missions break under pressure in the near future. Cynics at the UN sometimes joke that one of the organization's recurrent strengths is its ability to survive failure, if only because nobody really believes it can succeed. A body that can recover from a disaster such as the Rwandan genocide, they say, can bounce back from anything.

Perhaps the UN could see its missions in West Africa, Mali and the Golan Heights collapse yet still live to fight another day. But fatalism is not a sound strategy. It is time for far greater international and western investment to salvage the faltering UN.

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