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Could 5,000 Peacekeepers Have Saved 500,000 Rwandans?: Early Intervention Reconsidered

by **Col. Scott R. Feil**

> *"I came to the United Nations from commanding a mechanized brigade group of 5,000 soldiers. If I had had that brigade group in Rwanda, there would be hundreds of thousands of lives spared today."*
> —Major General Romeo Dallaire, Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda, September 7, 1994

On April 6, 1994, the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi were assassinated when their aircraft was shot down as it approached the airport near Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Within hours, violence swept the city and later spread throughout the country as members of the majority Hutu population began slaughtering the minority Tutsis at will.

Almost three years after this tragic onset of genocide, an international panel of senior military leaders gathered at Georgetown University to review the outbreak of violence in Rwanda and to reconsider what could have been done to stop it. Using General Dallaire's statement as the basis for discussion, the panel sought to answer these questions: What size military force would have been needed to forestall the violence? How should it have been organized, trained, and equipped? What actions could it have taken to end the violence? Finally, what is the relationship between the timing of interventions and the type of force required?

The Early Violence in Retrospect

Under the command of Canadian Major General Romeo Dallaire, a 2,500-man peace-keeping force, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR), was on the ground to help implement the Arusha Peace Accords. Signed by the Hutu-dominated government of Rwanda and by the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), composed of minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus, the Arusha Accords ended a four-year civil war. Pursuant to Chapter 6 of the United Nations Charter and UN Security Council Resolution 872, UNAMIR was directed to contribute to the security of Kigali, monitor the observance of the cease-fire and the security situation leading up to the elections, train Rwandans in the removal of mines, investigate violations of the Accords, monitor the repatriation effort, and assist in the coordination of humanitarian relief efforts.

However, the peace process slipped away and UNAMIR's mission became endangered as the death of Rwanda's President removed any semblance of legitimacy and order. The Rwandan Prime Minister was murdered along with ten Belgian members of UNAMIR who were trying to protect her. An RPF battalion, stationed in Kigali as part of the Arusha Accords, broke out of its compound and

The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) was founded in 1978. It is part of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and is the School's "window on the world of the foreign affairs practitioner." ISD is concerned with the practitioner's craft—how diplomats and other foreign affairs professionals succeed and the lessons to be learned from their successes and failures. Institute programs and activities focus on how foreign policy is best developed and implemented.

battled members of the Rwandan Presidential Guard. Other RPF units near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) engaged units of the Rwandan Government Forces (RGF) and began to advance toward Kigali. Repeated attempts by General Dallaire and the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to curtail the violence and restart the long-running peace process failed. The civil war had been renewed in earnest.

With UNAMIR weakened by national capitals unwilling to risk their forces already on the ground, and by the withdrawal the Belgian contingent, the situation quickly spun out of control. Within three months, UNAMIR was reduced to a rump force of 450 personnel; roughly 500,000 to 800,000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsi, were dead; and over two-million Rwandans, mostly Hutu, had fled to surrounding countries. More human tragedy was compressed into three months in Rwanda than occurred during four years of war in the former Yugoslavia.

For the Want of 5,000 Troops

The panel members generally agreed that General Dallaire was right—a force of 5,000 peacekeepers could have interrupted the violence. Moreover, his appreciation of the situation at the time has been substantiated by subsequent scholarship. The initial violence was confined to a "political decapitation" of moderate Hutus and Tutsis located in and near Kigali. The killings, directed by extremists within the deceased President's own party, were designed to permanently disrupt the tenuous peace process. The extremists carried out a systematic plan to attack opposition targets by spreading terror and inciting Hutus to kill Tutsis over the state radio; by uprooting the entire "target" population through local murder and intimidation; and by "straining" the refugees through a sieve of intermittently established roadblocks, selecting individual Rwandans for execution. The population upheaval had an added benefit: extremist leaders were able to secure themselves within the mass of refugees and ultimately seize control of the refugee camps in Zaire.

In retrospect, a capable force of 5,000 troops inserted during April 7–21 could have significantly squelched the violence, prevented its spread from the capital to the countryside, and removed the RPF's pretext for renewing its fight with the RGF. This force, however, would have required significantly different and enhanced capabilities than Dallaire's original peace-keeping contingent—one with more firepower and mobility. A regular infantry brigade, with all of its organic weapons and helicopters for in-country transportation, should have formed its core. Tanks would not have been necessary—armored personnel carriers (APCs) could have intimidated any opponent. Some panelists argued that artillery would also have been needed, but most modern infantry units carry mortars, which would have been adequate. In addition, compatible, secure communications and a robust logistics and support system would have been essential. In contrast, UNAMIR's communications were provided by contractors; it never had more than three to five days of supplies on hand; and its twelve APCs lacked spare parts, mechanics, tools, or operator training. When the fighting started, only six were operational.

It should go without saying that this force would have to have been well trained and cohesive, much more so than UNAMIR—a totally ad hoc unit drawn from several disparate countries. Its subunits and soldiers would have to have been capable of large-scale, integrated combat operations; small-unit peacekeeping; and confidence-building and security operations. More critically, the soldiers and their leaders would have to have been able to shift rapidly along the spectrum between combat and peacekeeping—as the situation required. Simply put, complex and dynamic operations require personnel who can assess the situation rapidly, anticipate developments, and adjust plans to prevent setbacks and exploit opportunities.

Had it been deployed, about 60 percent of this hypothetical force could have been devoted to direct intervention, with the remainder committed to aviation, logistics, communications, staff, and security functions. Self-sustaining at the tactical level, and supported by forces operating from Entebbe, Uganda, or other staging areas, a reinforced brigade of 5,000 troops,

About the Conference . . .

On January 23, 1997, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict cosponsored a conference to assess Major General Dallaire's statement that 5,000 troops could have saved hundreds of thousands of Rwandan lives.

Bringing together a distinguished international panel of military leaders with experience in multinational peace-keeping efforts, representing both national and international perspectives, the sponsors hoped to answer a set of questions regarding the situation in Rwanda in 1994 and peace-keeping forces in general. The remarks of the conference participants were made on a not-for-attribution basis.

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operating under a robust mandate, could have subdued the killers and returned some semblance of order to the country.

For the Want of a Mission

While the panelists generally agreed that this force could have made a difference, they could not agree on its mission. One panelist thought that preventing the militia and government sympathizers from killing fellow Rwandans would have removed the RPF's rationale for conducting offensive military actions against the RGF. The force would not have needed to interpose itself between the RPF and RGF units in the field, but would have instead concentrated on keeping the population in the rear areas safe and on ensuring the flow of humanitarian aid. In his estimation, ending the mass slaughter would have been a sufficient first step in ending the civil war and prompting a resumption of the peace process.

Other panelists were concerned that such a limited mission and sequential plan would have generated perceptions of partiality, endangering the force and its mission: First, any attempt to stop the killing of the Tutsis and moderate Hutus would have been interpreted as de facto support for the RPF. Second, the ability to discriminate precisely between acts related to the civil war and those associated with the genocide is beyond the capability of any intervening force. Instead, these panelists proposed the simultaneous imposition of a cease-fire, a freeze on all military movements, and an end to the killings in the rear areas. After achieving these military goals, the peace negotiations between the RPF and the Rwandan government could have hypothetically then resumed.

In hindsight, the RPF became increasingly reluctant to submit to a cease-fire as it moved toward victory on its own terms. Therefore, for this reason, humanitarian concerns, and military requirements, early intervention—within two weeks of the initial violence—would have been necessary.

The Issue of Political Mandates

The rapid introduction of a peace-keeping force presumes a definable, achievable political end and the will to realize it in a reasonable amount of time. The panel members thought that political mandates, without the commitment of troops and resources, are more expressions of moral outrage than of political will. In the spring of 1994, several factors combined to prevent the generation of the national and multinational political will required for early, effective intervention in Rwanda.

First, the early intervention of any peace-keeping force would have required the sophisticated transportation and logistics capabilities maintained by a select few states. The panelists believed that for this hypothetical operation, U.S. participation would have been critical. However, the United States and other major countries were trying to cope with the aftermath of the UN action in Somalia, particularly the consequences of the change in political goals, from humanitarian relief to nation-building, and the United States' withdrawal after sustaining casualties. Second, the UN, particularly the permanent members of the UN Security Council, and regional organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, were struggling to devise a solution to the ongoing wars in the former Yugoslavia. Third, the strategic outlook of the major powers was, as some panelists observed, characterized by peacekeeping fatigue, outright caution, or fear of over-stretching their military resources.

The panelists also lamented the UN's role in Rwanda in particular and its role in peacekeeping and peacemaking in general. One panelist assessed the problems with the UN on both conceptual and practical dimensions: The UN, formed at the end of World War II, developed two major aims: (1) to end colonialism and (2) to prevent a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Respect for national sovereignty—a key, inviolable concept—and the open airing of differences became two of the UN's chief characteristics. Its institutional construction, according to this participant, has been aimed at preventing, where possible, a precipitous deterioration of events and crises into war. Today, however, even in the eyes of UN officials, respect for territorial and political integrity are no

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longer the psychological impediment to intervention that they once were. Indeed, the UN now finds itself primarily engaged in disputes *within* countries. This shift in the UN's conceptual framework requires a corresponding structural adjustment; however, the UN in the post-Cold War world remains ill-equipped to make or implement quick decisions that require rapidly establishing a physical presence on the ground in a crisis. The political machinery and the logistical and financial structure necessary to make things happen quickly currently do not exist. Transportation, communications, and supply functions are contracted out through a competitive, laborious, and time-consuming system. (It takes three weeks to procure an aircraft and six weeks to obtain sealift.) Crisis staffing is ad hoc and drawn from standing organizations within the UN. Members of the staff must be recruited, either as volunteers or for differential compensation.

Getting It Right in the Future

The problem faced by current UN policymakers is how to bridge the gap between Chapter 6 missions, classical peacekeeping, and Chapter 7 missions, peacemaking and peace enforcement (see the inset at right). What should be the response when a Chapter 6 mission, like UNAMIR, begins to go wrong? The answer obviously lies in a "force in being," which presupposes the political will to devote the resources to counter situations that may be unclear or not yet in existence.

The participants discussed three possible answers to this question. One option would be the creation of a standing UN force. While the UN has a military staff of about 145 officers, it is neither permitted to field such a force nor capable of it, and it probably won't be for the foreseeable future. The sovereign concerns of the member states continue to preclude its development.

A second option—and an alternative to a standing UN force—might be found in regional forces, such as NATO or the recently proposed African Crisis Response Force. The advantages of a regional force are its inherent knowledge of regional problems, linguistic compatability, and acclimatization; the general interest of the regional participants in successful outcomes; and the synergy that comes from working with allies bound by shared economics, culture, and interests. Secondary benefits include regular training and interoperability of weapons systems and staff procedures.

There are significant obstacles, however. First, the different stakes that regional participants might have in the outcome of a nearby conflict may lead either to misuse of the force for one country's agenda or to other obstacles to its effective use. Disinterested, and perhaps distant, parties sometimes make better peacekeepers. Second, building and training a militarily meaningful regional force is a costly undertaking. Building confidence and interoperability take significant effort to achieve—NATO is a fifty-year work in progress that requires constant political maintenance, and yet, in the case of Yugoslavia it is subject to major internal strains. Third, few regions have the military capability to deploy or sustain a peace-keeping or peace-making force for the significant time it takes to generate stability on the ground, and such an effort may be viewed by some as an excuse by the developed world to wash it hands of the problems in less-developed regions (many of which originated during colonial rule). The final paradox, pointed out by one panelist, is that the very regions where a force may be required are comprised of countries in dire financial, social, and political straits, which would be hard pressed to participate without outside assistance.

The third option—and one solution to the problems facing the establishment of regional peace-keeping forces—is to create a "regional plus" force, one with a clear division of responsiblity between the rich and poor nations. The regional forces can be trained in peace-keeping and combat skills. They require transportation, intelligence, logistics, and communications capabilities that could be furnished by a major power. Thus, the on-the-ground resources would be provided by those who stand the most to gain from regional stability, while technical support would be furnished by other countries (some of which may be former colonial powers) that could maintain a discrete

About Chapters 6 & 7 of the UN Charter . . .

Chapter VI of the UN Charter, "Pacific Settlement of Disputes," enjoins the parties to an international dispute to "first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means . . ." The UN Security Council can recommend or implement supportive actions, such as UNAMIR, when one or more of the parties report failure in their peaceful efforts to resolve the dispute in question.

Chapter VII, "Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression," offers a basis for greater action. In particular, Article 42 provides that the Security Council "may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security."

distance from any hostilities.

Yet, the regional-plus option contains its own set of difficulties. The countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia,where such forces are proposed, look at "regional plus" as a way for the developed world to shift the risk of casualties onto poor countries or to maintain a de facto veto over the use of regional forces through the retention of certain key capabilities. Evidence fueling this perception resides at the UN headquarters, where, for lack of resources, developing countries cannot afford to maintain personnel in New York City to work on the UN military staff. Thus, the staff remains populated by Western and Northern officers, and as a result, it may lack the perspective of the countries in the regions where it is most likely to implement its plans.

Ultimately, the force that was required in Rwanda may be the purview of a "lead country." If questions of operational goals, force generation, deployment, employment, and engagement require a major military actor to answer them in sufficient time to make a difference, then countries like the United States, France, and Great Britain must recognize that their services will be in demand. This is not to say that only Western democracies can, should, or will perform the bulk of future operations like the one retrospectively proposed for Rwanda, only that their capabilities are indispensable. To be certain, peace-keeping forces that incorporate wide participation send a strong message to their intended audience that the world community has a stake in successful outcomes. But "somebody must be in charge," and those who call the shots generally have to put up a large share of the resources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the panel made the following observations and recommendations:

- A force created along Dallaire's lines could have made a significant difference in Rwanda in April 1994. It would have required at least 5,000 personnel (depending on the method of employment) armed with all the weapons, equipment, and capabilities necessary to employ and sustain a brigade in combat.
- There was a window of opportunity for the employment of this force during April 7–21, 1994. During this time, the targeted killing had not spread much beyond Kigali, the population was relatively stable, and the RPF had not yet made its final push on Kigali. The opportunity existed to prevent the killing, interpose a force between the conventional combatants, reestablish the DMZ, and place the peace negotiations back on track.
- Generation of a capable force requires the participation of a modern, sophisticated national military force—in this case, U.S. participation would have been essential—to marshal the resources, provide critical functions, and achieve mission goals.
- For the foreseeable future, "lead countries" will provide the best arrangement for determining and achieving peace-keeping mission goals. These lead countries should operate under the mandate of a UN Security Council resolution, but retain command authority to determine immediate goals, objectives, and methods.
- The role of the UN needs better definition. It is now involved in internal conflicts. Static Chapter 6 and 7 definitions do not address the "gray areas" where dynamic situations can shift along a spectrum that may require peace-keeping capabilities one day, peace-making savvy the next, and peace-enforcement prowess the day after. Capabilities for generating forces, mandates, and political will require new study and articulation. If the UN is going to be involved in crisis situations on an operational basis, its decision-making apparatus requires overhaul.
- The creation of a standing peacekeeping force and the delineation of capabilities, responsibilities, and parameters surrounding the use of force in Rwanda-like situations is a legitimate and necessary area for further inquiry. ◆

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