

FROM THE UN: UN PEACEKEEPING AND MEDIATION – UPDATE

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The United Nations was founded in 1945, after the horrors of World War II. One of the most important purposes of the UN is the maintenance of international peace and security. Over the years the UN has helped end numerous conflicts, many in politically explosive situations, often through action of the UN Security Council.

When diplomacy fails and conflicts break out the UN mediates. If a peace agreement or a cease-fire is arranged, the UN organizes a peacekeeping force to monitor it. The UN is not a world government, does not have its own military force, and depends entirely on contributions from member states.

The UN Security Council creates and defines the details and clear rules of engagement of the peace mission. Peacekeeping troops, known as blue helmets, participate under terms carefully negotiated by their government and remain under overall authority of these governments while serving under UN operational command. The authority to deploy peacekeepers remains with the Security Council and the governments that volunteer them as does responsibility for pay, discipline and personnel matters.

Because of the Cold War, in the first 40 years of the UN's history only 13 peacekeeping missions were organized. During the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the focus was more on internal conflicts rather than inter-state conflicts. Since the end of the Cold War there has been a rapid increase in the demand for peacekeeping missions as well as a greater willingness to use them. Currently there are 111,000 personnel serving in 15 missions. Since 1948 there have been 68 missions with a total fatalities of 3,100. Last year 111 personnel were killed.

The number of peacekeepers has risen in the past decade from twenty thousand to over one hundred thousand. Unfortunately, the Security Council doesn't always provide adequate resources, money, or well-trained personnel to carry out complex and overambitious mandates. Recently, the UN peacekeeping operations have come under fire. Let's examine the criticism and also how successful these operations are:

Does Peacekeeping and mediation work?

There have been a number of studies showing both successes and failures. The Rand corporation in 2005 studied eight UN led missions and found that seven brought sustained peace.

A 2005 UN report was cited in a recent CNN crossfire discussion. The report claimed that since the end of World War II the UN has overseen 172 successful peacekeeping missions and negotiations. Examples include ending the Iran-Iraq war, facilitation of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and ending civil wars in Lebanon El Salvador and Guatemala. It has also used diplomacy to avert imminent wars. The CNN program host investigated and reported the claim mostly true. There have also been tragic failures such as Rwanda and Srebrenica.

Criticism

Recent reports have highlighted serious problems with peacekeeping missions. Haiti has filed a lawsuit charging the UN with gross negligence in starting a serious Cholera epidemic. Nepalese members of a peacekeeping force, infected with Cholera from their home country, spread the disease through reckless sewage disposal. This is a case of extremely bad UN oversight.

Next, Transparency International UK a London-based organization that monitors corruption reported cases of peacekeepers bribery, theft and unauthorized sale of equipment. They urged the UN to investigate and be more vigilant. If this is true it is a very serious charge.

Finally, there have been the outrageous sex abuses especially in the Congo. It is important to understand that this is a sovereignty issue in which each country insists on control over their troops and must take responsibility to monitor their soldiers. The UN has a zero-tolerance policy for sexual abuses but some contributing countries are lax in controlling their soldiers. This is a very serious situation and must be corrected.

There has been a recurrent idea that some of these problems could be mitigated through the creation of a well-trained standing UN force that can respond quickly to an unfolding crisis. This would not be a UN army, though some member states, given the history of colonialism, are suspicious that it may erode their sovereignty.

Why is the world interested in Peacekeeping?

The answer is partially humanitarian to relieve suffering. Also chaos is a “travelling epidemic” for crime, disease, refugees, and general instability crossing national borders. Another concern is that if the UN doesn’t do it, who will?