

U.N. Peacekeeping: Few Successes, Many Failures, Inherent Flaws

by Thomas W. Jacobson (March-April 2012)

The United Nations Charter states that it was founded, in part, to “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” In 2000, after a series of egregious failures in the 1990s, the U.N. ordered a comprehensive review of its own peacekeeping operations. The Brahimi Report, named after the panel chairman Lakhdar Brahimi (from Algeria), concluded that, “the United Nations has repeatedly failed to meet the challenge.”¹ The same is true today, though this review focuses primarily on the egregious failures of the 1990s, which best revealed the systematic flaws in U.N. peacekeeping.

The primary successes of the United Nations in peacekeeping have been in the areas of elections and communications (after peace agreements), diplomacy, and hindsight analysis of failures.

Within the parameters of their duties, the majority of peacekeeping soldiers appear to conduct themselves honorably. Yet they are put in unnatural and untenable positions by serving as police or military personnel in foreign nations, charged with protecting people they have no family, personal, community, or national relationship to, which is why they are disinclined to risk their lives for people they don't know and have no commitment to.

The problems, failures, and abuses of foreigners serving as U.N. peacekeepers and personnel are numerous. They are lightly armed if at all, retreat if challenged or attacked, rarely if ever protect innocent civilians, and put civilians who flee to them for protection at deadly risk by abandoning them when their lives are at risk. They sexually exploit local women and girls, and often become the primary transmitters of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases to the population. Yet they are rarely punished for any crimes, rapes, or other offenses. Generally, they have a reputation of caring little about the people they are sent to protect.

U.N. peacekeeping failures in the 1990s were partially responsible for the murder or massacre of nearly 1 million innocent civilians and citizen soldiers (trying to protect their communities) in Rwanda, Bosnia, and other places. During the same decade, 798 U.N. peacekeepers died too, plus U.S. soldiers serving under U.S. command in support of U.N. missions, most notably the 18 who were murdered, dismembered, and shamefully dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993.

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Code of Conduct

The United Nations has Ten Rules that comprise the Code of Personnel Conduct for Blue Helmets, including the following:

1. "Dress, think, talk, act and behave in a manner befitting the dignity of a disciplined, caring, considerate, mature, respected and trusted soldier, displaying the highest integrity and impartiality.
3. "Treat the inhabitants of the host country with respect, courtesy and consideration. You are there as a guest to help them ... Neither solicit or accept any material reward, honor or gift.
4. "Do not indulge in immoral acts of sexual, physical or psychological abuse or exploitation of the local population ... especially women and children.
5. "Respect and regard the human rights of all.
10. "Exercise the utmost discretion in handling ... matters of official business which can put lives into danger."

For the most part, these are noble standards, which are most likely to be upheld when a person is around people they know, but more likely to be violated when around vulnerable foreigners because of the fallen nature of mankind. Also, note that rule 4 has the qualifiers of "abuse or exploitation," which the U.N. interprets as permitting sexual immorality that is not proven to be abusive or exploitative.

A Few "Successes"

The U.N. points to Cambodia as one of its successes, but its primary success was to facilitate a nation-wide free election after a new government replaced the Khmer Rouge. Haiti is another "success," where the U.N. has had five mostly concurrent peacekeeping missions since 1993, with any lasting success difficult to ascertain.

The first U.N. peacekeeping mission was the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in Israel that began in May 1948 and continues today, but the sole deterrent to violence and attacks on Israel has been Israeli intelligence and military forces. Some view the Second United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF II) – helping to keep the peace on the Egyptian-Israeli border from October 1973 to July 1979 – as a success. Yet the identical First U.N. Emergency Force (UNEF I), serving from November 1956 to June 1967, had no power or capacity to stop Egypt and its Arab neighbors from attacking Israel, and to prevent the 6-day war in June 1967. UNEF II was formed after the second multi-Arab nation attack on Israel in October 1973. A top Israeli advisor accurately observed that, "Peacekeeping forces have been useful in the context of resolved conflicts. In unresolved conflicts they are more the source of problems than a solution."²

The U.N. lists Liberia as a success for its current mission that started in September 2003. However, the internal social unrest and violence in Liberia were brought to an end in 2003 after two African interventions: [1] A Nigerian-led African (Economic Community of West African States) military force, supported by the U.S., deployed in Liberia; and [2]

Olusegun Obasanjo, then President of Nigeria, successfully led African diplomatic efforts that resulted in Liberian President Charles Taylor agreeing to relinquish power, with safe passage to Nigeria for exile.³ The Africans themselves resolved and ended the conflict, and made a peaceful transition and free election possible, which were facilitated by the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

Egregious Failures

The Brahimi Report admitted, “No failure did more to damage the standing and credibility of United Nations peacekeeping in the 1990s than its reluctance to distinguish victim from aggressor.” After the massacre of 800,000 in Somalia, the UN Commission of Inquiry investigating that U.N. peacekeeping failure concluded, “the UN should refrain from undertaking further peace enforcement actions within the internal conflicts of States.”⁴ Wise assessment and recommendation!

Somalia Tragedy (1993): Between 1992 and 1994, the United Nations deployed as many as 30,550 military, security, and other personnel to Somalia. During the same period, U.N. representatives worked diligently to secure cease-fire agreements, and to bring the 16 or more political factions together with some limited success.⁵ But the U.N. peacekeeping mission failed miserably, resulting first in the tragic deaths of 25 Pakistani soldiers (plus 54 injured); followed by 18 U.S. soldiers, some of whom were dismembered and dragged through the streets in Mogadishu (plus 75 injured)⁶ – as memorialized in the movie, *Black Hawk Down*. President Clinton responded by announcing U.S. troop withdrawals, and formulated a highly restrictive U.S. policy toward participating in future U.N. peacekeeping missions.

Rwanda Genocide (1994): The Canadian U.N. Peacekeeping Force Commander and other United Nations representatives on the ground in Rwanda perceived the serious nature of mounting tensions between Tutsi and Hutu government, military, and militia leaders. But U.N. leaders and peacekeeping forces, and the ambassadors of multiple countries including the United States, could not stop the 104-day outbreak of violence that resulted when Hutus massacred about 800,000 Tutsi and sympathetic Hutus. Some of the U.N. and international mistakes were:

- Choosing to give Rwanda a non-permanent seat on the Security Council (starting 1 January 1994) after the 1993 Arusha Peace Agreement that stopped its civil war, but before the new government was formed and the nation was stabilized;
- U.N. efforts to force a political solution – the establishment of a new government as agreed in the Arusha Agreement – while ignoring deep unresolved tensions that prevented cooperation and unity;
- After the massacre started, U.N. Peacekeepers focused on evacuating their own expatriates, people from other nations, and government officials;
- U.N. peacekeepers knowingly and disgracefully abandoned thousands of Rwanda civilians who sought safety where they were stationed (e.g., school, stadium), leaving them vulnerable to surrounding militia and troops who subsequently massacred them;

- U.N. failure “to identify the events in Rwanda as a genocide,” and “to respond to the genocide” (pp. 35-36);
- U.N. Security Council which ignored Nigeria’s (an African nation and then member of the Security Council) draft resolution, expressing concern about innocent Rwanda civilians and calling upon U.N. peacekeepers to protect them;
- U.N. Security Council decision, on day 16 of the massacre, to reduce by almost 90 percent the number of peacekeeping troops in Rwanda.⁷

Bosnia Massacre (1995): The U.N. peacekeeping force deployed in multiple posts around the city of Srebrenica was there to protect community “safe areas,” with a mandate to “deter attacks.” In 1993, most citizens surrendered their guns during a demilitarization agreement. When the Bosnia Serb Army attacked in early July 1995, the Dutch U.N. peacekeepers refused to give the locals their guns back, and did not protect the citizens. The Dutch commander “believed that the Bosniacs (locals) could not defend Srebrenica by themselves and that his own forces could not be effective,” so they did not fire a single shot at Serb soldiers, and abandoned their posts when Serbs attacked and disarmed them. Tragically, “up to 20,000” Muslim men and teen boys, and women and children, were executed or brutally massacred around and within the so-called “safe areas.”⁸

Israeli-Lebanon Border Murders: On 7 October 2000, Hezbollah terrorists “disguised themselves as UN personnel, using uniforms and vehicles carrying the UNIFIL insignia,” and lured three Israeli soldiers in an army jeep to the Israel-Lebanon border. Then the terrorists ambushed them, bombing the jeep and shooting at the soldiers. Allegedly complicit real U.N. peacekeeping troops stood by and did nothing. The U.N., even at the highest levels, was most uncooperative in giving any helpful or truthful information about the incident. Not until 29 January 2004, in a prisoner exchange with Israel, when what was left of their remains was returned in coffins, was it known for certain that Sgt. Adi Avitan, Staff Sgt. Benyamin Avraham, and Staff Sgt. Omar Suaed were murdered.⁹

DR Congo – Rape Capital of the World: The U.N. launched a peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] (about the size of Western Europe, excluding Scandinavia) in 1999. As of the end of 2011, it remains the largest or second largest mission with 23,383 personnel, including 18,928 peacekeeping troops, police, and military observers.¹⁰ Many armed groups – including some supported by neighboring nations to extract precious resources such as gold and diamonds – freely roam in eastern DRC. Periodically they attack villages and rape women and girls, at the rate of over 15,000 per year by 2008. One U.N. official accurately dubbed the DRC as the “rape capital of the world,” but U.N. peacekeepers often cower in the face of armed opposition, and do not protect vulnerable women and children.¹¹

Increased Prostitution, Sexual & Child Exploitation

Some U.N. leaders, and most peacekeeping commanders and officers, seem to have an attitude that “boys will be boys” when it comes to satisfying their sexual desires with any woman or girl available. But every year there are hundreds of allegations of U.N.

peacekeepers committing sexual exploitation, rape, and abuse of women and girls – yes, minors – in the host country.

In 2004, the UN investigated 150 allegations of sexual misconduct by peacekeeping troops in Burundi and the DRC, including allegations of “rape, paedophilia and prostitution” in the latter. Thus even the peacekeepers whom civilians thought were sent to protect them were also exploiting and raping their women and girls. Not surprisingly, the peacekeepers obstructed the investigators.¹²

Then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour was rightly vexed, but by her own admission, only because of “the inequality of bargaining power,” and lack of capacity of “a vulnerable population” to “strike an equal bargain in the sale of sexual services.”¹³ She clearly was not opposed to prostitution, or of UN personnel or peacekeepers paying prostitutes for sexual services. She was only concerned about how much anyone representing the U.N. was paying.

The U.N. Secretary-General issued a report on the incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse reported by civilians in 2005 (see numbers in following table).

**U.N. Peacekeeping Operations:
2005 Reported Incidents of Sexual Exploitation & Abuse¹⁴**

Accused U.N. Personnel	Total Allegations	Dismissed by 1 st Head	Unsubstantiated	Pending Investig.	Substantiated	Sent to UN Hdqts	OIOS Investig.
Civilian	123 (36%)	4	18	2	15	33	51
Police	24 (7%)	0	6	5	4	0	9
Military	193 (57%)	50	25	5	22	15	71
Totals	340	54	49	12	41	48	136
Percentages		15.9%	14.4%	3.5%	12.1%	14.1%	40.0%

The first step for a civilian who was violated by a U.N. peacekeeper is to file a complaint with the head of the U.N. mission in country, but note that over 30 percent of the complaints were promptly dismissed, or disregarded as “unsubstantiated.” About 70 percent were investigated or reviewed at various levels by the U.N., but only 12 percent “substantiated.” The last column above lists cases assigned to the U.N. Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) for investigation, but little or nothing is usually done as a result of any of these investigations, except to send the peacekeeper back to his country.

The greatest number of sexual violations, at these of those reported, routinely occurs in the DRC. The OIOS conducted a four-week investigation in early 2006, and received 217 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation committed by 75 U.N. peacekeepers against girls mostly age 15 to 18. The girls apparently consented initially in order to receive money, food, clothing, or other goods. Ten were pregnant with babies fathered by the peacekeepers. Problematically, only one of the girls was willing to go on record so that her case could be “substantiated.”¹⁵

In 2007, the General Assembly decided that, for the largest group of offenders – military personnel – the country from whom the troop is from bears “the responsibility for investigating allegations of misconduct ... and for taking subsequent disciplinary actions.” Since then, the U.N. has tried to wash its hands of the problem. However, there has been very little feedback from countries of any disciplinary action, further showing ineffective “enforcement of the zero-tolerance policy” promulgated by the U.N.¹⁶

One fact that High Commissioner Arbour got right was this: the primary problem is a “culture of impunity which is continuing to be prevalent and difficult to overcome.” In 2011, the OIOS issued a mere 18 reports after investigating sexual exploitation violations by U.N. peacekeepers; half of the cases dealt with rape and abuse of one or more minors.

More Problems

The Brahimi Report identified more problems worth mentioning:

- “Traditional peacekeeping ... treats the symptoms rather than sources of conflict”;
- “Traditional peacekeeping ... has no built-in exit strategy,” so missions have continued for decades, some for 50 years or more (par. 17);
- After the 1990s, most peacekeeping operations have been deployed where there is a stalemate, “the conflict is unfinished,” and no true lasting peace was established (par. 20); and
- Throughout the U.N. system, personnel who do excellent and meritorious work are treated identical to those who perform poorly or are utterly incompetent (Executive Summary).

Concluding Comments

Obviously, it is difficult to justify U.N. peacekeeping as successful, wise, or in the safety and best interests of the people they are purportedly assigned to protect. By noble character and nature, a father will risk his life to protect his family, and a man to protect his community or nation. But it goes against human nature to expect foreigners to risk their lives to protect people they don’t know and to whom they have no relational connection or commitment. U.N. peacekeeping creates the illusion of safety and doing something good, but is inherently flawed.

¹ “Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects,” known as the Brahimi Report, 21 August 2000, Executive Summary [UN doc. A/55/305—S/2000/809].

² Dore Gold, adviser to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, quoted in, “International Peacekeepers Are Not the Solution,” by Benny Avni, *New York Sun*; as quoted in *Daily Alert*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 12 June 2003.

³ “African Peacekeeping Operations,” by Esther Pan, Council on Foreign Relations, 2 December 2005.

⁴ U.N. report on Somalia [UN doc. S/1994/643], quoted in Rwanda report below, p. 41.

⁵ “Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Somalia Submitted in Pursuance of Paragraph 13 of Security Council Resolution 954 (1994),” 28 March 1995 [UN doc. S/1995/231].

⁶ <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unosom2backgr2.html>

⁷ “Report of the Independent Inquiry into the actions of the United Nations during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda,” 15 December 1999 [U.N. doc. S/1999/1257].

⁸ “Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35. The fall of Srebrenica,” 15 November 1999, pars. 2-3, 239-390, 470-471 [UN doc. A/54/549].

⁹ “Israelis Held by the Hizbullah,” and “Bodies of Three Soldiers Positively Identified” (January 29, 2004), Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. www.mfa.gov.il

¹⁰ “Peacekeeping Fact Sheet,” as of 31 December 2011, United Nations Peacekeeping.

¹¹ “UN Peacekeepers Failed DR Congo Rape Victims,” story published by Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 8 September 2010. <http://www.rnw.nl/international-justice/print/177178>

¹² “The UN has Suspended Two Peacekeepers Serving in Burundi following Allegations of Sexual Misconduct,” by Susannah Price, *BBC News, United Nations*, 27 December 2004.

¹³ “UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Calls Peacekeepers’ Prostitute Use Sexual Exploitation,” *Agence France-Presse*, Helsinki, 2 December 2004.

¹⁴ “Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse,” Report of the Secretary-General, primarily containing the report of incidents in 2005, 24 May 2006 [UN doc. A/60/861].

¹⁵ “Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on its investigation into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse ...,” 5 April 2007, par. 26 (b & c) [UN doc. A/61/841].

¹⁶ “Implementation of the recommendations of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations,” Report of the Secretary-General, 22 December 2009, par. 84 [UN doc. A/64/573].