



The Need for Rapid Reaction

There can be little doubt that a capability to deploy UN forces more quickly and more effectively is badly needed. On many occasions the lack of such a capability has had dramatic consequences. After the collapse of the election process and the renewal of the fighting in Angola in 1993, negotiations began in Abidjan to get the peace process back on track. The two sides reached agreement on a blueprint for a new peace process, but requested a UN military presence in Angola to verify and support the ceasefire. The Security Council was willing to authorize a new UN operation, but only after a ceasefire was in place. The Secretary-General's Special Representative, Margaret Anstee, then faced what she termed a "chicken and egg" situation.

The Security Council required agreement at Abidjan before 'Blue Helmets' could be considered. UNITA [Uniao Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola] wanted an assurance of at least an immediate, symbolic presence of Blue Helmets before they would agree to the terms for a ceasefire set out in the Abidjan Protocol. The reality was even worse than that. I was told that I must warn both sides that, even if they agreed to a ceasefire, no UN troops could, for practical reasons, be made available until six to nine months later. Not surprisingly, I had two nightmares in Abidjan: one was that I would fail, which was what happened; the other was that I would succeed because then I could not see how a ceasefire would be monitored and supported.⁸

This need not be the perpetual dilemma of the UN. These types of conflicts do not lend themselves to long lead-times prior to action by the international community. A response to a crisis of the order of Goma or Somalia must be virtually immediate, within weeks rather than months, if it is to be effective. A lead-time of up to six months in getting personnel to Angola to verify a ceasefire will not inhibit a return to fighting. A six-month wait in getting UN troops and personnel to Rwanda is the difference between a situation of imminent conflict and one of outright disaster.

These considerations argue strongly for a more effective UN rapid-reaction capability. The mere existence of a reliable, credible capacity to create a peace operation rapidly upon a decision of the Security Council would not automatically provide an invitation to action. Nor would simple possession of such a capacity inevitably lead to regular decisions to intervene. But having the ability to respond swiftly should encourage responsible, prudent decision-making within the Council itself. The ability to get forces and other personnel in the field quickly should encourage the Security Council to consider with care not only the immediate situation but also what is likely to follow afterwards. It will help, rather than hinder, the search for international peace and stability in a new era of more complex types of conflict.

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