

Government Orders

The action of our peacekeepers in the former Yugoslavia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular is an integral part of the efforts by the High Commission for Refugees. They go hand in hand. Without the logistical support provided by the UN forces, especially the Canadian peacekeepers, there is no way humanitarian assistance could get where it is supposed to. These convoys bringing food, clothing and medical supplies to people who are increasingly dependent on them are often delayed, stopped or attacked. Nevertheless, the people of Canada and Quebec have every right to wonder what our peacekeepers are doing in the former Yugoslavia.

It should be pointed out however that the primary role of the UN peacekeeping forces, of which Canada is a member, is to provide assistance to populations in need, to try to reduce tension between warring factions and provide organizations such as the High Commission for Refugees with all the technical assistance required. This peacekeeping force currently includes over 2,000 Canadian soldiers, more than half of whom are stationed in Bosnia-Herzegovina. About 80 per cent of the Canadian contingent is made up of young men and women from Quebec, which goes to show the generosity of our people.

Canadian peacekeepers escort humanitarian relief convoys and secure areas under UN protection. Without their support, this goal would be difficult and perhaps even impossible to reach, in view of the fact that missions are often plagued with administrative obstacles laid by the military commands, whether Bosnian, Croat or Serb. It is obvious that without the help of the peacekeepers, the peace mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina would come to a standstill.

What are the cost to the people of Canada and Quebec? There is no denying that there are economic costs associated with the presence of Canadian peacekeepers in the former Yugoslavia. Let us not at this stage overestimate, worse, underestimate these costs.

• (1735)

Economic costs are one thing, loss of life is quite another. Each life is important and invaluable. Two casualties among our peacekeepers are directly linked to these hostilities. This number is too high, but it is perhaps not too great a cost when we think of the countless lives that have been saved thanks to the presence of Canadian peacekeepers.

If we have succeeded in saving a single life, a single child, then we have already accomplished a great deal. Our peacekeepers know this and do not hesitate to say so. Quebecers and Canadians know this as well. Can we, for economic considerations, dismiss lightly all of the work and all of the humanitarian relief provided by thousands of civilians and UN peacekeepers?

We have a duty to be responsible and to fully assume our role as citizens of the world.

The process of collective reflection that we have initiated in this House leads us to think that the debate must be comprehensive. The presence of the peacekeepers is a tangible symbol of the support Canada and Quebec have always extended to oppressed nations, because here in this country, we value people above all else.

Consequently, Canada must continue to fulfil its current mandate. It must give its moral and political backing to the UN peacekeeping effort. It must continue to escort humanitarian relief convoys which serve as the daily lifeline for approximately two million people, mainly women and children. We must work together toward world peace through concerted efforts to prevent conflicts from spilling over borders.

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga—Maisonnette): First of all, Madam Speaker, I am pleased to offer my congratulations to my colleague, the member for Laval Centre, for her brilliant, clear presentation, full of the compassion for which she is known. I also want to congratulate you on the responsibilities entrusted to you and to participate, perhaps modestly, in the debate which has been going on since ten o'clock this morning by telling you that I represent a riding in eastern Montreal where the social and economic conditions are rather difficult.

On several occasions, I was able to discuss with my constituents what Canada's presence abroad means. This brings me to say that the debate we are having today as parliamentarians should lead us to answer two main questions. The first is what exactly does it mean in terms of resource allocation to participate in a peacekeeping or a peacemaking force abroad? The second basic question is what are the underlying values? To understand the present debate, I think that we must go back to the past. I believe that our colleague from Laval Centre has clearly shown that we have a responsibility.

• (1740)

I believe in something called international conscience. I believe that the reason we have to debate the conflict in the former Yugoslavia where three major communities have difficulty living together is that some decisions were made before. We as parliamentarians cannot ignore that the decisions were made, first, just after the First World War and, second, just after the Second World War.

The reason I refer to these historical facts is that I think there is a lesson to be learned from this century: every time the international community was tempted to withdraw from a problem or to minimize its extent, this had the contrary effect of prolonging the problem.