

Special Debate

social lives were shattered. The scope of this tragedy leaves us at a loss for words.

It is to help the civilian population that the UN forces were deployed in that region. Peace is the most precious thing for any nation. The right to life and to one's physical integrity is the most treasured one. The international community, through the UN, felt an obligation to maintain peace, in spite of the enormous financial and military costs involved. Canada made a contribution from the very beginning and decided to pursue its commitment, although with some reservations and doubts. We agree and we have no choice. Indeed, the consequences of a withdrawal of the UN forces would be tragic for the population. The attacks would start all over again. We know that as recently as last week, there were 14 outbreaks of armed conflict in Bosnia.

Genocide would resume, and help would no longer reach the various communities, with consequences one can well imagine. However, we must also consider the impact of these operations on each individual member of our peacekeeping forces. It seems that in some cases, the impact is considerable. Some problems have already been identified. There is of course the conditions in the field which may have an impact on physical health. And there are also conditions we could qualify as environmental, like bombings, hostage takings, the hostility of part of the population and armed attacks intended to threaten and humiliate the soldiers.

What is most traumatic is being powerless to intervene pro-actively in the face of so much horror. There is also the daily confrontation with human misery, with the very visible impact of war on the civilian population. There is fear and boredom. That was also the point my leader, the leader of the opposition was trying to make.

All these factors contribute, to a greater or lesser degree, to the deterioration of the physical, psychological and mental health of our peacekeepers. A number of questions come to mind. First of all, were they given adequate preparation and training before they left? Second, was there a proper evaluation of the tasks they would be given so they would have a better idea of what they could expect? When they return, do they have access to the support and services they need to resume a "normal" life as members of their community? Apparently not, since it was found that among peacekeepers and their friends, the suicide rate was higher than average.

These are all issues that must be addressed if we want our involvement in peacekeeping missions to be humanitarian for those who are on the receiving end and for those who go on these missions. I deplore the fact that this government failed to table a statement describing the conditions under which our soldiers have exercised their peacekeeping mandate so far. We are faced with a fait accompli. Our answer to the government's request to renew the peacekeeping mandate of the Canadian forces is yes, but.

• (2020)

[English]

Mr. Ted McWhinney (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this has been not merely a valuable debate but an innovatory debate in Constitutional law of Parliament terms.

It was intended by the United States Constitution, to which some of the members of opposition parties referred, that questions of peace and war and commitment of armed forces be always submitted to Congress for decision.

We know that historically American presidents evaded that in invoking presidential power. What is fascinating here today is that we have come to Parliament. We are consulting Parliament on the renewal of the mandate and we have established a parliamentary practice that will not likely be changed in the future.

It will now be part of our constitutional law that where there is a commitment to be made of Canadian forces, it will be more than a telephone call at 5 a.m. from a foreign head of government and a Canadian Prime Minister replying yes sir, without any thought of the roles and missions of the forces to which he is committing Canada.

There are mistakes here and we can identify them readily if we survey the history of peacekeeping in its classical form as developed by our then foreign minister, Lester Pearson, for which he won the Nobel prize for the interposition of unarmed UN forces between armed combatants who had decided to cease operations and were looking for a face saving way out of it.

The classic situation was in Suez in 1956. It was muddied in the Congo in 1960-61 when the secretary-general of the United Nations in moves that ultimately brought his own destruction and death interjected political motives that had not been cleared in advance. Many of us would believe they were the correct political decisions but the political motive intervenes.

If we look at the two operations in recent years in which we have been most involved, Croatia and Somalia, we find operations in which the political commitment was made to engage Canadian peacekeeping forces but without a prior adequate definition of goals and missions.

This is the tragedy in Somalia. A classic peacekeeping operation was converted into a mission with political objectives, arguable and even questionable because they ignored the existing power structure there which was necessary to the effective operation of the UN forces.

In Croatia conflicting political agendas had been set by European powers that were in some respects reviving their old quarrels of pre-1914. I would not wish to censor the government that made these decisions without prior discussion in Parliament, without prior examination of the roles and missions in which we are engaged, but it is clear there was a fault there.