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THE WORLD

Peacekeepers Without a Peace to Keep

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NAIROBI, Kenya

IF anyone needed proof that [Darfur](#) has degenerated into a peacekeeper's nightmare, 30 truckloads of armed men forcefully delivered it two weekends ago.

They stormed a small [African Union](#) garrison in a dusty village, Haskanita, and massacred 10 African peacekeepers, looted their equipment and torched their base. The attack came as the African Union was preparing for a critical peace conference on Darfur and the [United Nations](#) was rushing to assemble a beefed-up force that will total 26,000 soldiers under joint U.N.-African Union command — the largest peacekeeping mission in the world.

Is the intervention too late? Or maybe, as some experts argue, too early?

The problem with Darfur is that it is not a Kosovo, an East Timor, or a Cyprus, all places where United Nations blue helmets have stepped between well-defined warring parties and stopped the bloodshed. Darfur is experiencing a different, messier kind of war.

Though often simplified, the situation in Darfur has become a chaotic free-for-all with many warring pieces, Arab versus Arab, rebel versus rebel, bandit versus bandit, all fighting one another in a desiccated, burned-out wasteland overrun with weapons and increasingly lethal for aid workers and peacekeepers.

If anything, Darfur resembles Somalia in the 1990s, when the failure of American-backed United Nations peacekeepers to subdue teenage gunmen in flip-flops ushered in 16 years of chaos that rages on today.

“Unless Unamid,” the abbreviation for the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur, “develops a strategy, wises up very fast to the complexity of the conflict in 2007 and gets out of its fortresses, which is more unlikely than ever post-Haskanita, it will very soon become a major part of the problem,” said Julie Flint, a London-based journalist and co-author of “Darfur: A Short History of a Long War.” She cited the amount of water peacekeepers would consume — up to 40 times per person what a typical Darfurian uses, the burden on already broken roads and communications, and the huge expectations the force's arrival will create.

“Darfurians are expecting to be saved by Unamid, to have roads opened, the janjaweed disarmed and banditry ended,” she said. This, she added, is “mission impossible,” however well the troops perform.

Impossible or not, some experts emphasized that if the force is to have any chance of success, it must be willing to fight robustly and take casualties.

Roméo Dallaire, the former United Nations commander in Rwanda who was ordered to essentially watch the 1994 genocide there explode before his eyes, said the troops must “go inside the camps, do night patrols and snap inspections, essentially go wherever they need to, without the Sudanese Army or police blocking them.” He said they also need to go after “every one of those splinter groups” and they’ll need the proper gear to do so.

Though the United Nations has gotten pledges for the foot soldiers it needs from countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Thailand, it is still waiting on developed countries to cough up 24 helicopters, as well as heavy trucks and other equipment.

“Unless the commander screams to the high heavens for the force multipliers his troops need, he will fail,” said Mr. Dallaire, now a senator in Canada.

John Prendergast, co-chairman of the Enough project, an initiative to raise awareness of crimes against humanity, said the new peacekeepers needed to “make a statement early on that this force is different from the last one,” referring to the current African force.

“Let’s say a village has been attacked and the attackers are retreating,” he said. “If there’s good intelligence about who did this, then it’s very important for the peacekeepers to engage them, whoever they are — rebels, militias, the government — so they and other groups know there is a cost to their actions.”

The peacekeepers, he said, can’t forget their core mission — protecting people. “For example, they need to go on firewood patrols and protect the women collecting wood from getting raped,” he said. “No, this isn’t going to end the conflict. But it could at least end one of the most horrific subplots of this saga.”

Jane Holl Lute, an assistant secretary general at the United Nations, said the fragmentation of Darfur’s armed groups could be “a sign of weakness,” and restoring law and order would offer the peacekeepers an opportunity to win over the local population. She cited Haiti and Liberia as precedents.

Congo, which is home to the largest current United Nations peacekeeping force — more than 17,000 troops — is also an example. There, peacekeepers have made a dent in attacks on civilians, though by no means have they stopped them all.

When to act in Darfur has been a question since the conflict began in 2003, primarily as a rebellion by some non-Arab tribes. That fueled a brutal counterinsurgency by government-backed Arab militias, the feared janjaweed, who burned villages, raped women and slaughtered civilians. At least 200,000 people are thought to have died.

Leslie Lefkow, an Africa researcher for [Human Rights Watch](#), said, “There was definitely a lost opportunity for a robust intervention in 2004, when the situation was clearer in terms of the number and nature of the armed groups.”

On the other hand, there are dangers in jumping in too early.

“A peacekeeping force can end up prolonging the conflict by preventing either side from winning,” said Michael Clough, a former director of the Africa program at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#).

“Unfortunately, conflicts seldom end until one side loses — or realizes that it is likely to lose unless it agrees

to a negotiated settlement.”

The ideal situation for using peacekeepers, of course, is when a deal has already been struck and they can simply monitor it. In Bosnia that made all the difference. Before the Dayton accords, peacekeepers were powerless to stop massacres, like the 8,000 people killed in Srebrenica, in 1995, in front of Dutch soldiers. After Dayton, there was a peace to keep, and it held.

And so the timing of the expanded force for Darfur may be backward. Because of the enormous international pressure, the decision to send the peacekeepers came first, and now there is a scramble to force a political settlement before they arrive.

Sam Ibok, a negotiator for the Africa Union, said one complication is that Darfur’s rebel leaders have “prematurely ripened.” That is, Western activists lifted them from obscurity and saw them as heroes in a very complicated conflict, before they had much chance to learn organizational skills. As a result, he said, “it’s very difficult for them to make peace.”

Ditto for the Sudanese government, which does not have a stellar record of living up to its word. On Thursday, former rebels in south Sudan abruptly quit the national unity government to protest what they said was a policy by Sudan’s leaders of undercutting the peace deal they signed two years ago.

The reforms they are demanding — power sharing, wealth sharing and democratizing Sudan’s militarized regime — are the same ones that the rebels are fighting for in Darfur.

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