

TASK 9

DEVELOPING MORE EFFECTIVE DOCTRINAL APPROACHES IN PUBLIC INFORMATION

Task

- 121 This task brought together the need for good relations with the media with the need for fostering solid public support for military engagement in PSOs – even if things occasionally go wrong with such operations.
- 122 From a doctrinal viewpoint, there is a clear necessity for using information effectively to bolster public support, especially in troop-contributing states. This implies transparency and minimal ‘secrecy’. But there are evident risks, both to force protection and to unacceptable practices of ‘news management’.
- 123 Discussion in syndicate therefore focused on the following questions:
- *What can be said about transparency of operations in PSOs? Is it a workable goal, or even a desirable goal?*
 - *What can be done to improve public information to strengthen public understanding of the PSO mission, especially among the populations of troop-contributing states?*

Summary of points raised in discussion

- 124 Conflict is inherent to African society. But this only turns to war when one side takes up arms. Sometimes no-one outside the arena understands why a war has started or what it means. Intervention under such circumstances can actually aggravate the situation. This suggests a need for intense research to analyse the basis of emergent armed conflicts in African societies, and to use the results to advise governments that may be willing to contribute military forces to PSOs. However, the first reaction to conflicts normally comes from the media in the form of sensationalist coverage. This is traditionally followed by a government clampdown on information. On the other hand, the rapid growth of electronic information media such as the Internet makes it impossible for governments to keep this up, and the only alternative to the outmoded practice of ‘clampdown’ in the face of crises is a deliberate and constructive information policy. Indeed, the kind of raw information available on the Internet in the early stages of a conflict is equivalent to disjointed reports that have to be sifted and analysed before the military can regard them as reliable; and control

over this is being taken away from governments.

- 125 Moreover, government attempts to frustrate journalists' legitimate information gathering (by actual misinformation, evasions or denial of access) create a vicious circle. The journalists turn elsewhere, and often unreliable and biased sources create a picture that becomes accepted as the official truth. Journalists today also often have better communications equipment than the soldiers they are writing about. This means that a journalist can file an instant report about an incident, which can immediately be seen on international television, while the military report of the same incident will take much longer to find its way through the system. This can undermine journalists' (and the public's) confidence in official sources of information.
- 126 Governments and military structures nevertheless continue to underestimate the value of a policy of honesty and candour when interacting with the media. Such a policy pays off in the long run. If the public cannot be convinced that action is correct, there is in fact no justification for participating in the action in the first place. But this is not the same as 'spin-doctoring'. Sometimes, for instance during the UNAVEM III mission in Angola, there can be a problem of 'false transparency', where the operation includes an active media information programme that creates an over-optimistic and actually false picture of the operation.
- 127 Commanders must be credible if they want to engage constructively with the media. There are obviously some things that cannot be divulged for security reasons, but basic credibility makes this more acceptable to journalists. Also, the media are similar to aid agencies, in that they do not want to be seen to be taking sides. Commanders cannot therefore expect to manipulate their reporting to create a good impression. They must expect that both good and bad will be reported according to how the media reads the situation.
- 128 The media do not help a PSO directly. Indeed, they may be a nuisance. But indirectly they create a pressure to make rapid progress in the mission. On the other hand, the local media has the potential to create serious problems for a PSO by alienating the public. It is therefore important for commanders at all levels to sit down and work seriously on a planned media programme that includes regular briefings. This also holds true for the political level. The ill effects of adverse publicity (e.g. Operation Boleas in Lesotho) can be so damaging that a proactive high-level media policy is obviously desirable.
- 129 The success of NATO's information campaign during the Kosovo war demonstrates that it is not just the information itself, but the ability to

produce high-quality ready-made images, that gives the best access to public opinion. This is because the media like material that entertains, as well as informs. However, public information is a serious problem in the African context, where the vast majority of people are not avid media users and where there is an absence of the more sophisticated media to be found in the developed world. Often, the local population will be ignorant about the purpose of a PSO, the principles guiding it, and the legitimacy and nature of its mandate.

Unfinished business/Recommendations for further research

- 130 The syndicate discussion focused on issues of media interaction during operations. What remains lacking are sound ideas on how to prepare the media in likely troop-contributing states (and elsewhere) to understand the military component of PSOs, their limitations, methods and problems. It would also be useful to undertake an analysis of the challenges of public information in the host nation of an African PSO, and to suggest means of enhancement.
- 131 Further research should also be conducted into ways of adapting national military doctrines to the different demands of PSOs. This requires the modification of familiar 'principles' of operations to accommodate the need for good relations with the media – while ensuring that transparency does not undermine force protection (and mission achievement). Once greater doctrinal clarity on media engagement is achieved, research should identify the additional training required by commanders and staffs to work effectively in the media spotlight.