



COMMENTARY

THE MULTINATIONAL FORCE FOR THE CONGO

ERIC G BERMAN

The United Nations (UN) Security Council's recent unanimous decision to authorize the Interim Emergency Multinational Force to supplement the UN peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a welcome development. It challenges two widely held assumptions: that the UN is irrelevant, and that France and the United States can no longer work together. The French-led 1,400-strong multinational force (MNF) will be deployed in Ituri, a region of north-eastern DRC that has witnessed atrocities similar in brutality, if not scale, to the genocide in Rwanda. While a necessary and important response, it is insufficient and is likely to create new challenges.

The alacrity with which the Council has acted is noteworthy, but it is also an indictment of previous policies. The international community should build on the Council's heightened interest to re-examine the assumptions upon which the UN peacekeeping organization, known as MONUC, is based. Otherwise, the Council's resolution will likely be viewed as another in a long line of half-steps and missteps, which have exacerbated and perpetuated a humanitarian and moral nightmare.

Put simply, the approach of UN member states—particularly the five permanent members of the Council—to the crisis in the Great Lakes and DRC, formerly Zaire, has been

shameful. In April 1994, the Council's initial response to the genocide in Rwanda was to withdraw most of its peacekeepers rather than augment the mission. Four weeks into the slaughter, it changed direction and authorized a larger mission. The Council did so, however, with the full knowledge that it would take several months for the poorly-equipped troop-contributors to deploy their contingents. As an interim measure, it eventually authorized a French-led force that is credited with saving tens of thousands of lives, but also creating a situation in which advocates of, and participants in, the genocide were able to withdraw to Zaire (many with their weapons) and regroup to pursue their struggle.

Two years passed, during which the humanitarian, security, and environmental situation in north-east Zaire deteriorated. Member states failed to heed former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's pleas for a proper international force to protect Rwandan refugees and by extension the host population and countries in the region.

In November 1996, the Council authorized a Canadian-led multinational force to create a humanitarian corridor to ease tensions and facilitate the dispersal of aid. But before that force was deployed, the mission was abandoned because an insurgency led by Laurent Kabila resulted in several hundred thousand Rwandan refugees returning home. Relatively

little attention was paid to the multitudes that fled westward into the jungles, tens of thousands of whom are believed to have perished.

During 1998 and 1999, the Council's response to eight countries sending their soldiers to DRC was to rely excessively on regional actors such as the Organization of African Unity and the Southern African Development Community to broker a peace accord and provide peacekeepers. Neither body had the means to do what was being asked of it.

It was not until February 2000—18 months after the onset of the war—that the Council authorized an armed force of 5,500 for DRC (six months earlier it had approved 90 unarmed military liaison officers to support mediation efforts). By contrast, in the 1960s the Council had authorized 20,000 troops for the Congo (as DRC was then called). The country was no smaller in 1999 and the conflict was no less demanding.

Last December, MONUC's strength was enlarged to 8,700 peacekeepers to help implement "Phase Three" of its operations—consensual disarmament. As usual, deployment lagged far behind mandated troop levels. The two task forces of more than a thousand troops each from Bangladesh and South Africa had yet to arrive when the crisis in Ituri flared up last month.

Neither the delays in deployment nor the carnage in Ituri came as a surprise. The selected troop contributors are over-committed and under-resourced, and the logistical challenges in the mission area are formidable even for first-world armies. The tensions and proclivity toward violence and gross human rights violations of the two major protagonists in Ituri—the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups—were widely known for years. The withdrawal of Ugandan People's Defence Force personnel was clearly going to create a flash point, which

the unarmed military observers in the region and lightly armed Uruguayan peacekeepers could not have been expected to handle.

While there is great uncertainty concerning how the Hema and Lendu and other armed non-state actors in the region will respond to the newly created force, inaction would have been worse. France is to be commended for responding to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's request for a MNF. However, the size of the force will likely have to be augmented in the coming months, and the coalition broadened. Political pressure will have to be continually applied to Rwanda and Uganda to moderate the actions of their proxies in the region, and ensure that none seeks to exploit the situation for military or financial gain. Moreover, the 1 September end-date for the mission ought to be extended, as the proposed transfer of responsibility from the MNF to a MONUC task force will not enhance the prospects for peace. Many more troops—especially those from well-equipped and -trained countries—must be sent to the DRC. And MONUC or a MNF must be given a mandate to tackle targeted non-consensual disarmament.

The Council is correct to emphasize that for peace to take hold, the parties on the ground must want it. The challenges before the Council are immense. But the Council's go-slow approach to the conflict in the DRC, and its proclivity toward burden-sharing have not worked. Resources appear limitless when the Council addresses conflicts of similar complexity in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo. The multinational force for the DRC is late in coming and too limited, but may generate a much-needed reappraisal of the international community's failure to respond meaningfully to the crisis in DRC and the region. The Council can and should do much more to create the necessary conditions to help end the conflict.