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Team UN, world police: why we need an emergency

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UN peacekeepers are often too late to the scene to help. [EPA/Atef Safadi](#)

It's been more than 25 years since the Cold War ended, more than a dozen since we created an International Criminal Court, and a decade since the UN World Summit recognised the Responsibility to Protect civilians – and yet there's been scant progress in preventing armed conflict and responding rapidly enough to protect civilians.

It's not the fault of UN peacekeepers themselves, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988 and have helped to manage and improve conditions in 69 armed conflicts worldwide, with 56 operations since 1988. Indeed, May 29 is recognised as the [International Day of UN Peacekeepers](#).

While there's cause to celebrate their service and impressive improvements, the challenges they face are cause for serious concern.

Slowdown

At the outset of peacekeeping, the governments of member states wanted to help the UN prevent the escalation of high-risk and high-casualty crises. Then, they managed to deploy forces to the Suez in seven days in 1956, to the Congo in three days in 1960, and to the Middle East within 24 hours in 1973. But not now.

These days, a UN response takes 6-12 months or more. To mount a peacekeeping operation, the UN must borrow or rent from the stand-by resources (troops, police and equipment) of the southern member states inclined to help, and while the wealthier Western countries may finance a peacekeeping operation, [only a few](#) (among them Italy, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Finland) are willing to send modest numbers of troops.

As a result, UN operations are routinely delayed, last far longer than they should, and balloon in size and expense. The upshot is more human suffering and lives lost. Protection of civilians and prevention of armed conflict become far tougher when there is no UN presence for months to stem the escalation and spread of hostilities.

When that happens, the prospects of development and disarmament are often set back for decades – and the forces that arrive are often unprepared, occasionally inappropriate. (<https://theconversation.com/leaked-report-details-un-peacekeepers-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-39004>).

It's not as if governments don't know how or what's needed. As early as 1961, officials in the US State Department [identified](#) a UN Peace Force as a better solution:

There is an inseparable relationship between the scaling down of national armaments on the one hand and the building up of international peacekeeping machinery and institutions on the other. Nations are unlikely to shed their means of self-protection in the absence of alternative ways to safeguard their legitimate interests. This can only be achieved through the progressive strengthening of international institutions under the United Nations and by creating a United Nations Peace Force to enforce the peace as the disarmament process proceeds.

Doing better

In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, a UN-multinational initiative morphed the idea into a proposed UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS). It is specifically designed to help prevent armed conflict and mass atrocity crimes, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up of demanding peace operations, and to address human needs where others either can't or won't.

The UNEPS proposal is built around core principles. It would be:

- A permanent standing, integrated UN formation
- Highly trained and well-equipped
- Ready for immediate deployment upon authorisation of the UN Security Council
- Multidimensional (civilians, police and military)
- Multifunctional (capable of diverse assignments with specialised skills for security, humanitarian, health and environmental crises)
- Composed of 13,500 dedicated personnel volunteering to serve (recruited professionals, selected, trained and employed by the UN)
- Developed to ensure regional and gender equitable representation
- Co-located at a designated UN base under an operational headquarters and two mobile mission headquarters
- At sufficient strength to operate in high-threat environments
- A service to complement existing UN and regional arrangements, with a first responder to cover the initial six months until Member States can deploy

This service would amount to a rapid and reliable “first responder”, with a military formation to deter aggression and maintain security. There would also be sufficient police to restore law and order, and civilian teams to provide essential services.

Wind of change



The UN needs less bark and more bite. [EPA/Hassan Bahsoun](#)

Clearly, an emergency peace service would not be a cure-all. It is limited by size, design and purpose. It would not be capable of war-fighting, mid-to-high intensity combat or large-scale enforcement operations, although it might assist with more demanding operations.

As proposed, the service would have sufficient capacity to manage mission start-up and protection operations at the outset and, to help in securing safe havens, buffer zones and humanitarian corridors.

With a proposed start-up cost of \$3 billion and an annual recurring cost of \$1.5 billion, shared between 193 member states, it would also be a substantive investment for the UN – but it would be a cost-saver in the long run. It would not only help to prevent the escalation of volatile conflicts and deter groups from armed violence; it could also drastically cut the size, length and frequency of UN operations. Even with success in just one of those areas, it should provide a substantive return on the investment.

The feeling does at last seem to be that a sea change is needed. Faced with overlapping crises and an annual cost of war pushing [\\$10 trillion](#), the UN has set up a high-level independent panel to review [peace operations](#), and a commission to examine [global security, justice and governance](#). They may choose to stick to the same sorts of regional partnerships and stand-by arrangements that haven't worked in complex emergencies – or they might opt to complement what exists with a dedicated UN service to improve peace operations.

American leadership could also provide crucial impetus. President Obama recently announced a much-needed [global summit on UN peacekeeping](#). And when she was last a presidential candidate in 2008, his likely heir Hillary Clinton [acknowledged](#) the UNEPS option was one of several proposals intended to plug a critical, enduring gap in UN peacekeeping.

This is at the tipping point where it becomes common sense. The world is waking up to the obvious truth that swiftly and effectively meeting human needs as soon as they arise will be critical to a safer and more co-operative future.

Above all, it's about time the UN started inspiring more hope. With support from the right places, a UN Emergency Peace Service could make a world of difference.

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