UN Peacekeeping in Darfur: A 'Quagmire' That We Cannot Accept

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At a ceremony on 7 April 2014 commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon gave his assurance to Rwandans: 'never again'. As is well known, over a period of 100 days between April and June 1994, some 800,000 Rwandan Hutus and Hutu sympathizers were killed in an appalling genocide, with little assistance from the UN or the international community more broadly. While there was a UN peacekeeping operation on the ground at the time of the genocide—the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR)—peacekeepers did little to prevent the killings. On April 16th of this year, speaking at a session of the Security Council held to mark the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, former New Zealand diplomat Colin Keating, who had been President of the UN Security Council at the time the genocide began, offered an apology for that organ's behavior. According to him, while some of the countries represented on the Security Council—including New Zealand, Nigeria, the Czech Republic, and Spain—wanted the Security Council to condemn the killings in April 1994, most veto-wielding permanent Security Council members, including the United States and France, rejected this. According to a meticulously researched 2001 article in *The Atlantic* by Samantha Power, currently US Ambassador to the UN, not only did the US government not volunteer troops to assist in preventing the atrocities in Rwanda, it actually made efforts to remove most of the UN peacekeepers who were already in Rwanda and to block the authorization of reinforcements.

On the same day that Ban Ki Moon was offering his assurances to Rwandans on behalf of the international community, *Foreign Policy* published the first of a three-part series of articles by correspondent Colum Lynch, offering a deeply disturbing analysis of the work of the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in the Darfur region of Sudan (UNAMID). The titles of each of the three articles telegraph their contents: 'They Just Stood Watching', 'Now We Will Kill You', and 'A Mission That Was Set Up to Fail'. UNAMID, which was established in July 2007 and authorized to use 'the necessary action' to protect civilians, prevent disruption of the implementation of a peace agreement, and prevent armed attacks, is described in the articles as woefully inadequate—unable to protect civilians and, in many cases, unable to protect even its own forces. Moreover, the articles describe UN peacekeeping officials that, unable to achieve the unrealistic tasks set for them by the Security Council, have resorted to cover-up and obfuscation. In public statements and reports, UN officials are said to routinely downplay attacks by Sudanese government forces and their proxies against civilians and, in some cases, against the UNAMID peacekeepers themselves. UNAMID's non-confrontational approach is said to be borne of a desire to preserve good relations with the government in Khartoum. Civilians, NGOs, and development agencies on the ground who expected protection from UNAMID have, in many cases, come to view the force as impotent and cowardly.

As the author of a 2011 book lamenting the change in direction in UN peacekeeping since the turn of the century and warning that such operations would almost certainly fail, I was not surprised to read the articles. Deeply disturbed, of course, but not surprised. UNAMID is an example of a 'militarized peacekeeping' operation—also known as 'Chapter VII peacekeeping', 'robust peacekeeping', or 'muscular peacekeeping'—a type of operation that has routinely been authorized by the Security Council since the late 1990s. The operations represent an attempt by the Security Council to prevent the recurrence of a Rwanda-type situation, where mass atrocities occurred in the presence of a UN peacekeeping operation, by moving away from the traditional policy that force may only be used by peacekeepers in self-defense (or, sometimes, in defense of the mandate of the force), in favour of a policy authorizing the use of

offensive force to protect civilians and others. As I argued in 2011, this type of operation is unlikely to be successful.

Why Isn't It Working?

The argument put forward in my book is, in a nutshell, that UN peacekeeping operations are ill-suited to operations requiring the use of offensive force: they lack the personnel, the equipment, and the effective leadership required. Moreover, the tradition that peacekeeping operations may only operate with the consent and cooperation of the government of the host state means that it is extremely difficult for a militarized peacekeeping force to be even-handed in its resort to force: if it were to use force against the host state—even if the government of the host state was acting contrary to the interests of its civilian population—it would lose that government's good will and its continued operation in the state would be extremely difficult.

It is generally agreed that the handful of peacekeeping operations in the 20th century that were vested with enforcement powers were disastrous; they were unable to achieve their mandated tasks and brought the Organization into disrepute. Examples here include ONUC (a peacekeeping operation in the Congo in the early 1960s) and two ill-fated operations in the 1990s: UNPROFOR, a peacekeeping operation charged with protecting civilians in 'safe areas' in the former Yugoslavia (including, tragically, the 'safe area' of Srebrenica where some 8,000 thousand men and boys were murdered while peacekeepers were pushed to one side), and UNOSOM II, a peacekeeping operation charged with using force to prevent the resumption of violence in Somalia (which withdrew in ignominy following the deaths of 18 US soldiers and over 25 UN peacekeepers).

Of course, the UN did not use force in its peacekeeping operation in Rwanda—despite it being advocated by its ground commander, Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, in the months before the genocide broke out. Permission to use force was denied by the UN Secretariat on the basis that it was not provided for in the operation's Security Council mandate. The stain left on the reputation of the UN by the Rwandan genocide was deep. With a view to ensuring that nothing in the nature of the Rwandan genocide occurred 'under the noses' of UN peacekeepers, the idea that peacekeeping operations should routinely be mandated to use offensive force in certain circumstances gained favour—despite the problems with earlier militarized peacekeeping operations. In 2000, the influential Brahimi Report on peacekeeping was published. On the question of the use of force by peacekeeping operations, it argued along the following lines: 1) the UN must never again stand by while civilians are killed, as had been the case with the Rwandan genocide; 2) peacekeepers must be made 'robust' and charged with taking sides—they must never again be mere 'appeasers'; and 3) only once a sufficient number of well-trained and well-equipped peacekeepers have been contributed by states should the Security Council establish and deploy an operation.

The first element of the argument is laudable: the UN must certainly not stand idly by in the face of mass atrocities. However, matters fall apart when one gets to the second and third elements. Simply adding a line or two to the mandates of peacekeeping operations, requiring peacekeepers to take on the unimaginably difficult task of preventing genocide or civilian harm is wildly unrealistic. The nature of UN peacekeeping does not lend itself to the use of force: peacekeeping forces must be donated by states (and may be withdrawn by them at any time), peacekeeping forces tend to have little in the way of sophisticated equipment (that, again, in many cases, must be donated), and the command structure of peacekeeping forces is frequently problematic. For example, an order from a commander from State A may be ignored by a subordinate from State B—if that subordinate is able to have the order overruled by a government official from State B. A version of this scenario is outlined in the *Foreign Policy* investigation of UNAMID.

The third element of the argument that emerged from the Brahimi Report, i.e., that the Security Council should wait until peacekeeping forces are sufficiently well-configured to be successful before establishing them or placing them *in situ*, is also problematic. It presumes a Security Council that is sufficiently circumspect to put political considerations to one side, as well as UN member states that are willing to contribute sufficient financial resources and personnel to the endeavor—despite the risk of the loss of life. It ignores the reality that many states may consider the contribution of personnel to operations where the forces will be in harm's way to be politically damaging (the US contributes no personnel to UNAMID) and may even be begrudging when it comes to donating equipment. Moreover, it ignores the possibility that some members of the Security Council might consider it to be preferable to put in place

an operation that is ill-suited to the task, rather than risk waiting until the time is right, lest they be seen to be doing nothing in the face of mass atrocity. Former Secretary-General Kofi Anan described the establishment of a militarized peacekeeping operation with a robust mandate, but little chance of fulfilling it, as creating an 'alibi' for the Security Council. Presumably, the idea is that if the UN is criticized for allowing another mass atrocity to occur, the Security Council can point to the fact that it did act: it established a militarized peacekeeping operation to prevent such an atrocity. In this regard, the title of the third article in the *Foreign Policy* investigation may be recalled: 'A Mission That Was Set Up to Fail'.

Even if we lived in a world where the leaders deciding what direction the Security Council would take were circumspect and uninfluenced by politics, and member states—including, of course, the Security Council's permanent members—were willing to donate sufficient funding, equipment, and troops to ensure the success of such operations, I am not convinced that assigning peacekeepers forceful tasks is a good idea. Imagine a mayor of a city with serious crime problems and an inadequate police force deciding that the way to protect the citizenry was to arm traffic wardens or ambulance attendants. While these newly robust city employees might very well prevent a number of crimes, it would not be long before they were no longer seen by the criminal population as unthreatening—instead, becoming the targets of the criminals. Militarized peacekeepers are in something of a 'no-win' situation: where they use force, they become the target of various forces; where they do not use force (because they are vastly outnumbered and to do so would be the equivalent of committing suicide), there is a substantial risk that the local population—which, for better or worse, has come to think of the peacekeeping force as their protector—will see them as failures or cowards. Recall the title of the first article in the *Foreign Policy* investigation: 'They Just Stood Watching'.

If Not Militarized Peacekeepers, Then Who?

Of course, arguments that UNAMID was not the appropriate way forward in 2007 are of little assistance in addressing the problems of suffering in Darfur in 2014. The *Foreign Policy* investigation quotes Princeton Lyman, President Barack Obama's former special envoy to Sudan, as acknowledging that 'the problems of Sudan can't be solved by a UN peacekeeping mission.' However, he continued, 'But if you withdraw UNAMID, I would fear for the people in the [refugee] camps. They would have no protection at all; and it's not even clear they would be fed.' A similar point was made by a UN official, also quoted in *Foreign Policy*, who put it this way: '[W]e would love to declare defeat but we can't. We have to accept this as a quagmire.'

There is an alternative to the failure of the status quo. It would, of course, be unimaginable to pull out UNAMID and replace it with nothing. What must happen is that UNAMID must be replaced by an enforcement operation, led by a state or a coalition of the willing, to restore peace and security and maintain them. Just as law enforcement is the job of the police and not traffic wardens or ambulance attendants, civilian protection, the restoration of security, and intervention in the face of a possible genocide are the task of Security Council-authorized enforcement operations. These are the same genus of operation as the Security Council-authorized Australian-led force that restored security in East Timor in 1999 and the Security Council-authorized British force that restored security in Sierra Leone in 2000. In each case, an enforcement operation was established when the situation broke down and the (non-militarized) peacekeeping force on the ground needed backup. If such enforcement operations are available where peace breaks down, peacekeeping operations may focus on the 'traditional' tasks they are so skilled at, which relate to preserving and entrenching a precarious peace: facilitating negotiation, observing behavior, training judges, etc.

It is time to recognize that UNAMID was indeed 'set up to fail' and call upon the Security Council to establish an enforcement operation—and call upon states, including the US, to risk blood and treasure. While such a way forward may be difficult in view of the variable interests of Security Council member states, the status quo cannot continue. More broadly, the Security Council must move away from its policy of militarized peacekeeping—not, of course, in favour of a policy of doing nothing, but in favour of doing something that may actually work in alleviating human suffering. Otherwise, the UN and the international community more broadly must admit the ugly truth that, twenty years after the genocide in Rwanda, the political will simply does not exist to take effective steps to protect civilians and prevent massacres.

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