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Cote d'Ivoire Tragedy: Rigorous Oversight of U.N. Peacekeeping Needed

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It was recently discovered that as many as 1,000 people in Duekoue, Cote d'Ivoire, were killed between March 27–29.¹ It is unclear who is responsible for the killings. The U.N. claims that forces loyal to former President Laurent Gbagbo—who lost the recent election but has refused to leave office, sparking the current conflict—are responsible. However, the area where the killings occurred was controlled at the time by fighters loyal to President Alassane Ouattara.

There were 1,000 U.N. peacekeepers based in Duekoue. Reportedly, most of them were protecting about 15,000 refugees at a Catholic mission. However, the killings occurred despite “robust” patrols by U.N. troops. According to one news report, the victims “were mainly men who had been shot and left where they fell...either alone or in small groups dotted around the town, which lies at the heart of Ivory Coast’s economically crucial cocoa producing region.”²

Although the role of U.N. peacekeepers is far from clear, it is hard not to conclude that the mission has fallen short of its mandate to protect the civilian population. This terrible incident raises echoes of former instances in which U.N. peacekeepers seemingly were in a position to stop an atrocity but failed. It also demonstrates that the U.N., despite a long-term presence, has failed to resolve the issues that provoked conflict in the country a decade ago.

This should teach the U.S. to be more vigilant in assessing whether U.N. operations are achieving their objectives before approving or reauthorizing them.

U.N. Peacekeeping Failures and the Need for Oversight. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which resulted in at least 800,000 deaths, occurred despite the presence of a United Nations peacekeeping force under Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire. General Dallaire has famously related how his request for support and intervention was denied by the U.N. Security Council and how, with a much-reduced peacekeeping contingent, he and others tried to save as many lives as possible.

In July 1995, more than 8,000 Muslim Bosnian men and boys were slaughtered in the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The United Nations had declared Srebrenica to be a “safe area” under U.N. protection, but the 400 peacekeepers assigned there took no action either to prevent Serbian forces from capturing the town or to stop the subsequent massacre.

Although there are many examples of misconduct and shameful irresolution on the part of U.N. peacekeepers in these incidents and elsewhere, these failures are not solely the fault of the U.N. missions on the ground.

The Security Council typically approves missions in situations where the major powers have little

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direct interest. This allows permanent council members to claim that they are addressing a situation when in reality they are shifting responsibility to the U.N. because they do not care enough to assume the costs of such action. The result, typically a U.N. political mission or peacekeeping operation, is more a show of international interest and support than an expression of determination to resolve a situation (backed, if necessary, by a willingness to use force).

Failure to understand the limited nature of the political commitment has yielded tragic results. Indeed, lessons learned in the 1990s led the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, also known as the Brahimi report after its chairman, to conclude, “The United Nations does not wage war.”³

U.N. peacekeeping missions can be useful when this tenet is observed, but the U.N. has ventured into more difficult missions in recent years in defiance of the warnings of the Brahimi report. Ironically, it is being pushed in this direction by the U.N. itself. Tragedies like Rwanda and Srebrenica have led the U.N. to embrace the idea that the international community should be under an obligation to intervene to prevent humanitarian crises—an idea called the “responsibility to protect.”⁴

The assumption is that a timely intervention could have stopped these tragedies from occurring. Unfortunately, it is difficult to predetermine when such a tragedy is in the offing and just what level of intervention is the right amount. This has led to an overly broad theory that is extremely hard to operationalize and imposes unrealistic burdens and expectations on the U.N. and those countries that endorse the principle.

The inclination of nations to give the U.N. responsibility for difficult problems that they do not care to deal with directly, combined with the drive to intervene to protect civilians, has contributed to the dramatic increase in U.N. peacekeeping over the past decade. The U.N. may not be the best vehicle to address these problems, but it is readily available. As a result, U.N. forces have increasingly been asked to perform missions for which they are ill-suited or lack the resources because the “international community” feels obligated to do something, even if it is ineffectual.⁵ For instance, U.N. missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Darfur are incapable of protecting civilians, and the Lebanon mission ignores its mandate to disarm Hezbollah because of political difficulties.

Although the missions in Cyprus, Kashmir, and Western Sahara have been around for decades and predate the “responsibility to protect,” the underlying ideas behind the theory help justify their habitual renewal despite little tangible change on the ground. After all, who knows what might happen if they were ended?

These missions most likely are performing tasks that help individuals or relieve suffering, but is their presence providing an excuse for others not to act? Are they perpetuating tense situations rather than providing an environment for their resolution? Will a similar loss of life still occur over years instead of months? The Security Council needs to ask these questions of every operation when it is up for renewal, yet it rarely debates them thoroughly.

Unasked Questions Haunt Cote d’Ivoire. The Cote d’Ivoire crisis gives increased pertinence to this failure. After several years of instability and conflict,

1. BBC, “Ivory Coast: French Forces Take Over Abidjan Airport,” April 3, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12950467> (April 5, 2011).
2. Aislinn Laing, “Ivory Coast: aid workers find 1,000 bodies in Duekoue,” *The Telegraph* (UK), at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/8423651/Ivory-Coast-aid-workers-find-1000-bodies-in-Duekoue.html> (April 6, 2011).
3. U.N. General Assembly and U.N. Security Council, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, A/55/305-S/2000/809, August 21, 2000, p. 10, at http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/docs/a_55_305.pdf (April 5, 2011).
4. For further discussion, see Steven Groves, “The U.S. Should Reject the U.N. ‘Responsibility to Protect’ Doctrine,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2130, May 1, 2008, at <http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/13492.pdf>.
5. For more details, see Brett D. Schaefer, “Critical Reforms Required for U.N. Peacekeeping,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2313, September 8, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/09/critical-reforms-required-for-un-peacekeeping>.

the U.N. established a peacekeeping mission (United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire, or UNOCI) in 2004 and charged it with monitoring the 2003 cease-fire agreement, keeping rival forces separate, and facilitating a national election. Among its responsibilities are monitoring the cessation of hostilities and movements of armed groups; disarmament and dismantling of militias; protection of United Nations personnel, institutions, and civilians; promoting law and order; and support for the organization of open, free, fair, and transparent elections.⁶

Gbagbo's original presidential term expired in 2005. The U.N. has approved numerous delays in the election to ease tensions, craft a lasting peace agreement, disarm rival factions, and provide time to institute a free and fair electoral process. As long as no election was imminent, the situation was tense but relatively quiescent. Pressure arising from the 2010 election, however, revealed that the lengthy negotiations under U.N. supervision had only disguised the underlying problems, not resolved them.

By independent accounts, Gbagbo lost the November presidential election. He rejected the result and undertook efforts to maintain power, including encouraging violent acts by his supporters. The U.N. and most countries have rejected Gbagbo's claim and recognize Ouattara as president. The past few months have seen widespread violence and instability in Cote d'Ivoire, culminating in the recent massacre. There is concern that the situation could reignite civil war. U.N. peacekeepers and aid workers have become targets of violence for supporters of Gbagbo since the U.N. declared Ouattara the winner. The Security Council passed three resolutions in 2011 condemning the situation, expanding and enlarging the peacekeeping mission, adopting targeted sanctions, and authorizing the use of force by U.N. peacekeepers and French forces against Gbagbo's fighters.

What, therefore, was gained from the seven years of U.N. peacekeeping and diplomatic guidance? The peace process is broken, and bitter political, ethnic, and religious rivals remain hostile and

armed. Experts believe that nearly 1 million people have fled their homes to escape the fighting and that thousands have been killed. The international community has condemned the situation and called for peace and negotiation. The prospects and timeline for resolving the conflict are uncertain. The Security Council has passed three resolutions calling on parties to protect civilians and observe human rights, imposing sanctions, and approving military intervention by the French.⁷

In short, the situation is distressingly similar to Cote d'Ivoire circa 2003. Clearly, despite lengthy efforts and numerous reports on progress being made, the U.N. failed to address the fundamental issues that sparked the original conflict a decade ago.

Time to Rethink U.N. Peacekeeping, Again. With added pressure from the French intervention, Gbagbo's days appear to be numbered. However, the fact that (1) it was necessary to force him to leave power, (2) this could be done only with the support of French military forces, and (3) the threat of civil war remains an ongoing concern only emphasizes that the U.N. mission failed in its mandate and proved inadequate to address the challenges in Cote d'Ivoire. This should spur the U.S. to:

- **Assess each U.N. peacekeeping operation intensely to determine whether its mandate is appropriate, constructive, achievable, and being met.** This includes establishing clear and achievable objectives, ascertaining the extent of political support for the mission, carefully planning the requirements, securing pledges for the necessary resources before authorizing the operation, and demanding an exit strategy. This process should apply when reauthorizing existing missions, which too often are merely rubber-stamped. If a mission has not achieved its objective or made evident progress after a set period, the Security Council should reassess whether it is serving a constructive role in resolving the situation. If these conditions are not met, the U.S. should oppose approval or reauthorization of a mission.

6. United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire, "UNOCI Mandate," at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unoci/mandate.shtml>.

7. U.N. Security Council, Resolutions for 2011, at http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions11.htm (April 5, 2011).

- **Hold congressional hearings on specific U.N. missions.** The U.S. spends billions on U.N. peacekeeping each year. Each mission is funded individually. It is incumbent on Congress, as part of its appropriations process, to assess whether these missions merit U.S. financial support. If a mission proves lacking, the Congress should urge the Administration to shift funding toward voluntary support from nations seeking to continue it for political reasons, as has partially happened with the Cyprus mission.

The Need for Careful Decisions. Short, easy peacekeeping missions or interventions are extremely rare. The pressure to “do something” should not trump sensible consideration of whether a U.N. presence will improve or destabilize a situation.

Frequently, when a poorly planned or insufficiently scrutinized mission fails, there are expectations that the U.S. should intervene to salvage the situation. Thus, the U.S. should take special care when deciding to authorize a mission and should not let an “emergency” override the prudent evaluation and assessment process that is necessary to maximize the prospective mission’s chance of success.

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