

60 Years United Nations Peacekeeping

The United Nations will observe 60 years of peacekeeping operations on 29 May, the International Day of UN Peacekeepers, by paying tribute to all peacekeepers who have served since 1948, and presenting medals to honour those who died in the cause of peace in 2007.

United Nations peacekeeping began in 1948 with the deployment of unarmed UN military observers to the Middle East in a mission to monitor the Armistice Agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

Today, almost 110,000 uniformed and civilian personnel are serving in 20 peace operations managed by the Department of Peacekeeping (DPKO).

Since 1948, 63 peacekeeping operations have been deployed by the United Nations, 17 of them in the past decade. Well over one million military personnel, as well as tens of thousands of UN police and other civilians, from more than 120 countries have participated in UN operations over the years.

More than 2,400 United Nations peacekeepers from some 118 countries died while serving under the UN flag during the past 60 years.

Background

United Nations peacekeeping is a unique and dynamic instrument developed by the Organization as a way to help countries torn by conflict foster the conditions for lasting peace.

While the term “peacekeeping” is not found in the United Nations Charter, Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN Secretary-General, found a way to define it within the framework of the Charter, saying that peacekeeping should occupy a “Chapter VI and a half” as it falls somewhere between traditional methods of resolving disputes peacefully such as negotiation and mediation (outlined in Chapter VI), on the one hand, and forceful action (Chapter VII), on the other.

Over the years, UN peacekeeping has evolved to meet the demands of different conflicts and a changing global political landscape.

Born at the time when Cold War rivalries frequently paralyzed the Security Council, UN peacekeeping goals were primarily limited to maintaining ceasefires and stabilizing situations on the ground, so that efforts could be made at the political level to resolve the conflict by peaceful means. Those missions consisted of military observers and lightly armed troops with monitoring, reporting and confidence-building roles in support of ceasefires and limited peace agreements.

The Early Years

The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) and the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) were the first two United Nations missions deployed. Both of these missions, which continue to operate to this day, exemplified the observation type of operation and had authorized strengths in the low hundreds.

The earliest armed peacekeeping operation was the First United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF 1) deployed in 1956 to address the Suez Crisis. The UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC), launched in 1960, was the first large-scale mission, with nearly 20,000 soldiers serving at its peak. It also demonstrated the risks involved in trying to bring stability to war-torn regions, with 200 fatalities incurred.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the United Nations established short-term missions in New Guinea, Yemen and the Dominican Republic, and started longer term deployments in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and the Middle East (UNEF II, UNDOF and UNIFIL).

Nobel Peace Prize

In 1988, United Nations peacekeepers were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize: at that time the Nobel Committee cited in particular the “young people from many nations...who, in keeping with their ideals, voluntarily take on a demanding and hazardous service in the cause of peace”.

The Post-Cold War Surge

As the Cold War ended, there was a rapid increase in the number of peacekeeping missions. With unity prevailing in the Security Council, a total of 20 operations were established between 1989 and 1994, raising the number of peacekeepers from 11,000 to 75,000 during this period.

Some of the missions were deployed to help implement peace agreements that had ended long drawn out conflicts -- in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Cambodia -- and to help the countries stabilize and re-organize, elect new governments and build democratic institutions.

The general success of these missions sometimes raised expectations for United Nations peacekeeping beyond its capacity to “deliver”, especially in situations when the Security Council was not able to agree on providing adequate resources and authorize sufficiently robust mandates.

Some missions were established in situations where the guns had not yet fallen silent, and in areas where there was “no peace to keep.” With fighting still raging, UN blue helmets were deployed to the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Rwanda.

These three high-profile peacekeeping operations came under criticism as peacekeepers faced situations where warring parties failed to adhere to peace agreements, or where the peacekeepers themselves were not provided adequate resources or political support. As civilian casualties soared and hostilities still continued, the reputation of United Nations peacekeeping plummeted.

The Mid-1990s: A period of UN Peacekeeping reassessment

The setbacks of the early and mid 1990s led the key members of the Security Council and the Council as a whole to limit the number of new peacekeeping missions for the next several years, and assess the lessons learned. In the meantime, UN peacekeepers continued their long-term operations in the Middle East, Asia and Cyprus. Pressed by political reality, the Council also authorized relatively small-scale UN operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti, Guatemala and the follow-on mission in Angola.

21st century surge

With a greater understanding of the limits – and potential – of UN peacekeeping, the United Nations was asked to perform even more complex tasks starting in 1999. The UN served as the administrator of the territories of Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia, and East Timor (now Timor-Leste), which was in the process of gaining independence from Indonesia.

In both situations, the UN was widely viewed as the only organization with the globally-recognized credibility and impartiality to take on the job.

Over the next decade, the Security Council also established large and complex peacekeeping operations in African countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, the Sudan (in the south of the country and in Darfur), Eritrea/Ethiopia, and Chad and the Central African Republic.

Peacekeepers also returned to resume vital peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations where a fragile peace had frayed, in Haiti and the newly independent Timor-Leste.

With the establishment of UN missions in Darfur, Chad and the Central African Republic in the second half of 2007, the authorized strength of UN peacekeeping operations now stands at 130,000 – an all-time high.

Peacekeeping Evolves

With the end of the Cold War, the strategic context for UN peacekeeping dramatically changed, prompting the Organization to shift and expand its field operations from “traditional” missions involving strictly military tasks, to complex “multidimensional” enterprises designed to ensure the implementation of comprehensive peace agreements and assist in laying the foundations for sustainable peace.

Today's peacekeepers undertake a wide variety of complex tasks, from helping to build sustainable institutions of governance, to human rights monitoring, to security sector reform, to the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants.

The nature of conflicts has also changed over the years. Originally developed as a means of dealing with inter-State conflict, UN peacekeeping has been increasingly applied to intra-State conflicts and civil wars.

Although the military remain the backbone of most peacekeeping operations, the many faces of peacekeeping now include administrators and economists, police officers, legal experts, de-miners, electoral observers, human rights monitors, specialists in civil affairs and governance, humanitarian workers and experts in communications and public information.

Peacekeeping Reforms

At the turn of the century, the UN underwent a major exercise in examining the challenges to peacekeeping in the 1990s and introducing reform. The Secretary-General appointed a Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, composed of individuals experienced in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, to assess the shortcomings of the existing system and to make specific and realistic recommendations for change.

In August 2000, the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, summoned by the UN Secretary-general issued the “Brahimi Report” (after its Chairman, former Algerian Foreign Minister, Lakhdar Brahimi), found that the UN would not be capable of executing the critical peacekeeping and peacebuilding tasks without renewed political commitment on the part of Member States, significant institutional change and increased financial support. The Panel noted that there are certain tasks which UN peacekeeping forces should not be asked to undertake and places they should not go. But when the United Nations does send its forces to uphold the peace, they must be properly resourced and equipped to carry out their mandates.

The report determined that the United Nations was grossly understaffed for the job that peacekeeping was mandated with doing. The experts stressed that United Nations peacekeepers must be able to carry out their mandates professionally and successfully and be capable of defending themselves with robust rules of engagement against those who renege on their commitments to a peace accord or otherwise seek to undermine it by violence. They called for the Security Council to provide

peacekeeping operations with clear, credible and achievable mandates. And they insisted that Headquarters support for peacekeeping be treated as a core activity of the United Nations.

Following the recommendations in the “Brahimi report”, subsequent efforts for reform were addressed in the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change; the 2005 World Summit Outcome; and the reform strategy of DPKO entitled “Peace operations 2010”. A “Capstone Doctrine” has also been developed for strategical and tactical guidance of UN peacekeepers in the field.

Profiles of Peacekeepers

The troops contributed to the UN's first two missions established in 1948, UNTSO and UNMOGIP largely came from Europe, the Americas and the ANZAC countries (Australia, New Zealand and associated States). The peacekeepers were unarmed military observers and all were men.

During the 1990s, the profile changed as developed countries shrank their militaries because of the end of the Cold War and/or became reluctant to commit their soldiers to UN-commanded operations. The largest troop contributors now are in South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Nepal) and Africa (Ghana, Nigeria). Arab and Latin American countries also provide significant numbers of troops. However, in 2006, Europeans returned to play a major role in UN peacekeeping in Lebanon, when UNIFIL was expanded following the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

In a reflection of their appreciation of – and confidence in - United Nations peacekeeping, several countries that once hosted UN operations now contribute troops, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Croatia, El Salvador, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Guatemala, Namibia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

Peacekeepers are no longer only soldiers. UN police related activities have increased in size and complexity over the past few years. There are now more than 11,000 UN police deployed around the world, with that number expected to increase to 16,900 in the coming year as they build up their presence in Darfur, Chad and the Central African Republic.

Women have also taken on an increasingly important role in UN peacekeeping. More and more, they are represented in the military, police and civilian components of peacekeeping operations. In an historic event, the first ever all-female contingent to serve in a UN peacekeeping operation was deployed in 2007, when a 125-strong Formed Police Unit from India arrived in Liberia. Their presence has served to demonstrate the special contributions that women can make to law enforcement.

New Reforms

UN peacekeeping continues to evolve, both conceptually and operationally, to meet new challenges and political realities. Faced with the rising demand for increasingly complex peace operations, the United Nations in the past few years has been overstretched and challenged as never before. The Organization has worked vigorously to strengthen its capacity to manage and sustain field operations and, thus, contribute to the most important function of the United Nations – maintaining international peace and security.

In his 2007 annual report, the Secretary-General expressed concern that the increasing complexity and growing challenges faced by United Nations peacekeeping have stretched the capacity of the Organization to address the problems in the field.

To strengthen the UN's capacity to manage and sustain peace operations in an era when the demand for blue helmets has reached an all-time high, the Secretary-General proposed a restructuring of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations; the establishment of a separate Department of Field Support; a major augmentation of working-level resources in both departments and in other parts of the Secretariat dealing with peacekeeping matters; and new capacities as well as integrated structures to match the growing complexity of mandated activities.

The Dag Hammarskjöld Medal

In 1997, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of peacekeeping in 1998, the Security Council decided to establish the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal. Since then the medal has been awarded annually to the peacekeepers that have fallen while serving in the cause of peace the preceding year.

International Day of UN Peacekeepers

By resolution 57/129 of 11 December 2002, the General Assembly designated 29 May – the day the first mission was established – as the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, to pay tribute to all the men and women who have served and continue to serve in United Nations peacekeeping operations for their high level of professionalism, dedication and courage, and to honour the memory of those who have lost their lives in the cause of peace.

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