

Why Congos Peacekeepers Are Coming Under Fire

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Alex Perry

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There can be no greater indictment of a peacekeeping mission than when it is attacked by the people it was sent to protect. But that is what's happening to the U.N.'s biggest peacekeeping mission, the 17,000 blue helmets in the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.) known by the French acronym MONUC. ()

Hundreds of thousands of Congolese have fled renewed fighting in the eastern part of the country in the past few weeks. Government forces are pitted against rebel groups that have operated in the area since crossing the border from neighboring Rwanda at the end of the genocide there in 1994. In some ways such as how the conflict has sucked in armies from across Africa and how it has often descended into a fight over the region's plentiful natural resources the war in Congo is immeasurably more complicated than the one in Rwanda. But in other ways, it's a direct sequel. The rebels now advancing on Goma, for instance, are led by General Laurent Nkunda, an ethnic Tutsi fighting remnant Rwandan Hutu militias. In all, according to humanitarian NGO the International Rescue Committee, the war in Congo which escalated into a full-scale civil war in 1998 that lasted until 2003, and still erupts periodically, as now has killed 5.4 million people, mostly through hunger and disease.

The moral imperative for an international response is clear. It's set out in the **Responsibility to Protect** (R2P), a doctrine adopted by the U.N. World Summit in 2005 the largest gathering of world leaders in history that made clear that a nation forfeits its right to sovereignty if it unleashes or is unable to prevent massive human-rights abuses on its soil.

R2P

was born from the collective shame over global inaction during atrocities in places such as Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica. The most striking current example of R2P in effect is in Darfur, where the U.N. has agreed to deploy 26,000 peacekeepers to end genocide. It is a mission that, if fully staffed, would supercede that in the D.R.C. as the biggest in the world. "The concept is focused on mass atrocity crimes," says Gareth Evans, who heads global-conflict watchdog the International Crisis Group and who launched a book,

Responsibility to Protect

, in Washington on Tuesday. "The whole point is to develop an international reflex response that goes, 'Of course we have to do something. Let's figure out what.' " ()

Peacekeeping is tricky, no doubt. Alex De Waal [program director at New Yorks Social Science Research Council and author of several books on Africa] is among those who have questioned whether we might have set our sights too high, and whether, while peacekeeping might work in small countries like Sierra Leone or East Timor or Kosovo, there may not be the resources to make it work for vast nations like the D.R.C. or Sudan. Evans, a former Australian Foreign Minister, is among those who believe that just because something is difficult, "it doesn't mean you abandon it." Says Evans: "In Congo, the problem is insufficient resources. Maybe MONUC has to be reinforced and upgraded. In Darfur, you have a lackluster result, yes, but you had to

have peacekeepers with a mandate that was accepted by the government. A full-bore invasion [would have had] catastrophic results." Evans is also keen to highlight "unheralded, unclaimed"

R2P

successes like in Kenya this year and in Burundi in the early years of the decade both cases in which strong diplomatic intervention prevented ethnic clashes from descending into wider ethnic wars.

But then there's Somalia. Somalia is the world's biggest humanitarian crisis, in which 3.5 million people more than one-third of the population are now on the brink of starvation after 17 years of civil war. If we have a responsibility to protect anywhere, surely Somalia would be top of the list. But Somalia has attracted no offers of help from the West, and only a few thousand African Union troops. It is not as if the world has no interest in what happens in Somalia; anarchy has fostered not only a starvation catastrophe and international piracy, but also Africa's most dangerous Islamists, who have bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. And that's the problem: the dangers of Somalia override any noble notion about saving others. Evans says the "main point" of his book is to "clear away the debris and skepticism about the scope and limits of **R2P**." Here's hoping his writing is exceptional.

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