

The Independent
Tom Porteous
10 November 2008

Tom Porteous is the London Director of Human Rights Watch.

The difference between the British Government's timid handling of the current crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its bold military intervention in Sierra Leone just eight years ago could hardly be starker.

In 2000, Tony Blair dispatched a small force to Sierra Leone to save an imperilled United Nations peacekeeping operation which was incapable of protecting itself let alone civilians threatened with killings by a rebel army. The decision is now seen as the pinnacle of New Labour's "ethical foreign policy". Before anyone had even heard of the concept of the "**responsibility to protect**", the UK's muscular intervention in Sierra Leone rescued the UN. (...)

The crisis in the eastern DRC presents remarkably similar challenges. A UN peacekeeping force is struggling to protect itself and failing to protect civilians. A warlord supported by neighbouring Rwanda is seeking to impose his political demands on North Kivu province by force. His opponents, including local militias and Rwandan Hutu rebels linked to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, are supported by the Congolese government.

The consequences of all this: the perpetuation of untold human suffering. Daily killings of civilians, the recruitment of child soldiers, torture, massive forced displacement of the population and a fast-diminishing prospect of a return to peace and normality. And where is the UK this time? Worse than dithering, it is actually blocking the deployment of an EU military force which is the only realistic way rapidly to assist the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), which has been deeply compromised by its restrictive mandate and lack of rapid response capabilities, in time to make a difference for those in need of urgent protection.

In speech after speech, the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, talks up human rights and his concept of "civilian surges". But in the face of civilian torment at the hands of brutal warlords supported by two governments, Rwanda and the DRC, which receive large amounts of British development aid, he blocks the most immediate means of extending a helping hand and calls instead for respect for ceasefires (which are not being respected) and political dialogue between Rwanda and the DRC. Political dialogue is crucial to helping to resolve Congo's problems, but it won't result in immediate solutions and it does not substitute for the need to protect Congo's citizens today and in the coming weeks and months. Even if Britain feels it cannot act decisively and boldly in the DRC, it should at least not be blocking other EU member states from doing so. MONUC desperately needs reinforcements of troops and equipment. Some EU members are apparently ready to act. The UK should immediately support that initiative, at least politically and preferably by offering some of its much-vaunted military expertise as well.

A professional show of force and international resolve was enough to break the cycle of violence in Sierra Leone and set its region on a solid path to peace. Lasting peace won't come

easily or quickly in the Congo. But standing by while civilians are killed, raped and pillaged is a sure recipe for further escalation of the conflict.

Source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/tom-porteous-britains-cowardice-in-congo-1006640.html>

For todays press release from Human Rights Watch on the protection of civilians in DRC, please see: <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2008/11/10/congo20172.htm>