EXCERPTED FROM

A Peacekeeper in Africa: Learning from UN Interventions in Other People's Wars

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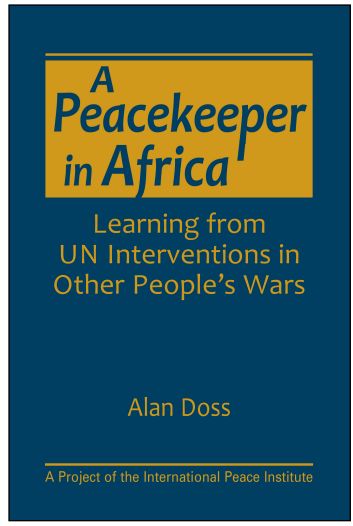

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A Journey in Peacekeeping

All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.

—Viet Thanh Nguyen

My journey begins in the prosperous New York suburb of Westchester County, far from the hardscrabble battlefields of Africa, where the events I recount in this book unfolded. From there I commuted to United Nations headquarters in Manhattan and my job running the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), which had been set by the newly elected UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, as part of his reform program designed to enhance the impact of UN operations around the world.

One of my fellow commuters from Westchester was Hedi Annabi, assistant secretary-general in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) at UN headquarters. I first got to know Hedi (who was to die tragically some years later in the earthquake in Haiti, where he was heading up the UN peacekeeping mission) when I was leading the UN operation aiding Khmer refugees displaced into Thailand by the war in Cambodia. Hedi was working on the peace process that finally brought an end to that war (and the demise of the infamous Khmer Rouge), followed by the fielding of a UN peacekeeping mission to Cambodia.

Our professional paths crossed again in New York. In the late 1990s several new peacekeeping operations were established and Hedi was in charge of the planning for those missions, which he did with great professionalism, combining an eye for detail with a keen understanding of the political and organizational challenges inherent in a major peacekeeping deployment. One of those challenges was how to ensure cooperation between the peacekeeping mission and the UN development and humanitarian organizations already on

the ground (the so-called UN country team). Tensions between them bubbled to the surface, especially during times of crisis. Inevitably, those tensions were reported up the bureaucratic chain to UN headquarters, where I and Hedi tried to defuse or at least attenuate them, in line with the Secretary-General's call for a coherent "joined-up" approach to UN field operations.

On a December morning in late 2000, Hedi and I got off our train in Grand Central Station and headed toward the UN. Our conversation turned to Sierra Leone. Secretary-General Annan had recently visited the country following a major crisis that had almost derailed the United Nations Assistance Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), the peacekeeping mission the UN had deployed to help end the bloody civil war. He had been dismayed by the poor state of relations between UNAMSIL and the UN country team (and more broadly the humanitarian community). Following this trip, the Secretary-General decided to reinforce the mission with the appointment of a deputy special representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) who would lead UNAMSIL's stabilization operations and head up the UN country team.

As we exited Grand Central, Hedi stopped, turned to me, and asked if I would be interested in the post. I said I would speak to my wife, Soheir, but my interest was certainly sparked. After nearly four years at headquarters, the opportunity of getting back to the field in a new and innovative post was a big pull.

After discussion with my wife, I let Hedi know that my name could go forward. A month later, my appointment was announced, and I was awarded the lofty title of the DSRSG for governance and stabilization. My journey in peacekeeping was about to begin.

Other People's Wars

In the long history of human warfare, UN peacekeeping operations are something of a novelty. Most people deployed in UN peacekeeping—soldiers and civilians alike—are not from countries that are seriously threatened or endangered by the conflict they are trying to contain or end. These are other people's wars.

UN peacekeepers are not sent forth with the usual aim of armies engaged in armed conflict: to impose their will on adversaries by force of arms. Peacekeeping demands a distinctive mindset and mode of engagement dissimilar from war fighting. Both employ armed soldiers, but with very different ends in mind. As one Indian commander who served with me in the Congo remarked, "You don't go to war in tanks painted white"—a reference to the UN practice of painting peacekeeping vehicles (military and civilian) white with distinctive black lettering (more on the UN "war of colors" later).

Peacekeeping operations are put in place at the request and with the consent of the so-called host government, however ineffectual, unrepresen-

tative, or vile that government might be. UN forces are not armies of occupation (although some protagonists portray them as such). Nor do they normally exercise executive authority—they do not run the country where they are deployed.

These operations are something of a political conjuring trick. They are essentially a temporary convergence of concern that coalesces around a crisis—one usually characterized by a massive humanitarian disaster—rather than a stable alliance of national interests. They are put together as a desperate response to tragedies that the international community has failed to prevent. The UN departments responsible for mounting and managing these operations cannot count on a defined budget or call on armed forces that can be deployed at short notice. Every operation represents a new set of challenges, requiring intensive negotiation (particularly on their financing) among the member states of the United Nations.

All of these caveats have significant implications, which I explore, describe, and dissect in this book, for what peacekeepers can or cannot do.

A Peacekeeper's Journey

During my years as a UN peacekeeper, I was often invited to speak at conferences, symposia, and the like. I found that the remarks that really got the audience's attention were those where I recounted what I had learned in running large and complex peace operations. Several friends suggested that I should write about these experiences before they passed from memory. That is what I have now attempted to do.

My story focuses on the four African countries where I worked in UN peacekeeping operations. It encompasses a disparate cast of characters: warlords and warriors; politicians and prelates; advocates and activists; as well as ordinary people caught up in the bloody conflicts that progressively engulfed those countries. Some of those characters are still prominent; others are now forgotten or dead; a few languish in jail.

My account does not pretend or presume to tell the whole story of those conflicts or the ultimate impact that UN peacekeepers may have had on them. The origins of the conflicts that we were sent to contain or resolve were both proximate and profound, often reaching back to events, dramas, and tragedies that played out long before I, or any other peacekeeper, arrived on the scene. I throw only a passing light on some episodes in which I played a part.

UN peacekeepers have been deployed to deal with violent and protracted internal conflicts that have been years in the making. The troubles that overwhelmed countries like Sierra Leone were not temporary aberrations that suddenly emerged without warning. On the contrary: the past was never very far away and constantly intruded on the present. And because countries emerging from conflict appear to be especially vulnerable to a

relapse into further conflict, peacekeeping mandates have become ever more complex and comprehensive as the international community has sought the ultimate fix for countries in deep trouble—peacebuilding.

Missions are now routinely tasked to go beyond the traditional confines of peacekeeping (providing inter-positional forces in support of peace agreements)[1] and expected to help resolve, or at least temper, the underlying drivers of conflict. So some understanding of the historical context that frames a peacekeeping mission is indispensable for understanding the complexities that such missions face. Consequently, in each of the country chapters, I give readers a glimpse of the past in order to better understand the present and the prospects for the future.

I have divided the story into four parts. In the first part, I delve into the peacekeeping operations in Sierra Leone, then Côte d'Ivoire, followed by Liberia, with a chapter on each country. The second part of the book covers my days as the special representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). That experience was especially intense and demanding, so much so that I have written four chapters on the DRC, reflecting the size, complexity, and significance of the United Nations Mission in the Congo (MONUC).

In the third part of the book I complement the mission-specific chapters with a few broader observations on the demands and constraints that peacekeeping missions face as they become entangled in other people's wars. I sketch some reflections about peace, politics, protection, and personalities and how they come together or don't. I ask whether leadership makes a difference, and if so, what kind of leadership works best, under what circumstances, and, by consequence, what are the limits of intervention by UN peacekeepers: In sum, where and under what circumstances can peacekeepers hope for success in their interventions?

In the fourth part I write about the challenges of running a large, multidimensional peacekeeping operation, and indulge in some speculation on the future of peacekeeping. I originally got involved in peacekeeping through my association with Kofi Annan's UN reform program. A quarter of a century later there are new reform efforts under way, and I ask if they will resolve, or mitigate, the complexities and contradictions that I encountered during my peacekeeping assignments.

Not long before I left New York for Sierra Leone and my first peacekeeping post, I met Secretary-General Annan on the margins of the Security Council, where he was attending a meeting on Africa. Hedi Annabi introduced me to him with some encouraging words. We then briefly discussed the situation in Sierra Leone and the need to get the UN country team and UNAMSIL working together. At the end of our conversation, he wished me well, saying "have fun" and adding that this would be a UN job unlike any other. How right he was.