

# For the Honour of India: A History of Indian Peacekeeping

**Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd)\***

In December 2002 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 57/129, declaring 29th May to be observed annually as the International Day for United Nations Peacekeepers, to pay tribute to “all 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”. 29th May assumes importance, as on this day in 1948 the United Nations established its first peacekeeping mission (UNTSO: United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation) in the Middle East during the Arab-Israel War. Since then 2588 peacekeepers have laid down their lives in the line of duty, including 130 Indian peacekeepers. In the year 2008 and 2009 alone, 163 peacekeepers made supreme sacrifice while serving under the UN Banner in various Peacekeeping Missions.

In New Delhi, a function to mark the International United Nations Peacekeepers’ Day was organised by the Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping at the United Service Institution of India (USI) on 29 May 2009. As part of the commemoration ceremonies, a book by Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd), ‘For the Honour of India : A History of Indian Peacekeeping’ was released by Shri Hamid Ansari the Honourable Vice President of India. General Deepak Kapoor, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, ADC, Chief of Army Staff, was also present on the occasion.

Ever since gaining Independence in 1947, India’s unreserved participation in UN and regional peacekeeping operations has been both spontaneous and enthusiastic. To date, about 100,000 Indian personnel have served in 43 such operations including all operations undertaken in Africa. The fact that, as of 31 March 2009, 130 Indian peacekeepers have given their lives in UN peacekeeping operations alone, underlines more than anything else the Indian commitment to the objectives set out in the UN Charter. This contribution has been widely acknowledged by the international community and the UN.

Indian peacekeeping participation has evolved from its idealistic origins during the Nehruvian era to the present where it is inextricably linked to the furtherance of India’s national security interests. This book provides a comprehensive insight into the history of India’s involvement with peacekeeping operations from its tentative beginnings in Korea in 1950, through the non-aligned phase of Indian foreign policy in Indo-China and Gaza, to the heavy employment of the post-Cold War period. Apart from regular UN peacekeeping operations, the book also covers the Indian involvement in regional peacekeeping missions in Sri Lanka and the Maldives alongwith a host of other related issues.

In his welcome address Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Director USI, noted that the occasion had a special significance for USI fraternity, as all three distinguished guests present on the podium, the Hon’ble Vice President, the Army Chief and Lieutenant General Nambiar were members of the USI. The Chief was also the seniormost serving former “Blue Beret” while General Nambiar too had donned the Blue Beret as a UN Force Commander.

All present then rose to observe a two-minute silence in memory of those Peacekeepers who had made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of peace. This was followed by reading out the message of the United Nations Secretary-General Mr Ban Ki-moon, by Ms Shalini Dewan, UN Representative for India and Bhutan. Thereafter, General Satish Nambiar presented a brief glimpse of the book.

General Nambiar recounted his involvement with UN peacekeeping and gave an engaging account of how the present book came into being at the behest of the ex-President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam who desired that India’s Peacekeeping contributions should be recorded in the form of a book. The venture has been funded by the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Home Affairs - the three ministries which are directly involved in contribution to the UN Peacekeeping Missions.

The history was formalised as a project under the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR), with the signing of an Agreement between the USI and Army Headquarters on 09 Dec 2005. Work on the project commenced in March 2006 after the allocation of funds. A research team under Colonel KK Sharma (Retd), assisted by Mr Manzaruzzama and Ms Suchismita Mishra, began working on collection and collation of data from a wide range of individuals and agencies. General Nambiar commented upon the unsatisfactory nature of official record-keeping procedures that made the task of the research team a fairly daunting one. Nevertheless, the research team did a fair job of cobbling together a rough draft based on the information that was available.

This rough first draft was further worked upon, under the author’s directions, by an editorial team consisting of Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina, Secretary of the USI CAFHR and Dr Chandar S Sundaram, assisted by Ms Kanika Sharma and Ms Ambreen Agha. The thoroughness with which this team addressed the task was largely responsible for plugging some of the more glaring gaps in information and General Nambiar expressed his gratitude for their assistance in giving the publication its final shape. In particular, he thanked Dr Chandar S Sundaram and Squadron Leader Rana Chhina whose invaluable contribution merited special mention not only for their editorial efforts, but also for the quality of advice and guidance provided to him as military historians. Ms Kanika Sharma was specially mentioned for revising the book’s chapter structure.

General Nambiar said that the book aimed to encapsulate six decades of peacekeeping experiences of our valiant and dedicated soldiers, sailors, airmen, civilian police, and members of other agencies like electoral officers.

Every effort had been made to get the factual details right and put them together to present a coherent narrative of the various missions to serve as a historical record of the outstanding work done by our peacekeepers. In the last chapter, he said he had gone beyond ‘history’ and tried to look ahead into remaining decades of the 21st Century, in order to analyse future trends in international peace operations and speculate on the role India would be called upon to play insofar as the maintenance of international peace and security are concerned, including a more dynamic role in the region. He had done so in the hope that the observations he made would provoke a detailed discussion and enable future generations of Indian peacekeepers to carry forward with greater pride, élan and vigour, the traditions set in the past six decades.

General Nambiar humbly dedicated the publication to the 130 Indian peacekeepers who had made the supreme sacrifice at the altar of UN peacekeeping “for the honour of India”; the motto set for the first such venture, the Indian Custodian Force in Korea, by its commander, then Major General SPP Thorat, DSO, in 1953.

The Honourable Vice President of India, Shri M Hamid Ansari, then released the book and addressed the gathering. In his remarks, the Vice President called the book an “authoritative account” and an “impressive and commendable” effort. He rounded off his incisive and insightful remarks on Peacekeeping with the hope that besides enlightening the general public, the book would facilitate a more focussed policy debate on the principles and mechanics of peacekeeping.<sup>1</sup>

The ceremonies concluded with a vote of thanks by Lieutenant General PK Singh, Director USI. This was followed by tea in the USI lawns, where the Vice President and the COAS mingled with the guests, who included many senior and distinguished former ‘Blue Berets’, before departing.

---

**\*Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd)** is currently Secretary of the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research and Vice President of the Indian Military Historical Research Society, UK.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXIX, No. 576, April-June 2009.