

Blue Helmets and White Tanks: On the Frontlines with India's UN Peacekeepers

Mr Alan Doss[@]

Abstract

UN peacekeeping is something of a military paradox. Peacekeepers are soldiers deployed to prevent and not pursue war. They are allowed to use their weapons for defensive purposes, and, even then, only in extreme circumstances when they are in imminent danger. They do not launch offensives against enemies or seek to capture foreign territory. Above all, they are expected to protect civilians rather than subjugate adversaries.

This paradox was summed up succinctly back in 2008 by General (then Brigadier) Bipin Rawat. He remarked to a journalist visiting the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that you don't go to war in tanks painted white. General Rawat, who then headed the Indian contingent of United Nations Observer Mission in Congo (MONUC)¹ based in the DRC's North Kivu province, was referring to the fact that vehicles (of all descriptions) used in UN peacekeeping operations are always painted white with large black UN letters, which, of course, makes them easy targets for armed opponents. His larger point was that UN peacekeeping missions are not mandated or structured to act as expeditionary forces.

General Rawat was the commander of UN forces in North Kivu, a deeply troubled and violent province in the eastern Congo. Much of the violence emanated from clashes between ethnic groups competing for political power and economic

[@] **Mr Alan Doss** is a former Under-Secretary General of the United Nations & former President of the Kofi Annan Foundation. He is a founding member of Diplomats without Borders Chair of the Advisory Board of the UNITAR Peace Division. He holds the Chair of the Advisory Board of the Oxford Global Society.

resources, but amplified by cross-border tensions, and incursions by armed groups from neighbouring countries, notably Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi.²

Despite numerous peace agreements and the deployment of thousands of UN peacekeepers, the violence continued, displacing a million local people. The Indian brigade was charged with assisting the authorities to maintain the peace and protecting civilians in North Kivu, a province with ten million inhabitants, roughly half the size of California — but with few serviceable roads, inhospitable weather, and arduous terrain.

Communal violence, constant rainfall, and rundown infrastructure were not the only challenges facing the Indian and other contingents operating in North Kivu. They also had to contend with the failings of the national security forces, which UN peacekeepers were tasked with assisting and training. Those forces were poorly led, inadequately trained, barely equipped, and not always fed. They often preyed on local populations with looting and worse. Many of the soldiers were former members of militias and rebel groups that had gone through a form of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) and were then recruited into the national army — the *Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo* / Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC)³ — without any screening. This was a recipe for incompetence and indiscipline.

UN peacekeeping missions are always deployed at the request of the national government concerned.⁴ They can help but cannot replace the government at national or local levels. UN peacekeepers can propose but they cannot impose. So, the UN could not enforce a programme of security reform of the kind that was sorely needed to redress the woeful state of the Congolese military and police service.

These constraints were dramatically displayed in North Kivu, where the Indian peacekeepers were deployed. In 2007, a rebellion of Congolese soldiers of Tutsi extraction broke out. The rebellion euphemistically called itself the National Congress for the Defense of the People.⁵ Although it categorically denied doing so, the Rwanda Government provided cross-border support to these rebels, who formed a buffer between Rwanda and the remnants of the Hutu army and militias, which committed the 1995 genocide

against the Tutsi community in Rwanda and then sought refuge in the Congo, creating recurring tensions and persistent mistrust between the two countries.⁶

The CNDP gained ground taking control over swaths of the province. The FARDC did not prepare defensive positions and launched ill-prepared offensives despite the advice and admonitions of General Rawat and the MONUC Force Commander, Lieutenant General Babacar Gaye of Senegal. As a result, the CNDP made incremental gains and even threatened Goma, the capital city of the province.

MONUC faced an invidious predicament. Without UN intervention, the CNDP was likely to over-run the province. However, the North Kivu brigade was not mandated or equipped to undertake a broad offensive against the CNDP. Moreover, UN forces had been dispersed around the province in an effort to stay closer to the population and to prevent attacks on civilians, a complex task given the rugged terrain and the large area of operations.

As the then Special Representative of the Secretary General and head of the UN Mission, I had the unenviable but unavoidable job of explaining these constraints to the President of the DRC, Joseph Kabila and his senior defence and security officials. I told them that the UN could not substitute for the national army although, it could and would, robustly act to protect civilians under immediate threat and support the FARDC if the ceasefire we had negotiated was breached.

My message was not well received. At one meeting, the Minister of Defence recalled peevishly that Indian units assigned to an earlier UN peacekeeping mission,⁷ fielded just after the Congo's independence in 1960 (at the request of the iconic Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba), had acted to end the secession of the mineral rich Katanga province. He expected us to do the same in North Kivu and end the CNDP offensive.

Despite the mandate and capacity constraints, the North Brigade, and associated, units moved to prevent the CNDP from attacking civilians and the seizure of strategic locations. This involved kinetic action, including the use of the brigade's highly effective attack helicopters. However, the increasing tempo of the

violence put the brigade and General Rawat in a tenuous position. Obviously, I was not privy to his communications with New Delhi but clearly there was growing concern at home that the Indian contingent was being drawn into protracted hostilities.

To make matters worse, as the situation deteriorated, the government began publicly criticising the UN Mission and the North Kivu brigade for not dealing with the CNDP threat while blithely ignoring the shortcomings of its own forces. An ill-advised farewell for a departing Indian officer attended by some CNDP officers stationed in the area added fuel to the fire. Toasts and gifts were exchanged (and recorded). This, it was claimed, was proof that Indian units were in league with the CNDP even though that same officer, some months earlier, had led a fire fight that stopped CNDP units from taking over a town close to Goma.

This and other disinformation were used by FARDC commanders (and politicians) to obfuscate their own mistakes and incite local people against UN forces. On several occasions, civilians blocked roads to UN units that were moving to support FARDC positions under threat from the CNDP. Sometimes the crowds became violent and several Indian soldiers were seriously injured; fortunately, they did not retaliate, which would have further inflamed the situation. Nevertheless, these incidents had a detrimental but understandable impact on morale and raised questions about the rationale for the presence of UN forces.

Unwisely, the DRC Government escalated its negative commentary on the Indian contingent. In response, the Indian Government indicated that it would not stay where it was not wanted. This response, although reasonable, created great concern for me and the senior UN leadership in New York. Without the Indian units and its air capabilities, the mission could not sustain an effective presence in North Kivu. I took the threat seriously as I knew what happened to United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)⁸ in Sierra Leone when India had pulled out its contingent following a severe crisis that precipitated a collapse of confidence in the mission.

Matters came to head in late 2008 when the CNDP attacked the strategically located town of Rutshuru. Indian troops were stationed near the town to back-up the FARDC. To our consternation, however, as soon as the CNDP began its attack,

the FARDC fled firing on Indian units which attempted to keep them in place. After a counter attack by militias aligned with the FARDC, the CNDP moved into the village of Kiwanja close to where an Indian company was based, and began killing young men who they claimed were from the militia or government sympathisers.

At the time of the Kiwanja assault, the Indian company had been on full alert for several days and nights. It had already rescued NGO workers, staff of religious organisations, and some journalists. As the security situation worsened, several thousand people fled to the company base (which also guarded a helicopter landing site) in search of protection. The company focused on the protection of the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) against the threat of the CNDP, which was trying to disperse them.

This was a difficult operational call, which illustrates the acute challenges that peacekeeping forces sometimes face in fulfilling their mandate to protect civilians. MONUC and the Indian brigade were harshly criticised by human rights groups for not stopping the killings. But if the company commander had intervened, would that have halted the killings which were done house to house? Or would this have simply allowed the CNDP greater room to intimidate and harm the IDPs sheltering at the base? It is hard to judge whether more or fewer lives would have been lost if the company had been sent into the village, leaving the IDPs exposed to the CNDP.

With their capture of Rutshuru, the CNDP was in a much stronger position and began to move in the direction of Goma. Needless to say, for the government and the UN, a CNDP takeover of Goma would have been unacceptable. Together with Alain Leroy, the UN Under-Secretary General in charge of peacekeeping operations at UN headquarters, who had flown in from New York, General Rawat planned a multilayer defence of Goma, which we approved.

Again, I am not sure to what extent General Rawat had consulted New Delhi about the defence plan but his resoluteness was reassuring to all in Goma, civilians and military alike. As it turned out, MONUC's defence plan was not put to test. I believe (but cannot prove) that faced with the UN's determination to defend Goma, Rwanda and the CNDP leadership decided to pursue a

diplomatic approach, as urged by some of Rwanda's foremost development partners in the international community. In the event, regional diplomacy, backed by the UN, took over. An emergency meeting of the International Conference on the Great Lakes was convened in Nairobi to deescalate the crisis, which threatened to embroil the DRC and Rwanda in an armed confrontation.

A few weeks later, the leadership of the CNDP imploded. Subsequently, a joint exercise of the FARDC and Rwandan forces was launched to root out the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda*/Democratic Force for Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) units operating close to the DRC-Rwanda border. In March 2009, the CNDP signed a formal agreement with the DRC Government to integrate its forces into the FARDC, while the government recognized the CNDP as a political party, opening the way for it to compete in national elections.

After some personal diplomacy, I was able to persuade the DRC Government to over-ride a letter that it had sent to the Indian Government making unfounded allegations about the Indian contingent. Later, when the Secretary General Ban Ki Moon visited the then DRC, General Rawat hosted a dinner at the contingent's base in Goma where amends were made by the DRC Foreign Minister, who previously had voiced some intemperate remarks about the Indian forces. He subsequently "lauded the contribution of the Indian contingent in the UN Peacekeeping Forces (MONUC)".⁹

Sadly, the Kivu crisis abated but did not disappear. Two years later, elements of the CNDP reconstituted themselves as M23¹⁰ and attacked Goma before being eventually repulsed by government forces backed up by MONUC and the North Kivu brigade. That event, in turn, led to the creation of an 'intervention brigade' within MONUC with troops from the region. It was designed to provide stronger force to counter armed groups menacing civilians, including groups with ties to or originating in neighbouring countries,

The intervention brigade enjoyed some initial success in its kinetic operations. However, it has not solved the underlying problems. Last year M23 was once again on the move, attacking government forces, provoking yet another humanitarian crisis in the Kivu provinces and a fresh rupture in DRC-Rwanda diplomatic

relations. The East African Community, of which the DRC is now a member, has recently agreed to field a new force to help counter the many threats posed by a multitude of armed groups (the M23 is only one of them) operating in North Kivu and neighbouring provinces.¹¹

The steadfastness of General Rawat during the Kivu crisis was admirable. He was calm in the face of adversity, ever thoughtful but tough minded when needed. He was among the very best of the many military commanders I worked with during my decade in peacekeeping. His untimely passing in a tragic accident is a great loss.

But General Rawat's comment about the 'blue helmets and white tanks' remains a vital caution for all peacekeeping operations (under UN auspices or otherwise). UN peacekeepers are not fielded for the purpose of waging war. They can provide temporary aid and create some space and time for political and diplomatic dialogue to take roots, which hopefully leads to peaceful solutions. What they cannot do, however, is substitute for a state's own security forces or replace the national political will that is indispensable to achieve lasting peace.

Endnotes

¹ MONUC: Mission des Nations Unies au Congo/ United Nations Mission in the Congo

² Alan Doss, *A Peacekeeper in Africa: Learning from UN Interventions in Other People's Wars*, Lynne Reiner Publishers, USA, 2020

³ FARDC: Les Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo/ The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

⁴ United Nations, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines, United UN, New York 2008: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/capstone_eng_0.pdf.

⁵ Le Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP)

⁶ United Nations Security Council, S/2022/967, New York, 16 December 2022: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/757/86/PDF/N2275786.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁷ United Nations Operation in the Congo, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/past/onuc.htm>.

⁸ Funmi Olonnisakin, *United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, eds. Joachim A Koops, Norrie MacQueen, Thierry Tardy, Paul D Williams, Oxford University Press, 2015

⁹ India – Democratic Republic of Congo Relations: http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Democratic_Republic_of_Congo_Relations.pdf

¹⁰ M23 stands for the date in March 2009 when the Congolese government and the CNDP signed an agreement to end the conflict. The rebels who joined M23 claimed that the Congolese government had not respected the terms of that agreement. *Peace agreement between the government and le Congres national pour la defense du peuple (cndp)*, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CD_090323_Peace%20Agreement%20between%20the%20Government%20and%20the%20CNDP.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/dr-congo-entry-in-eac-makes-militia-menace-a-regional-problem-3784002>