

# Experiences of a Force Commander in UN Peacekeeping Operations in Africa

Lieutenant General Rajender Singh (Retd)<sup>®</sup>

## Abstract

*Commanding a multinational Force comprising of troops of many countries, each with different professional standards and ethos, by itself, poses a big challenge. In addition, doing peacekeeping in Africa poses a lot of other problems which are not always easy to surmount. Despite these, most of the peacekeeping troops generally do a good job of maintaining peace. The performance of Indian Offices and men, however, is truly outstanding and they are not only liked for their professionalism but also for their initiative and innovation. In this article the author narrates a number of instances where the peacekeepers were able to do a very good job in difficult and intricate situations. He talks of need for adopting a strategy to prevent any escalation of conflict by effective utilisation of Diplomacy and Deterrence through effective Peacekeeping manoeuvres. In this article the author also highlights the importance of keeping regular communications with the parties, establishing credibility of the UN Mission by fair and just actions and helping the population by launching a major Humanitarian campaign wherever possible.*

## General

**A**s a founder member of the United Nations (UN), India has been a firm supporter for the purposes and principles of the

---

<sup>®</sup> **Lieutenant General Rajender Singh PVSM, SM, VSM, (Retd)**, is a Former Director General of Infantry and Force Commander of UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea. He had commanded his battalion in Sri Lanka as part of IPKF and was also DDG Military Operations at Army HQ. Post-retirement he headed a major philographic Foundation as its CEO and was conferred with the Life Time Achievement Award by ABP NEWS in 2015.

United Nations and has made significant contributions to the furtherance and implementation of these noble aims as well as to the evolution and functioning of its various specialised programmes. India is today one of the largest military contributors to UN Peacekeeping Operations. Known for their professionalism, compassion, equanimity and forbearance, Indian troops have proved popular and effective everywhere. India first deployed its troops in UN peacekeeping operations in 1950 with the deployment of 60 Field Ambulance to Korea as part of the coalition forces. Since then, India has participated in more than 49 UN missions out of the total of 71 UN missions<sup>1</sup> launched, across the globe, till date with more than 234,000 troops participating. Till date, 178<sup>2</sup> Indian peacekeepers have made the supreme sacrifice whilst serving in UN peacekeeping operations. India has so far provided 16 Force Commanders in various UN Missions and 2 Military Advisors in UN HQ. It started with Lieutenant Gen KS Thimayya being appointed the Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) in Korea and has continued till date. The dedication, commitment, and devotion to peacekeeping have made the Indian soldier the most sought after peacekeeper by the UN.

### **My Experiences in Angola as a Regional Commander**

My experiences with UN date back to 1995, when I was sent to Angola as Regional Commander of the UN Peacekeeping Mission of UN Angola Verification Mission III (UNAVEM III). For someone who never had a chance to venture out to Africa, this was a most unique experience. Despite the fact that there was a ceasefire between the rebels and the government forces, the level of tension had continued to persist and both parties, the Government and União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) were unwilling to trust the other. The UN appointed me as the Commander of the central region and I had a challenging task ahead since the rebel headquarters was based in my region. Though the level of presence of Indian diaspora in Angola was not much, one thing that struck me was the fact that Angolans had tremendous amount of good feelings towards India, and almost everyone knew about Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. When the Indian troops arrived, the newspapers next day hailed their arrival by proclaiming that peacekeeping troops have arrived from the 'Land of Mahatma Gandhi'. Such an

image and goodwill were to be an important factor which facilitated my task tremendously.

On reaching Angola, I was indeed struck with awe and admiration of the natural beauty and richness of resources of the country. Infact, Angola would have been one of the richest countries of the world given its natural resources like diamonds, minerals oil etc. On arrival, however, what I saw was a war torn country with massive destruction of infrastructure, completely brutalised society, and people living in abject poverty. It was difficult to fathom that a country with such rich resources and simple, hardy, and intelligent people can reach such a state all due to the greed of their leaders.

My stay in Angola for next one year was quite eventful and full of ups and downs as far as managing security situation is concerned. But despite the problems, we were able to successfully surmount most of these and were finally able to convince the UNITA rebels, under Jonas Savimbi, to start giving up arms and join the rehabilitation camps (Quartering Areas as they were called) to facilitate peace process. This came about after a lot of cajoling and convincing by international community. US played a major role and Ms Mandeline Albright the US Ambassador to UN was sent to talk to Jonas Savimbi as he was refusing to meet the Special Representative of Secretary General for a long time. Though for some reasons, he had been quite considerate to me and had infact met me a number of times, a privelege he accorded to no one else. Accordingly, I was asked by the Force Commander to accompany Ms Mandeline Albright to meet the UNITA Supremo Jonas Savimbi. Luckily these talks went well and he did agree, though very reluctantly, to start the demobilising process. By the time I completed my tenure and returned to India, the demobilising process had started in right earnest which later led to stabalising of the situation to a very large degree.

### **My Stint as Force Commander in Ethiopia & Eritrea**

My moments of actualisation and understanding of the various contours and dimensions of the polity and economics of the region came about only during my tenure as the Force Commander of UN Peacekeeping Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE). During this time, I was able to interact not only with the top echelons of the two governments but also got an insight into the detailed

functioning of the Security Council in New York and also the African Union which was based in Addis Ababa. With the UN mission spread over a large area in Eritrea and Ethiopia, one also got an insight into the living conditions of the civil population there.

Bringing peace between these two war-torn countries was not a joke and a lot of diplomatic manoeuvring had to be undertaken to make these two countries to soften their hard line stance. Both the Special Representatives of the UN Secretary General and I had to work extremely hard to maintain peace in the environment. In this scenario, being an Indian certainly did help. In both, Ethiopia as well as Eritrea, there was a tremendous amount of goodwill for India and most of the political leaders as also important members of the civil society had good words to say about Indians. They often remembered their Indian teachers/professors with tremendous amount of nostalgia. Even Prime Minister of Ethiopia and many ministers and senior Army Generals in both countries also used to talk similarly of their teachers in schools and instructors in the military academy which was established by the Indian Army.

### **Operational Challenges**

The two year war had ended with wanton destruction at both ends. It also left behind a deep hatred, fuelled by extensive mistrust between the two parties. Peacekeeping operations in such an environment were, therefore, fraught with operational challenges. By the time I arrived as Force Commander in mid-2004, the operational situation in the mission's Area of Responsibility (AOR) had stabilised to a large extent. Though there were no large scale military/operational undertakings by either side, the situation could not be described exactly as peaceful. Years of intense hatred between the parties had led to breeding of an intense mistrust, which was further exacerbated by a lingering suspicion of UNMEE's covert leanings towards the other party.

Ethiopia's refusal to implement the Boundry Commission verdict, the ensuing stalemate, and gradual erosion in Eritrea's confidence in the international community's and UNMEE's abilities to break the stalemate, led to reignition of punitive hostilities. This, in turn, resulted in a gradual degeneration of the military situation. The number of violent incidents increased as both sides undertook regular military forays into each other's territories. But we still

managed to keep peace and prevent any major escalation of conflict by effective utilisation of diplomacy and deterrence through Peacekeeping manoeuvres. I had troops and officers from 43 countries, each with different professional standards and ethos. It is a normal belief that the officers and troops belonging to developed countries (US, Europe, Canada etc) are much more professional vis-à-vis African and West Asian countries. This is not always true. I found many African and West Asian troops to be highly effective in conduct of operations. One instance comes to my mind which clearly highlights the resilience and professionalism of African and other third world countries.

Badme, a village near the border which was under Ethiopian control, was the main bone of contention between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the two countries were often confronting and threatening each other on this. In Apr-May 2005, Eritrea not satisfied with the progress of the Peace Process carried out a major reshuffle in the army hierarchy and posted one of the most volatile commanders as the local Army Commander in charge of the Eastern Region. That commander called the senior UN Military Observer (Lt Col from a western country) and expressed serious concern and told him that since Ethiopian Army is carrying out offensive manoeuvres and is not listening, he is going to launch a major strike with two divisions next day. Hearing this, the senior military observer rushed straight back to Badme and packed his bag and fled towards Addis Ababa. He took along with him four more members of his detachment. However four remaining members (two from Africa, one from Malaysia and one from Bangladesh) refused to flee and conveyed these developments to me in the Force HQ. Hearing this, I mobilised the nearest post of Jordanian Battalion to occupy the defensive positions. The Eritrean local Army Commander was contacted again by the balance of military observer detachment, accompanied by the UN Western Sector Commander (Jordanian Battalion Commander) who told him that any offensive action by him will be countered by UN troops and he will be responsible for any consequences therein. Next day, some of Eritrean troops did move towards Badme but turned back on seeing the UN deployment, thus, averting any major incident. But these were most tension filled moments as the UN strength we were able to muster was only about one Company strength (with 6 Armed Vehicles), facing nearly two Brigades of

Eritrean troops. It was only the determination shown by Observers and the Jordanian troops that carried the day. Later I had to sack all the military observers who had fled the scene and repatriated them back to their countries for disciplinary action.

Another incident which highlights the courage and initiative of young officers, which come to my mind, was of an Indian Battalion Lieutenant who was heading a platoon post with two armed vehicles. In a similar threat, a local Brigade Commander of Eritrea was dissuaded from doing anything adventurous by this Lieutenant who on seeing the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops confronting each other had rushed in between. His bold move prevented the situation from turning worst and a major conflict situation was avoided which could have happened between the two sides.

The biggest challenge to peace, however, came about around Nov-Dec 2005. One fine day, I got a message from our Ethiopian Office that the Prime Minister of Ethiopia wanted to meet me. I along, with Special Representative, rushed to Addis Ababa next day and met Mr Males Zanavi, the PM of Ethiopia, with his Army Chief in attendance. He told us that he had got intimation that Eritrea is silently mustering up troops close to the border and in view of this, he is soon going to order mobilisation of his Armed Forces. I tried to reason with him that the information that Eritrea is amassing troops is not correct and he should take no precipitative action. He refused to believe me and said, General, "You do not know the President of Eritrea and I know him inside out since he is my cousin and we had fought together against the Communist regime. His mind works in a different way". I, however, requested him to give me 15 days and I will prove to him that there is no cause for alarm. He said OK, "if you are not able to convince us, we will mobilise".

Next 15 days were the busiest we had in my total tenure. I straight away rushed back to Eritrea and met their Defence Minister and the Army Chief. I frankly told them of the apprehensions of Ethiopian PM and requested them neither to issue any provocative statements, nor to allow any movements of Eritrean Forces. To instil mutual confidence Border Meetings were organised in all three sectors. I held press conference of the world press and

briefed them about the total harmony and peace in the area. We also took them to various locations to show that Eritrean Forces were still located in depth areas. In addition, I took the Ethiopian Chief of Intelligence to visit with me to all the posts on the border. In fact, I took him in UN Executive Jet to show him around. He sat with me and heard briefings of all local UN commanders. He was allowed to ask the questions and see for himself the situation on the ground. But the biggest Confidence Building Measure (CBM) was that I was able to organise a Military Coordination Commission meeting in Nairobi in which military delegations of both countries met and were able to clarify apprehensions. With these efforts, we were able to convince the Government of Ethiopia that their apprehensions were not valid. Their Defence Minister, thereafter, met me and told me that the PM has conveyed that their plan for mobilisation of forces has been shelved for the time being and they would continue to keep a strict watch on Eritrean Forces activities and reserve their right to respond appropriately. I knew that though the Ethiopian hierarchy are, in fact, now convinced, but they would refuse to admit that they were wrong in their assessment.

### **Humanitarian Challenges**

In the initial stages of establishment of the Mission, the humanitarian situation was grim. Drought and prolonged war had adversely affected the economics of both the countries. The problem was even more acute in case of the population staying within or close to the zones of conflict. In order to effectively overcome the humanitarian challenges, we launched a well-coordinated and sustained program called 'Winning Hearts'. Under this program, the UN Forces synergised its military operations with developmental projects to win the hearts of the people. A well-coordinated and sustained effort was worked out at providing assistance in consultation with the local civil administration of the two countries. The greatest emphasis was laid on basic needs such as food, water, medical, and veterinary aid. Assistance was also rendered towards building of infrastructure like construction of check-dams, bridges, digging of wells, reconstruction of school buildings etc. This program was spearheaded by our contingent, in which Indian contingent played a major role, duly supported by other contingents like Jordan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Italy etc. All

contingents used their own resources and the funds provided by their governments for this purpose. I employed the engineering efforts of the UN Mission for construction of check dams, wells, roads etc.

### **Conclusion**

In hindsight, it can now be observed that the strategy delivered handsome gains as the deliverance of succour and aid to the war ravaged millions resulted in a firm establishment of the credibility of UNMEE, this, in turn garnered the confidence and good will of the common man. This feeling of goodwill stood UNMEE in extremely good stead during the turbulent phase commencing Oct 2005, when even in spite of large scale restrictions by the Eritrean Government, the local population stood firm in support of UNMEE and the peacekeepers and no feeling of antipathy was felt. The winning hearts policy has, therefore, assisted in large measure in the success of the Mission. What I felt bad was that I could not fully instil confidence in the minds of leaders of both countries. However, I can derive satisfaction that we in UN Mission were able to convince the two sides of futility of armed conflict. The situation remained peaceful thereafter till last year. A major breakthrough, however, took place only last year when a new government was elected and took office in Addis Ababa. Almost the first thing this government did was to announce acceptance of the Boundary Commission Award, which was the biggest sticking point. Thereafter, the PM of Ethiopia visited the capital of Eritrea and was given a rousing welcome. Many agreements were signed and an era of a lasting peace seems to have finally descended on the region. I hope it stays this way!!





**The author taking over as Force Commander**



**Receiving UN Secretary General on his visit to Eritrea**

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> India And United Nations Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding, Government of India. [https://pminewyork.gov.in/pdf/menu/submenu\\_\\_1260383365.pdf](https://pminewyork.gov.in/pdf/menu/submenu__1260383365.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Total Fatalities Since 1948, United Nations Peacekeeping. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>