United Nations Peacekeeping Forces

The Nobel Peace Prize 1988

History of Organization

The United Nations Peacekeeping Forces are employed by the World Organization to maintain or re-establish peace in an area of armed conflict. The UN may engage in conflicts between states as well as in struggles within states. The UN acts as an impartial third party in order to prepare the ground for a settlement of the issues that have provoked armed conflict. If it proves impossible to achieve a peaceful settlement, the presence of UN forces may contribute to reducing the level of conflict.

The UN Peacekeeping Forces may only be employed when both parties to a conflict accept their presence. Accordingly, they may also be used by the warring parties to avoid having a conflict escalate and, in the event, also to have a struggle called off.

The Peacekeeping Forces are subordinate to the leadership of the United Nations. They are normally deployed as a consequence of a Security Council decision. However, on occasion, the initiative has been taken by the General Assembly. Operational control belongs to the Secretary-General and his secretariat.

We distinguish between two kinds of peacekeeping operations - unarmed observer groups and lightly-armed military forces. The latter are only allowed to employ their weapons for self-defence. Altogether, 14 UN operations have been carried out. They are evenly divided between observer groups and military forces. The observer groups are concerned with gathering information for the UN about actual conditions prevailing in an area, e.g., as to whether both parties adhere to an armistice agreement. The military forces are entrusted with more extended tasks, such as keeping the parties to a conflict apart and maintaining order in an area.

UN interventions have been in particular demand in the Middle East, both as regards observer groups and military forces. The UN first took on the task of sending observers to monitor the armistice between Israel and the Arab states in 1948. Observer group activity was resumed after the wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973. After the 1956 war, the first armed UN force was established to create a buffer between Israeli and Egyptian forces in the Sinai. Ten nations contributed soldiers. Another force was established after the war between Egypt and Israel in 1967 to monitor the armistice agreement between the parties. This took place during a period of extremely high tension both locally and between the great powers. In 1974, a smaller UN force was set up on the Golan Heights to maintain

the boundary line between Syrian and Israeli forces. The most extensive UN operation in the Middle East is represented by the formation of UNIFIL, subsequent upon the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978. Its tasks included watching over the Israeli withdrawal, maintaining conditions of peace and security, and helping the Lebanese government re-establish its authority. Such tasks have taxed the capabilities of UNIFIL to the utmost, but the UN forces have made an important contribution by reducing the level of conflict in the area. However, this achievement has not come without significant cost. UN casualties now amount to more than 200.

The UN played an important role during the struggles that erupted when the Belgian colony of the Congo achieved independence in 1960. As anarchy and chaos reigned in the area, a UN force numbering almost 20,000 was set up to help the Congolese government maintain peace and order. It ended up being, above all, engaged in bringing a raging civil war to an end and preventing the province of Katanga from seceding. It was while carrying out the UN mission in the Congo that Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold was killed in an air crash.

Among other important tasks may be mentioned monitoring the border between India and Pakistan, and maintaining the peacekeeping force that was established on Cyprus on account of the civil war that broke out between the Greek and Turkish populations of the island. The UN force has succeeded in creating a buffer zone between the two ethnic groups.

The UN has, in these and other areas, played a significant role in reducing the level of conflict even though the fundamental causes of the struggles frequently remain.

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