



**TODAY'S PAPER**  
**COMMENT**

Canada's offer to help Congo is puny, says security analyst PETER LANGILLE. It's time to activate a special force we proposed after the last bloodbath

By PETER LANGILLE  
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Few places on Earth need help more than the Democratic Republic of Congo. Civilians, including thousands of panicked refugees, are at the mercy of armed, drugged militias, which appear intent on slaughter. In early May, Oxfam appealed to the UN Security Council to deploy a rapid-reaction, peace-enforcement effort. UN commanders in the present mission have cabled New York daily, pleading for reinforcements. Sound familiar?

Many compare the situation to Rwanda. Already this messy five-year war has led to the deaths of at least three million people. It may soon get worse. Fighting has intensified in the northeast with the departure of the Ugandan army, which left behind arms so that their proxy, the Hema tribe, could continue battling the Rwandan-supported Lendu tribe.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has asked UN member states to provide troops and deploy an emergency international force through a "coalition of the willing." France will, if supported, lead the coalition, and Canada has said it could contribute two military transport planes or perhaps 200 soldiers. It's reported that the Prime Minister's Office is studying the feasibility of another deployment, given our commitments of about 220 troops to diverse UN peace operations, 1,200 troops with NATO in Bosnia, and plans to send approximately 1,600 soldiers to Afghanistan later this summer.

This isn't good enough. Canada could and should be doing more. Despite cutbacks, Canada retains a regular force of 19,500 soldiers in three brigade groups, augmented by 15,500 reserves, which provides a total force of 35,000 troops. The key question for the PMO is whether Canada's land force is really overstretched. Our total deployment abroad is 1,500 troops; assuming the need to train replacements and rotate personnel after six months abroad, as well as the need to provide rest and recuperation for those returning, it appears that 4,500 soldiers are already committed.

Yet, even with the pending deployment to Afghanistan later in the summer of another 1,600 soldiers, the army retains substantive capacity. Why can't two battalions of mechanized (wheeled) infantry (approximately 1,200 troops) be sent to the Congo?

Our government might also consider a mechanism designed specifically for such an emergency. Canada is one of 15 countries participating in the multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) for UN peace operations, which has been operational since 1999. After a relatively successful trial run monitoring the ceasefire between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the brigade was again declared available in January, 2002.

The objective underlying the brigade's eight years of co-operative planning was to provide the UN with a jump-start, rapid deployment force of as many as 5,000 troops within 30 days notice (each participating state reserves the right to decide whether to deploy national personnel on a case-by-case basis).

SHIRBRIG, unlike most national contributors, is a complete, self-sufficient brigade with its own headquarters, logistics and communications. The participating militaries are familiar with one another and work to common doctrine and standards. Deployments are limited to six months, making it essential to plan for replacements.

The timing for Canada and the brigade may not be perfect, but it isn't bad. In December, the participating governments agreed that they would consider "robust" peace operations (making a jump to operations with authorization for the limited use of force). Regrettably, a robust response may soon be necessary to prevent further violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In January, Canada assumed the chair and presidency of the brigade. Retired lieutenant-general Ray Crabbe heads its small staff in Winnipeg, and one of the office's objectives is to raise the brigade's profile. Officials in Foreign Affairs and National Defence were aware that a request to deploy the brigade would likely be forthcoming within the year -- and that it might be difficult to refuse.

According to polls, Canadians support further participation in UN peace operations. Having once been a world leader and major contributor to peacekeeping, Canada now ranks 31st in contributions to UN operations. But given Congo's crisis, it's unlikely that the Canadian people would be satisfied with sending military observers or even 200 troops.

The Canadian Forces can help in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We have options and resources. And some of us recall that the brigade was developed after the Rwandan genocide as part of a Canadian, Dutch and Danish initiative to develop a UN rapid-deployment capacity that might avert the next bloodbath.

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