

OPINION

UN peacekeeping works but Canada's contribution falls to all-time low

By WALTER DORN AND ROBIN COLLINS - MAY 25, 2020

UN peacekeeping is a good deal, by any relevant measure, especially at a time of crisis like the present. Now is not the time to step back. Missions are needed more than ever.

The UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda—led by Canadian general Roméo Dallaire, pictured Sept. 27, 2018, on the Hill—saved more than 20,000 people during the genocide, despite peacekeeper numbers being reduced to fewer than 300 personnel on the ground. Canada, to its credit, increased its deployment to Rwanda during the genocide, write Walter Dorn and Robin Collins.

Canada's contribution to UN peacekeeping operations has fallen to only [35](#) personnel among the UN's 82,000 uniformed peacekeepers currently deployed. This is the [lowest](#) point for Canada since the first peacekeeping force was created at the urging of (then) foreign minister Lester Pearson in 1956 to resolve the Suez Crisis.

This minimal contribution does not reflect the current government's promises, nor what Canadians want, which is a strong United Nations in a rules-based international order.

Admittedly, the COVID-19 crisis provides a good reason to pause some military movements, and the UN has cautiously postponed its rotation of troops until July. Furthermore, the UN is adjusting and reprioritizing its field activities, while still meeting mission-critical requirements. And many other nations continue to provide substantive contributions. Both Ireland and Norway, our friendly competitors for a Security Council seat, have more personnel deployed than Canada (Ireland: 474; Norway: 65, at the end of April). The European Union is committed to increasing the contributions of its members in the coming months.

The world's success in combating the virus will depend in part on UN peacekeeping because of the urgent need to provide health services in conflict-prone areas. Africa could become the future epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic and a reservoir for its continued spread if an effort is not made now. Peacekeeping requires that capable UN member nations commit dependably, especially to difficult missions.

Despite the comments of skeptics, UN peacekeeping has made a substantial difference in conflict areas and has helped end many wars, as described in our May 2020 essay, [*Peacekeeping Works: The UN Can Help End Civil Wars*](#).

UN peacekeeping is demonstrably cost-effective and has helped save and improve lives.

Multidimensional peacekeeping operations have the most positive outcomes, dealing with a wide range of national problems, including epidemics like Ebola in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

At least two-thirds of all missions since 1956 can be judged as mostly or partially successful. Fewer, if any, were unambiguous failures. But even some of those considered “disasters” have saved many lives. The UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda—led by Canadian general Roméo Dallaire—saved more than 20,000 people during the genocide, despite peacekeeper numbers being reduced to fewer than 300 personnel on the ground. Canada, to its credit, increased its deployment to Rwanda during the genocide.

Canada’s current decline in peacekeeping began under previous governments, despite continuing popular support for UN missions. There have been pressures to commit to alliance (i.e., NATO) priorities, to which Canada has responded far more promptly and generously. But this does not justify the lack of support for UN missions that are known to resolve armed conflicts. Studies show that armed conflicts are reduced by up to two-thirds compared to conflicts without UN involvement, and UN forces deploy at a fraction of the cost of other military missions (e.g., NATO).

Doubling UN peacekeeping budgets alone would result in far less human suffering, fewer infant deaths, better access to hospital care, life-saving potable water, and fewer undernourished people. Imagine the huge financial, economic, and other community benefits that result when conflicted societies end violence early. Now accelerate this with Canada offering significantly more resources and personnel to realize ambitious UN peacekeeping mandates.

UN peacekeeping is a good deal, by any relevant measure, especially at a time of crisis like the present. Now is not the time to step back. Missions are needed more than ever. If anything, Canada should be promoting and contributing to multinational standby brigades and eventually a standing emergency capacity, with UN-hired peacekeepers, thereby proactively pinching off conflicts before they escalate. These are the kind of bold ideas that the UN needs.

At the Mali mission pledging conference this month, Canada should offer forces for the mission, including the Quick Reaction Force this country promised the UN back in 2017, at the peacekeeping ministerial Canada hosted. This may be the last opportunity before the June vote in the General Assembly for a Security Council seat in 2021–22 that our government has been lobbying for. A convincing commitment to UN peacekeeping is the kind of contribution to international peace and security that is expected for the award of one of the ten rotating UNSC seats.

Canada has maintained deployments of hundreds to the NATO missions in Latvia and Ukraine for many years, so why have we so much trouble providing a few hundred soldiers and police to UN missions, even for short periods? It seems a sad reflection on the government. In particular, the performance is at odds with the unfulfilled promises and lofty rhetoric in support of peacekeeping.

We can ask for more. Canada can do better.

***Walter Dorn** is a professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College and the Canadian Forces College. He is also a consultant to the United Nations on peacekeeping technology. He serves as president of the World Federalist Movement–Canada.*

***Robin Collins** serves on the board or in committees of various civil society organizations, including the World Federalist Movement–Canada, the Canadian Pugwash Group, and The Group of 78.*

This article first appeared in The Hill Times on 25 May 2020 and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the authors.