Part 6 of 6: Canada and the call of the Congo

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In this strategic city near the chaotic combat zones of what is often called "the rape capital of the world," the streets are bustling with thousands of United Nations peacekeepers in jeeps and armoured vehicles. Finding the Canadians, however, is a bit more difficult.

To locate the Canadian peacekeepers in Congo, you need to enter a collection of prefab trailers on the shores of Lake Kivu. At the end of a rabbit warren of offices, two Canadian officers are sitting at their desks, working on the mundane realities of garrison construction and soldier training.

There are only a dozen Canadians among the 18,000 members of the world's biggest peacekeeping mission, in one of the world's toughest conflict zones. Despite growing outrage at the mass rapes and murders by rebel militias and government soldiers here, Canada has declined to provide the high-tech military equipment that the peacekeepers need.

The Canadian Armed Forces, battle hardened and highly mobile after years of combat in Afghanistan, possess precisely the advanced technology and logistical skills that could help protect Congo's war-weary civilians. The needs of the UN mission here - light and mobile forces, helicopter capabilities, telecommunications, intelligence gathering, language skills - are exactly the strengths that Canada has developed in Afghanistan and around the world.

While Canadians remain wary of Afghanistan-like combat missions - a Nanos poll for The Globe showed only 21 per cent saw it as an important role for our military - they retain a strong attachment to UN peacekeeping, seen by 52 per cent as important.

It might not be the right moment today to send Canadian troops into Congo. The conflict lacks the political negotiation process and concerted international effort that could lead to an enduring peace. But many experts see Congo as a classic example of the kind of UN mission to which Canada could be contributing after it withdraws its military forces from Afghanistan next year.

It could be a crucial contribution. Aside from the major powers on the UN Security Council, Canada is one of the countries with an expeditionary military capacity, able to respond quickly to crises and conflicts, as it showed in Haiti this year. For many UN missions, this could spell the difference between failure and success.

"After many years in Afghanistan, Canadians are well-trained and well-equipped for participating in Congo or any of the new peacekeeping missions around the world," said Jocelyn Coulon, a military and peacekeeping researcher at the University of Montreal.

"If the mandate is to protect civilians, you need to deploy a robust force that deters the enemy," he said. "Canada could play a role in providing special forces, combat helicopters and human intelligence. The Canadian soldiers have a lot of experience dealing with rebels and insurgency."

Historically, of course, Canada was known as the world's peacekeeping leader. It contributed to almost every mission in the effort's early days. But as it sunk deeper into the Afghanistan conflict over the past five years, Canada has virtually disengaged from UN peacekeeping missions. Among all the world's countries, Canada today ranks just 50th in terms of its contributions to UN-commanded missions.

Of the nearly 100,000 uniformed troops in UN missions around the world, only about 200 are Canadian - less than one-quarter of 1 per cent. More than 90 per cent of Canada's overseas troops are concentrated on the Afghanistan combat mission.

Some of the world's smallest and poorest countries - such as Fiji, Nepal, Benin and Togo - are contributing more troops to peacekeeping operations than Canada. Even the war-torn country of Sierra Leone, where Canada had its own peacekeepers a few years ago, is now contributing more troops to UN operations than Canada.

Canada's neglect of peacekeeping is a product not only of its Afghanistan involvement but also of a belief that UN operations were mismanaged and mishandled. The spectacular failures of several missions in the 1990s - including those in Rwanda, Somalia and Bosnia - certainly reinforced this perception.

But since those fiascos, the UN has drastically reformed its peacekeeping operations, making them tougher and more robust. Its peacekeepers have proven surprisingly successful in recent missions in Cambodia, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Burundi and other places. Over the past decade, 35 new peacekeeping missions have been launched by the UN or other organizations in conflict zones around the world.

The peacekeeping tradition "has gone through astonishing transformation and continues to show surprising vitality," says a report published this year by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. "We are convinced that it is in Canada's national interest to re-engage in peace operations."

The conflict in Congo is often seen as a UN failure. After years of UN peacekeeping efforts, rebels and soldiers are continuing to maraud through the villages of eastern Congo.

But some analysts argue that the UN's failure in Congo is largely due to its chronic shortage of troops and equipment, which are far from sufficient for a vast lawless country. Most of its troops are from poorer countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. "An undersized force, comprised almost entirely of under-equipped soldiers from developing countries, can't do everything," writes Laura Seay, a political scientist and Africa specialist at Morehouse College in Atlanta. "The UN in Congo is burdened with an almost impossible task."

Carolyn McAskie, a former UN official who held senior posts in peacekeeping and peace-building and is now at the University of Ottawa, notes that the 18,000 peacekeepers in Congo are trying to cover an area the size of Afghanistan - a country where 120,000 foreign troops are unable to restore peace. She argues that Canada should provide more troops and equipment to strengthen the Congo operation.

But Canada has repeatedly declined to provide reinforcements for the mission. The latest such decision was in April, when Canada was asked to provide the new commander for the peacekeeping mission. Ottawa said no.

Canada has also declined a number of requests to provide helicopters for the UN operation. One of the few countries providing helicopters to the mission, India, is withdrawing all of its aircraft from Congo over the next several months. This withdrawal "has already begun to have a major impact on the mission's mobility and operational capacity," the UN said in a report this month. It said it had "redoubled" its efforts to find other countries to replace the loss of the Indian helicopters.

Stephen Lewis, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations and former UN special envoy in Africa, believes that Canada could provide crucial assets for the Congo mission.

"The Congo is just desperate for peacekeepers, and Canada is well-suited to make a significant contribution in what is possibly the worst place in the world for women, and one of the worst conflict areas on the planet. It would restore us to the international position that we should hold."

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