Should We Privatize The Peacekeeping?

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With the United Nations' mission to Sierra Leone floundering, and Western nations even more reluctant to contribute troops, there is a need for some alternative way to undertake peacekeeping in Africa. One such solution may be found in the role that the South Africa-based private military company Executive Outcomes (EO) played in Sierra Leone from May 1995 to January 1997.

The United Nations does not like to discuss companies such as EO, shunning them as "mercenaries." But it would be wise to examine their activities in Africa more closely. Indeed, EO's operations in Sierra Leone stand in stark contrast to those of the United Nations. The status of the current mission, UNAMSIL, is being seriously questioned after the deaths of at least four U.N. peacekeepers and the capture of hundreds more. At an estimated cost of $260 million over six months, UNAMSIL is a very expensive mission gone wrong.

EO's actions in Sierra Leone could not be more different from the United Nations'. In the 21 months that it was in Sierra Leone, EO's costs were just $35 million. In that same time period, EO was able to drive back Revolutionary United Front (RUF) troops from around the capital, Freetown, retake key mines from the RUF and destroy the RUF's headquarters. This final act brought Foday Sankoh to the negotiating table; he signed a peace agreement in November 1996 that enabled elections to take place.

To be sure, the fundamental natures of EO and UNAMSIL are diametrically opposed, the latter being an international peacekeeping force, the former a military company hired to fight for the Sierra Leonean government. And EO, in fulfilling its contract with the government, no doubt had a good deal more leeway to do as it saw fit to subdue the RUF than U.N. troops do now.

But its success may also be attributed to its general approach in Sierra Leone. Involvement in Angola in 1993 and 1994 gave EO experience in the kind of "low intensity" conflict that was going on in Sierra Leone. EO used the kamajors, local hunters, in gathering intelligence for its operations, and then used them to occupy captured RUF bases. EO also cooperated with the West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, in many of its operations. This coordination allowed
EO's small force to overwhelm the far more numerous RUF.

There are disadvantages to using a private military company, of course. Its soldiers would not be accountable for their actions in the same way that soldiers in a national army would. Anyone with enough money could bring a private army in on his side. On top of all this, the stigma attached to private military companies means that their use is a public relations disaster waiting to happen.

Yet they could present a remedy to the recent refusals by France, Britain and the United States to send troops to bolster UNAMSIL's forces. These refusals stem in part from the experience in Somalia. No country wishes to embark on a peacekeeping mission and find its troop contribution being sent home in coffins. But the deaths of the soldiers of a private military company, to be blunt, would not cause the same political problem that the deaths of a country's nationals do.

Add to this the fact that military companies still in business (EO closed in 1998), such as the British-based Sandline International, have experience in Africa, and they become a more attractive option. The capabilities of military companies go beyond the provision of combat troops. Sandline is registered with the United Nations' Common Supply Database, and Military Professional Resources was used in the former Yugoslavia in 1994, furnishing 45 border monitors in a contract with the State Department.

The full value of private military companies to the international community will not be seen if the international community is not willing to acknowledge their possibilities. Furthermore, lack of such an acknowledgment will allow the liabilities of military companies to go unchecked, whereas engagement with them could result in better regulation.

It will be a sad testament to the lack of will in the international community if the rebel RUF is able to bring down U.N. peacekeeping in Africa. U.N. member states owe it to the citizens of Sierra Leone to, at the very least, explore all their options, including private military companies.

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