

March 3, 2008

OPINION

Africa's New Peacekeepers

By PETER CHARLES CHOCHARIS

March 3, 2008; Page A16

With the escalating violence in Darfur, the recent admission of the United Nation's Humanitarian coordinator for Sudan that "after five years of conflict" the people there "are simply losing all hope in our ability to keep them safe" has taken on an added dimension of tragedy.

They are not alone. Millions throughout Africa are facing war, mass rape, famine and disease. Yet there is no armed force able to deploy immediately to save them. If the U.N. can't protect them, maybe a private army can.

The suffering in Africa is immense. The Darfur conflict has left 2.5 million displaced and at least 200,000 dead. It's also spilled over to neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic, where rebellions have displaced hundreds of thousands. In Somalia, disease, malnutrition and civil war are endangering more than 1.5 million. In the Congo, fighting has displaced 1.3 million people, and tens of thousands of women have been brutally raped and mutilated.

What has been the international response? An expanded U.N.-African Union peacekeeping mission for Darfur has been delayed yet again until the end of this year because of recruitment shortfalls and the Sudanese government's intransigence. A new European Union-U.N. (EUFOR) mission for Chad and the Central African Republic has been delayed because of the growing insecurity and logistics problems. In Somalia, which the U.N. calls the worst humanitarian crisis in Africa, 1,800 U.N. peacekeepers have been unable to protect aid workers, let alone the 800,000 Somalis who are beyond the reach of relief agencies.

Diplomats, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments have long recognized that the international community lacks the means to prevent conflicts from turning into famine, civil war and other humanitarian disasters. Many have called for a standing rapid reaction force under Security Council auspices to intervene forcibly when necessary to prevent massive loss of life.

And so the U.N. has developed a Standby Arrangement System for member states to commit in advance to supply materiel and personnel for future peacekeeping efforts.

Led by the Danish government, a number of countries formed a multinational brigade to help plan missions.

Yet none of these initiatives has resulted in a force capable of preventing any of Africa's current calamities. And given that all of these measures rely on member countries agreeing to particular missions, resources and responsibilities on a case-by-case basis, it is difficult to see how they will *ever* result in a robust force that can deploy immediately to remote hotspots.

Until the U.N. can overcome these limitations, the Security Council should consider employing contract armed forces to protect civilians and relief workers. These forces would have a very limited mandate to create safe havens for civilians, and would operate only until traditional U.N. peacekeepers can takeover. Because they would be authorized by the Security Council, would not directly take part in hostilities, and would use force only when necessary to protect innocent civilians and relief workers, they would not be mercenaries, which are prohibited by international law.

Standing, privately funded, forces can deploy readily into conflicts without fear of casualties holding up missions. Nor will such forces have to wait for arms and other supplies, the way peacekeepers intended for Darfur have been waiting. Private forces could be multi-ethnic; develop specialized training in peace enforcement; and be subject to quality control standards that are often lacking in many current peacekeeping efforts.

Private forces could also act as a humanitarian force-multiplier. Protected by these forces, NGOs will be able to provide food, water, medical treatment and shelter much more quickly, thereby saving countless more lives. Beyond supplies, providing security to vulnerable civilians can help avert traumas like rape and mutilation that can scar entire societies and make national reconciliation more difficult.

As the experience of Blackwater and other private security forces in Iraq demonstrates, relying on contract armed forces presents a number of difficult challenges, including oversight and accountability. But current peacekeeping efforts are not immune from such problems. A few months ago, a U.N. task force found that fraud and mismanagement in peacekeeping operations had cost more than \$600 million, and that the corruption and waste stretched from U.N. headquarters in New York to Congo and other remote missions.

Besides, whatever the problems posed by private, U.N.-backed armed forces, none would be worse than standing by while hundreds of thousands of Africans die.

Mr. Choharis was an emergency relief worker for UNICEF in Sudan and is the founder of Choharis Global Solutions, an international law and consulting firm.