

Originally published as

Cosgrave, Mike, Boots on the Ground: *Defence Forces Review*, 2008 (Dublin, PR Section, COS Branch, 2008) pp 65-70 ISSN 1649-7066

Introduction

Since the first mission of Lebanon in 1958, (UNOGIL) the experience of Irish peacekeepers has been varied and disparate. The Defence forces have put boots on the ground from Cyprus to Timor to Namibia to El Salvador. The number of troops deployed has ranged from as low as 2 to some missions to many thousands in Congo and Lebanon. The range of tasks undertaken has varied from simple observation, through classic interpositional peacekeeping to election observation and humanitarian assistance, like rebuilding roads, schools, hospitals and wells. In spite of the diversity of the Irish experience of peacekeeping, there are some issues which appear regularly, and some themes about which we may usefully generalise.

In almost every operation which Irish troops have participated in, there have been critical locations which serve as focal points for the mission. Identifying the centre of gravity of the mission area, and understanding why certain locations are significant is important. In many cases, these are key points in the communications network. These are important not only as a means to control the mobility of the UN force, the flow of supplies or the movement of journalists or refugees but also a critical part of the legitimacy game for the various actors.

In the Congo, distances were huge – the new state was the size of western Europe. While the River and railways were essential for moving goods in bulk, the UN depended on air transport to get in and around the Congo. Elisabethville Airport was Katanga's main link with the rest of the world. Initially the Katangese sought to prevent ONUC personnel from landing there at all. Throughout August 1960, Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld's efforts centred around getting permission for any plane carrying UN troops to land there. After ONUC crossed that hurdle and established itself in Katanga, the Katangese made several efforts to regain control of the airport or to control the routes from the airport into the city. A key mistake was made by the Katangese when they sought to assert their right to mount checkpoints on routes to the airport, and effectively confine ONUC to its bases. In so doing, they challenged the UN force which by then had a strengthened mandate which permitted the peacekeepers to use force to maintain their freedom of movement, to a round of fighting which exposed the hollowness of the Katangese forces when deprived of the core of mercenaries which had formerly stiffened them¹.

In Cyprus, the key port of Famagusta was a major issue in the first days of the operation². The port was the main entry point for bulk cargo for the island. Closure of the port not only posed problems for imports, but was also provided an early example of the 'CNN effect' with Archbishop Makarios' inability to control the Greek Cypriot side being held up to scrutiny against the photogenic background of the walls of the old town. Since Greek and Turkish workers had formerly worked side by side on the docks before the Turks had fled to their homes in the Old Town, it was diplomatically important for the Greek Cypriots to get it back open on that basis again in order to avoid being seen to be in the wrong³.

1 Unit History, 35th Infantry Battalion, pp 20-22, 36th Infantry Battalion, pp 1-4

2 Unit History, 40th Infantry Battalion, pp 29-37

3 Unit History, 40th Infantry Battalion, pp 38-39

In Lebanon, while Beirut airport was outside the UNIFIL area of operations, its functioning was a key indicator of the power of the government – as long as the fighting in the city did not close the Airport, and diplomats and journalists could get on regular flights, the government could legitimately claim there was a degree of stability. In other operations, like Somalia, security of food aid through the port at Mogadishu was central to the UN operation, until events moved the focus to the person of General Aideed. In Liberia, Sierra Leone and Chad, ports and airports similarly become central to the success or failure of the operation. In fact, since many 'second generation' peace operations take place in lesser developed states, the very poverty of the infrastructure is often a contributor to the crisis. If there is only one major entry-point into the state, the single major city forms around it and whatever ethnic group happens to live at the wrong end of the state, farthest from the port or airport, is isolated and economically disadvantaged.

If the major urban centre holds the major entry port, it is also usually home to major government offices and broadcast media, such as it is. Possession of the government buildings and the radio station, while they might count for little in terms of real power, are important symbols of political legitimacy. In this, the value of terrain in peace operations differs considerably from the worth attached to the same terrain in conventional military operations.

In the Congo, as long as Tshombe could hold on in Elisabethville, living in the official presidential residence and broadcasting his version of events, he could claim to be the government. As soon as he fled from the city, and lost control of the symbols of governance, his regime collapsed⁴. The speed of this collapse, and the lack of any concerted resistance thereafter exposed how hollow the Katangan Government was. In Cyprus, when the crisis came to the Security Council, limits on Turkish Cypriot access to the public meetings of Security Council to present their case during the debates on Resolution 186 allowed them leverage to argue against the legitimacy of UN actions when it suited them. In Lebanon, the complexity of the states powersharing constitution means that there are a number of offices which allow different groups to accumulate political capital.

It is not uncommon across many cultures for possession of political office to count for 'nine-tenths of the law'. In some states, this simply means generally allowing the respect due to the office to rub off on the office holder, and allowing him or her the benefit of the doubt. In other cultures, possession of political office is seen as conferring ownership of the state. The UN is an organisation of states, and while that position may be evolving, it still means that possession of the appearance of political legitimacy confers advantages on a party to a conflict in a failed or weak state.

Even though the phrase 'Second Generation Peacekeeping' is usually taken to refer to peace operations in such 'failed states' in the post cold war period, most operations involve elements of 'second generation' challenges, especially during the deployment phase.

ONUC is generally accepted to be the 'second generation' operation of the Cold War era – it took place in a weak or failed state with periods when there was no legitimate or effective host government and left the UN force stuck in the middle of what was effectively a civil war. The lack of discipline among the Armee Nationale Congolaise, and the presence of various non-state armed forces and foreign mercenary fighters are all part of the 'second generation' landscape'. Since ONUC was seen as problematic at best, and branded an outright failure by many, the UN sought to steer clear of similarly complex situations and stick to classic 'interpositional' peacekeeping during the Cold War⁵.

Cyprus is generally regarded as a classic interpositional peace operation but in the early years it

4 Unit History, 39th Infantry Battalion, p 1

5 Diehl, Paul 'International Peacekeeping, p. 97; Hillen, p 172, James, Alan, *Peacekeeping in International Politics*, (London, 1990) p 296

certainly bore many of the hallmarks of second generation operations. While the UN was formally invited in on the request of the government, that Government had clearly broken down, and not only did it no longer command the respect of the Turkish Cypriot community, but there was a questionmark over the ability of Archbishop Makarios to control, or even to know what members of his government were planning. While the Greek Cypriot National Guard was, at least nominally organised, and uniformed, they were only barely subject to the normal chain of command and were supplemented by armed civilians in every village. On the Turkish side, most of the fighters were irregulars, many of them apparently university students who had come over from the mainland to join the fighting⁶. Repatriation of fighters on both sides back to their respective home countries, resorption of basic infrastructure and working out a modus vivendi between the two communities took several years. It was not until the end of 1968⁷ that the situation stabilised into its present shape, with the UN force holding a line between the two communities, effectively freezing in place a situation which still awaits a political situation.

In Lebanon, of course, the procession of factions, militias and armed groups is so chaotic as to defy clear description. PLO, PLFP, Amal, Hezbollah, DFF, AE, LAUI, SLA – the catalogue is without end. UN reports, striving to be neutral, tried initially to refer to all of these as 'Armed Elements' (AE), a label which means different groups from time to time, which makes deciphering UN documents on the conflict more complicated. While there was a *de jure* government in Lebanon at the time UNIFIL was established, it was in the throes of a civil war and had limited real powers. The ostensible reason why the Government of Lebanon appealed to the Security Council – the need to secure Israeli withdrawal and provide an interpositional force along the border – was a clear first generation mission in the manner of many other forces in the region. The reality however was that right from the start UNIFIL was a second generation mission, operating in an environment with weak central government, multiple armed factions in conflict and a resulting humanitarian crisis which ebbed and flowed throughout the mission.

A common thread running through these operations is the centrality of ethnic divisions. This is quite obvious in Cyprus and Lebanon, but perhaps less so in the Congo. In the Congo, the ostensible division was between those who favoured a strong central government and those who advocated a federal constitution. Those political labels can however be peeled away like the layers of an onion. The division between centralists and federalists generally matched a left-right split on the political spectrum, with advocates of strong central government tending to be at least slightly left of centre, and very much so in the case of Lumumba and his followers, although US assertions that they were puppets of Moscow were unfounded. Behind the political theory, however, there was an economic issue – while the centralists wanted to redistribute the nation's wealth to further economic development throughout the Congo, the federalists were identified with the provinces which were richer in natural resources and wanted to retain as much of their wealth in the provinces as possible. Not surprisingly, they were often closely associated with western mining interests who advised and bankrolled their political activities. Within the most troubled provinces – South Kasai and Katanga – the 'federalists' were, in fact, identified almost entirely with particular ethnic groups or tribal coalitions, and they did seek to exclude other groups from power and access to resources. Thus, in Katanga, the Balubas, who mostly lived in the poorer, northern end of the province, were the losers. Their political arm, BALUBAKAT, lost out to Tshombe's mostly Tchwoke CONAKAT, and his provincial government used force against the Balubas. In the north, Balubas assumed that all white military personnel were part of the mercenary force which formed the core of Tshombe's Gendarmerie while in Elisabethville itself, ONUC had to protect Baluba refugee camps from the Gendarmerie. At the heart of the matter, in Katanga, it is possible to generalise that political positions were adopted not out of ideological beliefs but because of ethnic divisions.

6 Unit history, 5th Infantry Group, pp 24-25

7 Unit History, 21st Infantry Group, p. 7

The Congo, Cyprus and Lebanon are problematic because all three states are badly designed relics of nineteenth century colonialism. The Belgian Congo was created by the 'Great Powers' at the Congress of Berlin in 1885 as a gigantic buffer zone in Central Africa. It was never a positive state, but was always a negative space, neutralised because no one wanted to take the risk that some other power might gain control over it. It was handed over to Leopold of Belgium as the largest private estate in history because he, like little Belgium, was mostly harmless. Its borders were drawn, not on the basis that they represented any meaningful unit, but simply because they represented the limits of what the other powers had already grabbed in the 'Scramble for Africa'

Lebanon had some minimal historic identity as a region, and there had been revolts against Turkish in some parts of Lebanon which had nodded in the direction of nationalism, but it was never a cultural or ethnic unit with a clear national identity. It did include two groups – the Maronite Christians and the Druse – who would certainly disappear in a Greater Syrian state. Both of those groups did possess a sufficiently distinctive history and culture to have a clear identity. Most importantly, they were able to win the favour of the French colonial regime – indeed France, living up to her former role as the most Catholic nation, had actively intervened to protect the Maronites in the eighteen-sixties. France was therefore willing to foster the development of a Lebanese state which would include the Maronites and the Druse, and unfortunately, since the ethnic geography was not simple, a significant Muslim minority. To make this work, the French devised a power-sharing constitution which was excellent in theory but which could only work in practice with goodwill on all sides. Even as the Vichy French generously granted Lebanon independence in 1943, local politics were already beginning to unravel.

If the French were happy to get out of Lebanon and Syria in 1943, Britain was certainly happier to hand over its Cyprus problem to the UN in 1964. Cyprus, part of the Ottoman Empire from 1571, was ruled by Britain since 1878 and has clear, distinctive Greek and Turkish communities with strong national identities. Prior to formal independence in 1960, the Turkish minority had been favoured under both Turkish and British rule. Both communities had national aspirations for political union with their respective mother countries, aims which were clearly incompatible. Like Lebanon, Cyprus was given a power-sharing Constitution which was the fairest possible theoretical solution to giving both communities a fair share in Government. In practice, it proved impossible to operate – in fact, it was never fully implemented because provisions for a multi-ethnic army and police, and the appointment of officials in proportion to the size of the communities, became the immediate source of countless minor disputes.

In classic peace operations, it has become the convention for the UN to request troop providing nations to provide Battalion sized contingents which usually function within the force as independent entities. Other states who do not provide 'front line' contingents provide logistic support units. However, in many cases the practice has not been as neat as the theory, and as a result, Irish units have gained through peace operations, varied experience of functioning as part of multinational units at several levels.

In ONUC, because of the size of the force which peaked at the equivalent of almost 2 Infantry divisions, and the distances involved, it was necessary to organise the force into what were effectively multinational Brigades. While in some cases this was simply administrative convenience, it was often an operational structure – Irish, Swedish and Indian battalions held brigade level meetings at which operational plans were agreed⁸. While in Rumpunch and Morthor, each unit seems to have focussed on their own patch, it also appears that in some of the later fighting in Elisabethville and during the mopping up of the Katangese, Battalions from different national contingents teamed up worked together, either working both sides of a road or leapfrogging

⁸ Unit History 36th Infantry Battalion, p 4, Unit History, 38th Infantry Battalion, p 80

each other to maintain the pace of the pursuit of the fleeing Gendarmes⁹. Units also worked together at sub-battalion level. Thus several Irish Cavalry Squadrons worked with other nations in Stanleyville, while in Katanga Irish mortar companies provided fire support for other contingents from time to time¹⁰. In Cyprus, co-operation with police contingents from other nations was the norm for Irish battalions, while 40th Battalion even had to pleasure of taking A Squadron, Life Guards under command for a period¹¹. In Lebanon, Irish troops provided training for other contingents while Irish Military Police and EOD teams worked with contingents from different nations frequently and easily.

Conclusion

It has now become all too common to talk of 'statebuilding' and 'nationbuilding' in 'failed states' as if the two terms were casually interchangeable. It is also common to toss out the term 'failed states' without recognising that for some states, failure is the norm which was briefly papered over for a generation during the Cold War. In many cases these states failed because they were the heirs to a colonial legacy which bound several nations in one state. What is remarkable is how often there was an effort to resolve these problems by creating complex constitutional mechanisms which proved unworkable in practice. It has also become commonplace to identify 'second generation' peacekeeping as almost entirely a post-cold war phenomenon and to assume that peacekeepers prior to 1989 went on tidy interpositional missions in neat battalion groups¹². What I have tried to suggest here is that a more complex multinational response to multi-ethnic conflicts has long been part of UN Peace Operations and the focus on the novelty of the post-Cold war environment meant that many lessons from the preceding years were disregarded. After 1989, all may well have been changed, but it was in not by any means changed utterly in the small wars of peace.

9 Unit History, 38th Infantry Battalion, pp 71-80

10 Unit History, 2nd Armoured Car Squadron, p. 2; Unit History, 3rd Armoured Car Squadron, Unit history, 38th Infantry Battalion p 2

11 Unit History, 40th Infantry Battalion, p 22

12 Diehl, p 183, Boutros-Ghali, Boutros, *An Agenda for Peace* A/47/277 – S/244111 17 June 1992 – see Paras 2,3 and 47-50 which assert the novel nature of the post-Cold War environment.