

UNEPS Backgrounder



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Time for a United Nations Emergency Peace Service

In his January 2009 report on “Implementing the Responsibility to Protect,” United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pointed to a critical deficiency in the UN’s ability to respond in a timely and decisive manner when forceful measures are required. He said:

“Despite years of study and public discussion, the United Nations is still far from developing the kind of rapid-response military capacity most needed to handle the sort of unfolding atrocity crimes referred to in Paragraph 139 of the [2005] Summit Outcome. I appreciate the efforts by a number of Member States to consider the components of such a capacity, including doctrine, training and command-and-control issues. Much more needs to be done, however, to internationalize such efforts and put them in the larger context of finding better ways to protect civilians.”¹

For nearly as long as the UN has been doing peacekeeping there have been proposals for improvements to overcome such challenges as the slow or incomplete mission deployments that accompany the present standby arrangements.

Earlier formulations calling for a UN “standing army” or permanent “rapid reaction force” have given way

to the idea of a more integrated “peace service,” mirroring the evolution in UN peace operations that now brings military personnel together with a wider range of civilian, police, judicial, governance, humanitarian, development and human rights actors.

Key Characteristics

A UNEPS is specifically designed to help with:

1. The prevention of armed conflict;
2. Stopping genocide and mass atrocity crimes;
3. Protecting civilians at extreme risk;
4. Ensuring prompt start-up of demanding peace operations; and,
5. Addressing human needs in areas where others cannot.

As proposed, it is to be:

- A permanent, integrated UN formation;
- A highly trained and well-equipped first-responder (‘UN 911’);
- Ready for immediate deployment upon authorization of the UN Security Council;
- Multifunctional and multidimensional (civilians, police and military);
- Composed of 16,000 dedicated personnel (recruited professionals, selected, trained and employed by the UN);
- Co-located at a designated UN base under an operational headquarters and

¹ A/63/677, Implementing the Responsibility to Protect, Report of the Secretary-General, Section IV, on “Pillar three: Timely and Decisive Response,” para 64.

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two mobile mission headquarters;

- At sufficient deterrent strength to operate in most high-threat environments; and
- A service to complement existing UN and regional arrangements.

A UNEPS would be paid for from the UN regular budget. Estimates of the cost of the Emergency Service vary, but start-up expenses could be as high as \$2 to \$3 billion. Annual recurring costs would be approximately \$1 billion. These costs would be shared among 192 member states and while these estimates may seem high, they should be considered in the broader context of a more effective United Nations. By comparison with the military expenditures of many UN member states, the cost of a UNEPS is modest. And a UNEPS would undoubtedly reduce the costs to “the system” from conflicts that could have been prevented or mitigated at earlier stages but weren’t. Over time the effect of UNEPS could well be fewer failed states, but certainly at a minimum the need for fewer more expensive, traditional peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations.



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In addition to more timely and effective deployment of peace operations, a UN Emergency Peace Service would enhance the legitimacy and consistency of Responsibility to Protect “third pillar” responses. It would provide an additional tool for the prevention of armed conflict, as well as UN collaborative arrangements with regional organizations. It would also strengthen the UN’s efforts to promote adherence to standardized doctrine and best practice by peacekeepers



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The way forward

Although the need for such a standing capacity is clear, a political consensus in favour of the creation of a UN Emergency Peace Service remains elusive. While a comprehensive, integrated UN Emergency Peace Service as described here remains the goal of progressive civil society and governments, it is also possible that the development of a UNEPS will be evolutionary and incremental. For example, the 2015 report of the Commission on Global Security, Justice and Governance calls for a 400-person standing UN Police Standing Capacity; and the UN High-level Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) has identified the need for a United Nations “vanguard capability” to allow the UN to insert a quickly responding military capability into a new or existing mission area. The HIPPO also called for creation of a standby Rapidly Deployable Military Headquarters.

Discussions in 2016 of the UN’s peace operations machinery and peacebuilding architecture demonstrate a widespread recognition of the need to do better. This is a necessary first step toward providing the financial and political support necessary. A new Secretary-General beginning in 2017 may find circumstances more opportune to support standing capacities, such as a UN Emergency Peace Service.