

International Day of UN Peacekeepers: 29 May 2019

Introduction

This briefing has been prepared to mark the United Nations' International Day of UN Peacekeepers on 29 May 2019. The date was chosen to commemorate the first UN peacekeeping mission in Palestine in 1948. The UN stated that the day pays tribute to “the professionalism, dedication and courage of all the men and women serving in UN peacekeeping organisations, and honours the memory of those who have lost their lives in the cause of peace”.¹ It said that more than 3,700 peacekeepers have lost their lives serving under the UN flag since 1948, including 129 in 2018.²

History of UN Peacekeeping

The theme for the 2019 day is “70 years of service and sacrifice”. Since 1948, more than a million people have served as UN peacekeepers in more than 70 operations.³ The UN described how these operations have changed over the years; initial operations were limited to “maintaining ceasefires and stabilising situations on the ground”, using only military observers and “lightly armed troops”. In contrast, the UN says that its current operations are “multidimensional”, still including maintaining peace and security, but also facilitating political processes, disarming combatants, supporting elections, protecting and promoting human rights and restoring the rule of law.⁴

In 1988, UN peacekeeping forces were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.⁵ The Nobel Prize Committee stated that:

The UN forces represent the manifest will of the community of nations to achieve peace through negotiations, and the forces have, by their presence, made a decisive contribution towards the initiation of actual peace negotiations.⁶

In accepting the award, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, described the technique of peacekeeping as to use soldiers “as the servants of peace rather than as the instruments of war”.⁷

Currently, more than 100,000 personnel serve in 14 operations. They are drawn from 125 countries and 14 percent of them are civilians, with the remainder coming from the military or police forces.⁸ The current operations include Haiti in the Americas, India/Pakistan in Asia, Kosovo in Europe and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Africa.⁹

Review of UN Peacekeeping Operations

In March 2018, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, launched an initiative to review the challenges facing its peacekeeping forces.¹⁰ He said that these included “complex threats”, such as terrorists who have access to modern weapons, and “mandates that lack focus and clear priorities”.¹¹

His stated aim was to develop a set of “mutually agreed principles and commitments to create peacekeeping operations fit for the future”. The initiative is known as ‘action for peacekeeping’ (A4P).

As part of this process, in August 2018 the Secretary-General published a ‘declaration of shared commitments’.¹² Amongst other points, the declaration committed to: peacekeeping operations being guided by “the pursuit of sustainable political solutions”; measures to tackle the rise in peacekeeper fatalities; engaging local populations in peacekeeping activities; and holding personnel and leadership accountable for proper conduct.¹³ The declaration has been endorsed by over 150 countries, including the UK.¹⁴

However, Richard Gowan, an academic focusing on international relations and conflict management, commented that the declaration included two “quite different visions” of how peacekeeping should operate, which he stated reflect a “cultural divide” at the UN.¹⁵ The first, he suggested, was the “diplomat’s view” that the UN should focus on the “intergovernmental framework for mandating and managing missions”. The second was prioritising the “political and operational dilemmas of life in the field”. He stated that “scholars working on peace operations highlight the growing gap in political priorities between headquarters and the field as an obstacle to effective peacekeeping”.¹⁶ He concluded that while the A4P process was an opportunity to overcome these divisions, there is “a significant risk that, having briefly reviewed and discarded A4P, the [UN] Security Council will simply continue business as usual”.

UK Policy

In its 2015 strategic defence and security review, the UK Government reiterated its support for UN peacekeeping initiatives, as well as for those of the African Union and the European Union. It stated that it would double the number of military personnel that it contributes to UN operations.¹⁷ It also committed to establishing a cross-departmental UN Peacekeeping Policy Unit to formulate UK policy.¹⁸

In July 2018, the Minister for the Armed Forces, Mark Lancaster, stated that the UK had exceeded the commitment on forces, with the numbers involved in UN operations rising from 300 in 2015 to 670 in 2018.¹⁹ In March 2018, a report on the implementation of the strategic defence and security review noted that the UK was the sixth largest financial contributor to UN.²⁰ The UN Peacekeeping Policy Unit began work in November 2016.²¹

During a debate on the role of reconciliation in British foreign, defence and international development policy in the House of Lords in December 2019, several contributors referred to the role of UN peacekeepers.²² In responding to the debate, the Minister of State for Defence, Lord Howe, stated that as well as increasing its direct involvement in UN operations, the UK trains and mentors peacekeeping teams from other countries.²³ He described a shift in the UN’s role, from “policing a brokered peace settlement” to “the enforced separation of warring factions”. He also said that the UK was actively promoting the A4P initiative.²⁴

Further Reading

- House of Lords Library, [Reconciliation in British Foreign, Defence and International Development Policy](#), 29 November 2018

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- ¹ United Nations, '[International Day of UN Peacekeepers: Background](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ² United Nations, '[International Day of UN Peacekeepers: Home](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ³ United Nations, '[United Nations Peacekeeping: 70 Years of Service and Sacrifice](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ United Nations, '[United Nations Peacekeeping Forces: The Nobel Peace Prize for 1988](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ⁶ Nobel Prize, '[The Nobel Peace Prize 1988](#)', 29 September 1988.
- ⁷ Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, '[United Nations Peacekeeping Forces: Acceptance Speech](#)', Nobel Prize, 10 December 1988.
- ⁸ United Nations, '[United Nations Peacekeeping: 70 Years of Service and Sacrifice](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ⁹ United Nations, '[United Nations Peacekeeping](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ¹⁰ United Nations, '[Secretary-General's Remarks to Security Council High-level Debate on Collective Action to Improve UN Peacekeeping Operations](#)', 28 March 2018.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, and United Nations, '[Action for Peacekeeping \(A4P\)](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ¹² United Nations, '[Action for Peacekeeping \(A4P\)](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ¹³ United Nations, '[Action for Peacekeeping: Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations](#)', 16 August 2018.
- ¹⁴ United Nations, '[Action for Peacekeeping \(A4P\)](#)', accessed 27 March 2019.
- ¹⁵ Richard Gowan, '[The Politics of Action for Peacekeeping](#)', UN University Centre for Policy Research, 19 February 2019.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ UK Government, '[National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015](#)', November 2015, Cm 9161, p 60.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p 84.
- ¹⁹ [HC Hansard, 9 July 2018, col 699.](#)
- ²⁰ UK Government, '[National Security Capability Review](#)', March 2018, p 44.
- ²¹ UK Government, '[National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: First Annual Report 2016](#)', December 2016, p 33.
- ²² [HL Hansard, 14 December 2019, cols 1519–82.](#)
- ²³ *ibid.*, col 1576.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, col 1577.

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