

UNOSOM II: Could Technology Have Made a Difference? 8

OPERATION WAS FAR FROM A FAILURE

It is commonly believed that the UN effort in Somalia was a failure of policy or simply too hard a problem given the unwillingness of nations to sacrifice more to get that failed country back on its feet. In fact, much was accomplished in Somalia. Thousands were saved from starvation and disease. Time was bought for various Somali elements to reconcile or, failing that, to better protect themselves in semi-autonomous clan regions. Clearly, however, the costs to the UN and participating nations were too high. The ambitious Security Council objectives of restoring some sort of transitional government, basic services, a nearly sustainable economy, and law and order in the hands of legitimate Somali authorities were not achieved.

In reviewing the UN experience in Somalia, it is often overlooked that the means available to the UN mission were not equal to the tasks assigned by the Security Council. The UN was so unready for that complex peace enforcement and nation building operation that it is difficult to make a valid judgment about what might have been possible with proper preparation, resources, and technology.

A frustrating UN attempt to use a small force (UNOSOM 1) under Chapter VI (of the UN Charter) limitations was one of the reasons that a large coalition spearheaded by the United States (UNITAF) was authorized in December 1993. But in relieving UNITAF in May 1994, UNOSOM II clearly was not ready for the stresses of a Chapter VII operation. Such a mandate recognizes the potential need to use force to achieve its goals and implies that there may be armed opposition. Two years later the UN is still not ready for similar operations.

by

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The post-Cold War period has unleashed a number of instabilities, many of which are ethnically based and internally centered. These very complex situations require a skillfully applied mix of political, humanitarian, and military resources. Whether under Chapter VI or VII, a peacekeeping mission needs to minimize the use of force whenever possible and to take extra precautions to avoid collateral damage. It is important to maintain the support of the majority of the population, whose good will is essential to any recovery, even if force must be used against troublemakers.

However, in many situations ahead this new world disorder will require determination, commitment, and readiness to use force. Often the UN will face obstructionists who have no interest in reasonable solutions to conflicts. Coercion or the recognition that force could be used will be necessary to convince them to cooperate with international authorities. This has been true in the case of external aggression (e.g., Iraq's invasion of Kuwait), and the internal disintegration of countries with growing anarchy and humanitarian catastrophes (e.g., ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, genocide in Rwanda, and manmade starvation in Somalia).

CAN PEACEKEEPING BE ACCOMPLISHED BY THE UN?

Some veteran peacekeepers believe it is impossible for the UN to use force without seeming to be taking sides among disputing groups. Others would oppose the use of a technological advantage if it gave the appearance of being "unfair." It is argued by some that peacekeepers should be unarmed or only lightly armed and that any fighting should be on a near even playing field. These arguments may have some merit in unusual circumstances, but generally technology should be exploited to its full advantage to prevent casualties to peacekeepers, to minimize damage to opponents, and to convey a clear message to those who would oppose a UN operation that cooperation is the only sensible alternative.

Technology can help minimize forces required as well make an emphatic point.

The similarity of recent problems faced by peacekeepers in differing situations around the world is striking. Many of the problems encountered by the UN mission in Somalia, for example, were similar to those experienced by other missions in Cambodia and Bosnia.

In Somalia, the challenges were more political than technical, more dependent on commitment and perseverance of nations than on technique and technology. Nonetheless, it is likely that with better technical capabilities the story would have been different. This paper briefly examines the problems associated with a hastily organized international military force in Somalia, and then considers where technology might have made a difference given the tasks that needed to be accomplished.

THE CHALLENGE OF A CHAPTER VII UN FORCE

In its first Chapter VII operation in a failed nation, the UN developed a force along the familiar lines of Chapter VI. However in conducting an operation in which consent from various contesting factions might not be obtainable (nor was it a prerequisite for entry of the UN), the force needed a high degree of political and military cohesion. Organized opposition quickly exposes weaknesses and requires greater mutual protection, cooperation, integration and unity.

In preparing for this peacemaking force, the UN solicited countries from a wide range of backgrounds and capabilities. Nations that normally are rivals (e.g., Pakistan and India) were thrown together and expected to cooperate. By way of contrast, the NATO alliance has many political and military weaknesses, but it has prepared for potential combat through forty years of training exercises and has developed political and military procedures for coordinating and unifying the policy interests of nations. In addition, it is an alliance of nations with shared values and is designed to defend the territory of its nations, not for intervention in other parts of the world.

■ Participating Units and Equipment Varied Significantly

For UNOSOM II, some thirty nations were brought together in small units. Desert Storm and the UNITAF part of the Somalia operation were benefited by a single dominant unifying force. The United States provided the overwhelming bulk of the military strength. When UNITAF left Somalia, responsibilities shifted from a superpower to a weak and diverse international organization.

Almost all of the nations involved limited what their troops could do, where they could work (e.g., some refused to be located in Mogadishu), and how they would react to various situations. Nations frequently rotated their units, delayed for months in sending promised troops and arbitrarily pulled them out on short notice. The UN military commander was frequently unable to move ahead with strategic plans because of the need to cover gaps of departing units or readjust the disposition of forces.

The state of training and quality of equipment of various units varied significantly. In trying to find replacements, UN headquarters in New York tended to simply count numbers of troops. But one is not equal to one when evaluating soldiers. Some units simply did not have the training to do what the Force Commander required. For example, they were uncomfortable patrolling at night or expanding the perimeters around compounds to help prevent short range mortar attacks.

When heavier or more capable equipment was urgently requested by the commander, the UN was dependent on nations for immediate results. It had no reserve of its own to draw on in emergencies. After the attacks of June 5, 1993 against the Pakistani force, for example, the Security Council called for member states urgently to contribute “armored personnel carriers, tanks and attack helicopters.” More than a month later when eight old M-48 tanks finally arrived for the Pakistanis, their breach blocks were inoperative.

From ammunition to maintenance to language, interoperability of this force assembled from all over the world was a continuing chal-

lenge. Such problems are to be expected. But an even more difficult problem is the inherent tendency of nations to micro-manage their units from distant capitals. It is understandable that nations would want to control their units facing dangerous situations, but this inclination presents a nearly insurmountable obstacle for a commander trying to marshal limited resources and to implement a coherent strategy. On one occasion a unit was stopped by its capital from counterattacking in mid-battle. Instead of receiving an important message, the “enemy” was emboldened. Some units were even suspected of colluding with opponents of the United Nations, at least to the extent of providing them a de facto sanctuary.

Another problem was that each nation seemed to have a different political threshold for casualties. No nation had an easy time justifying casualties in what is basically a humanitarian situation, but some seemed to believe that Chapter VII still meant a relatively risk free operation. When it did not, the result was often inaction, accommodation, or departure. This series of reactions produced a much less effective force. Given how the force in Somalia had been assembled, expectations should not have been high that it could accomplish much if tested. The UN demonstrated that it is not yet ready for Chapter VII peace enforcement operations.

TASKS FOR TECHNOLOGY

With more effective technology, the tasks faced by UN military forces could have been made easier and might have helped produce better outcomes. However, for the most part, the UN did not face overwhelming, sustained, or even skillfully executed attacks. Somalia has a large land area but a relatively small population. Although there were different types of challenges throughout the country, most of the opposition was limited to part of the capital city. The tactics used against the international force were typical of guerrilla warfare in many areas of the world. Nonetheless, in an urban setting such as Mogadishu these tactics can be difficult to combat

even with a well-trained force. The following are some of the requirements of the UNOSOM II forces that could have been met more effectively with better technology.

■ Good Intelligence

In order to do their jobs, military commanders needed to be able to detect the movement of opposing forces, determine the locations of hidden arms stockpiles, and anticipate the plans of those who might attack the UN. In trying to control a city at night and to ensure that various transportation routes remained open and were not used for smuggling arms into the city or relocating militias, twenty-four-hour surveillance was necessary. Helicopters were the best means for active reconnaissance in the city, but these were not always available. Commanders requested the support of remotely piloted vehicles that could maintain good coverage over a sustained period. These might have provided a better picture around the clock, but were never made available.

Intelligence, of course, was also critical to the civilian effort to understand the political situation and to facilitate the complex reconciliation process between multiple factions and clans.

■ Frustrating Attacks

Related to good intelligence was the need to be a step ahead of the opposition and to anticipate their moves. When confronted with periodic random attacks such as ambushes and mortar attacks, it is important to prepare for them by taking proper defensive measures. Those in the military compounds were subjected to frequent mortar and rifle-propelled grenades (RPG) shelling, and had to sprint from soft Quonset huts and tents to makeshift shelters. Civilians, as well as military personnel, were equipped with flak jackets and helmets, but were constantly at risk.

Early warning helped, but it was often incorrect or unavailable. Warning also allows more effective countermeasures and provides an opportunity to disrupt attacks before they are launched. This, however, requires good intelli-

gence and the ability to evaluate, disseminate, and react rapidly. In an unsophisticated society very ancient means of collection need to be fused with the most modern methods.

■ Protecting People

A constant worry in Somalia was how to protect UN civilians and international relief workers. Protection from shelling was just one of the dangers they encountered. Civilian vulnerability was the Achilles' heel of the operation. Their safety was paramount if the job of facilitating the recovery of the country was to be accomplished. Military units were organized, had the training and means to protect themselves, and faced danger as part of their responsibilities. Civilians, on the other hand, were often assigned to remote areas where there were no nearby military forces or lived in compounds that did not have military protection. This made them vulnerable to criminals and to those trying to disrupt UN operations for political reasons. Locally hired guards were of uncertain reliability. There were frequent accusations that guards hired by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) protected them by day and robbed them by night.

In the case of civilians living outside the military compounds in Mogadishu, it was decided in mid-May, before the attacks of June 5, 1993, that the best way to improve their security was to deploy a Nepalese Gurkha battalion. Eventually a civilian protection service, which could give some assurance of the reliability of locally trained Somalis, would be hired. In spite of the urgency of this need, it was four months before the first Gurkhas arrived and protection improved for the civilians. This was typical of the unresponsiveness of the UN system to pressing needs in the field.

Fortunately, only one UN civilian was lost. Ironically, this came after the cessation of hostilities and resulted from a carjacking attempt by common criminals. Clearly, there need to be ways of reducing the individual risks to these courageous men and women.

■ Protecting Fixed Installations

Fixed positions and facilities required sensors that would give early warning of attacks or of the nearly continuous criminal activity. Night vision was essential, but very few UN units were trained in it and very little equipment was provided. There was every reason for the UN to control the night, but it did not have the training or equipment to do so.

Light mortars shelled UN facilities on many evenings, wounding civilians and military alike, damaging unprotected helicopters on the ground, and contributing to a sense of vulnerability and insecurity. Mortars would be pulled from vans and quickly set up; after a few shells were fired the attackers would speed away. Greater vigilance at check points and more active patrols outside the perimeter would have helped make it more difficult to reach the compounds with short ranged mortars and with other weapons such as RPGs.

There was also concern that terrorist raids would be initiated from inside. Large Somali trucks visited the compounds daily to bring supplies or to pump water or fuel; workers entered by the hundreds for construction or other services. Truck bombs could easily have been brought into the compounds. Gate inspection procedures were tightened, but this is not easy to accomplish in a multi-cultural organization. Technology would have improved detection possibilities.

■ Crowd Control

A favorite opposition tactic was to stage a demonstration and attempt to provoke peacekeepers. Women and children would be deliberately mixed into organized crowds to complicate the problem of control. A classic example was on June 13, 1993, when a demonstration was staged in front of a Pakistani strong point. Not by accident, the site selected was next to the only press center in the city. As the mob converged on the Pakistani position, shots were fired at the soldiers from on top of nearby buildings and from the crowd. The beleaguered Pakistanis returned fire,

wounding some Somalis in the crowd. However, there was evidence that some in the crowd were also shot from behind by their own people to present an image for the press of a UN out of control. This incident was one of the reasons that it was decided four days later to declare that faction leader Aidid had become a menace to public safety who should be detained.

It would have been far preferable to have been able to disperse this organized crowd with non-lethal means and thus have prevented a contrived demonstration from becoming damaging in terms of world opinion. Although the Pakistanis were supposed to have riot control equipment and training in how to use it, preparations were inadequate. It was believed, however, that prevailing winds would have prevented the use of tear gas if it had been available. Equipment was flown in urgently and some training was subsequently conducted with the help of US forces.

Capabilities improved but crowds continued to be a problem. There was a need for a non-lethal means for breaking up crowds under prevailing weather conditions and at least separating out non-combatants. Women and children were repeatedly mixed in with gunmen and used as shields. On June 17 they were used to close a Moroccan column to hand grenade range, resulting in serious casualties to perplexed soldiers. Women and children were often used to construct roadblocks and were mixed into ambush groups. Aidid reportedly boasted that these tactics would intimidate UN soldiers. If women and children were hurt by UN peacekeepers, he could count on a media propaganda victory.

In one incident, a combination of US engineers and Pakistani escorts trying to remove a roadblock on a main artery was confronted by several hundred Somalis. With women mixed in their group, male shooters attacked from behind walls and buildings. The resulting defense by tanks and helicopters, in order to extract UN personnel from the ambush, resulted in heavy casualties to the Somali attackers. But the media reports were much more damaging to the UN.

Not only Aidid used these tactics. During the UNITAF period, Belgians watched helplessly in

Kismayo while fighters from one faction (Morgan's) infiltrated the town and a mixed gender crowd chased out the supporters of another faction (Jess). The Belgians were accused by Jess followers of deliberately allowing this to happen, but the Belgian troops were actually at a loss as to how to break up these mixed groups of combatants and non-combatants.

Swarming was also a difficult tactic to combat. It was evidently assumed that if enough people ran at a vehicle or a cordon protecting a search operation, UN soldiers would face the difficult choice of either having to shoot unarmed civilians or retreat.

In these situations, an effective means of breaking up crowds and isolating shooters would have been useful. At one point, a multi-purpose anti-riot control vehicle was offered to the UN by the French, but the price for this new technology was extremely high and there was only one of them available.

■ Communications

For a widespread community of workers, both UN and NGO, there was a glaring need for flexible communications, both within the cities and towns and between isolated posts and regional or national headquarters. In a country with no telephone system, the problem for the UN was to be able to talk reliably with representatives in widespread and remote areas of the country. This was necessary for safety and for timely reporting and policy discussions. Portable phones and radios were finally acquired in sufficient numbers to help short range communications within cities, but these were insecure. When phones were stolen or lost, Somalis were soon on the nets with disruptive chatter.

■ Movement

The ability to move throughout the city was important to the resupply and reinforcement of isolated positions and bases. Relief supplies needed transporting within and outside the city from the port. Personnel needed to move from their quarters to their place of work or to do busi-

ness or conduct meetings within the city. These movements were countered by roadblocks sometimes combined with ambushes, buried mines, and remotely detonated explosives. Bypass roads were constructed and guarded, routes were swept in advance and posted, times of convoys were varied and routes were changed regularly, helicopter transportation was used as an alternative, and escorts were provided. Nonetheless, there was a need for better detection and protection to reduce the dangers of ground movement. Work was hampered by the need to move during daylight hours, and it was difficult to hold meetings when people had to come from different locations. Heavy armored vehicles for breaking down roadblocks were not available until after organized hostilities had been concluded. Technology may have some answers for the safer movement of people and vehicles in a dangerous city.

■ Controlling Movement

The opposite of ensuring UN movement was to deny it to potential attackers or those smuggling arms and ammunition into the city. A system of citywide strong points and check points manned by UN military forces was developed, but these were only partially effective. Inadequate searches at check points and simple evasion techniques contributed to the inadequacies of this system. An integrated network was needed to spot and counter those moving with trucks and other vehicles around checkpoints. More thorough inspections of vehicles were required to detect arms and other illicit goods. Indiscriminately shooting from the air anything that moved was not feasible given the potential for collateral damage, misidentification, and hurting innocent individuals.

Helicopters were of value, but eventually became a target for massed gun fire when flying low to the ground. There were rumors of shoulder fired surface-to-air missiles and precautions had to be taken to reduce vulnerability, but no missiles were actually detected. The "eyes over Mogadishu" program of surveillance with helicopters had some deterrent effect on movement,

but observations from the air needed to be better integrated with effective monitoring and inspection on the ground. When AC-130 gunships were available they had success in detecting and countering activities at night and were a respected deterrent.

■ Disarmament

There was a need to find, contain, and destroy heavy weapons. Faction weapons were moved out of central storage sites and hidden in various clandestine sites around the city. While many weapons were found and destroyed, an improved capability was needed to detect their presence and to destroy them from standoff distances without causing a high degree of collateral damage.

■ Tracking “Elvis”

Finding a few prominent individuals in a third world city is not easy. Capturing them without significant casualties on either side requires a high degree of training and technology. Given a number of unsuccessful experiences worldwide, this is an area in which technology may one day provide some better answers. Part of the problem in Somalia was that specially trained forces did not come for more than two months, losing valuable time and adding to the degree of difficulty.

It was also important to have the ability to locate and rescue hostages and prisoners. In Somalia, those who had been kidnapped or captured were only retrieved by negotiation. Human intelligence is important, but technology may be able to help. For example, people going into dangerous situations may need hidden devices that could be tracked if they were captured.

■ Security

Security of information and military/diplomatic planning is essential. In a UN operation, individual units from different countries of a rapidly assembled force bring a diversity of standards. In Somalia, information protection over the telephone and other communications was nearly nonexistent and classified information was

loosely handled. Surprise Ranger raids into Aidid areas uncovered sensitive documents from various UN and military organizations.

On the civilian side, where there were many sensitive strategy papers and other documents that needed protection, the small UN staff came from 80 different nations. With traditional peace-keeping operations, UN personnel have been used to a wide-open system. The precautions required during a dangerous peace enforcement mission were not understood. It was not a case of carelessness and occasional lapses; training and good habits were nonexistent. Somalis, who were not regular staff members, were constantly around in significant numbers, hired as cleaners and for other work requirements. Many came from the local neighborhoods where Aidid’s clan was predominant. Aidid bragged to the UN political division chief that he saw papers intended for the Special Representative before the UN chief did.

Some training and tightening resulted in security improvements. Safes and file cabinets with locks were ordered. Documents were shredded and burned and doors were locked when UN staff left their offices. Nonetheless, the whole operation was very loose and undoubtedly too much sensitive information was easily accessible.

Months went by before the mission could communicate in a semi-secure fashion with the UN in New York from a few phones. Secure phones also were only available to a handful of the officials in New York, meaning considerable amounts of sensitive information undoubtedly were passed in the clear. Secure fax helped with the most sensitive written communications, but it was a laborious procedure and many documents did not have this modest degree of protection.

■ Countering Criminality

Even in times when there was no organized opposition to the UN, criminals were a constant problem. In a society of 90 percent unemployed and desperate human needs, this is not too surprising. Compounds would be infiltrated regularly by thieves. NGO facilities were regularly

robbed of cash, and even the UN payroll was stolen. Once the UN received vehicles, shipped from the winding-down Cambodian operation, vehicles began to disappear, even from the UN compound. There were numerous attempts at carjacking on the street. Simple anti-theft devices and countermeasures were needed. For example, a stolen car needed to shut down automatically, etc.

■ Civilian Needs

The civilian programs for providing humanitarian assistance, supporting the selection of District Councils in remote areas, and restoring the legal system needed help in many ways. One area recognized as critical from the beginning was the ability to reach the Somali population with information. The UNOSOM newspaper helped, although there were constant distribution problems, and it only reached a small percentage of the population.

But Somalia is an oral society and one in which destructive misinformation is often believed. Somalis listen to the radio, and UNOSOM needed to be able to reach audiences throughout the country. A broadcast system, inherited from UNITAF, reached Mogadishu and a little beyond, but a system was needed for the whole country. This was not the result of a technological gap. Equipment existed on the shelf. The challenge was to convince bureaucrats and committees in New York that communicating with the Somali people was an essential part of the mission. After many budget battles, approval was finally gained, but the equipment was never installed. Regular communication was critical to an operation dependent on the good will and cooperation of the inhabitants.

CONCLUSIONS

Although many of UNOSOM II's needs could have been filled with better training, increased

resources, and a more responsive system, UN experiences in Somalia demonstrated a number of technological needs. As described above, some of these include:

- Better ways to prevent and counter short range mortar attacks. Early warning of these and other types of attacks is essential to protection of personnel.
- Improved capabilities to detect and prevent intrusion, especially at night.
- More effective riot control equipment. Non-combatants need to be discouraged from mixing with combatants or carrying out tasks on behalf of shooters who use them for shields or to accomplish other dangerous tasks.
- Advanced capabilities in the detection of mines, remotely operated explosives, and ambushes.
- Ways to reduce the dangers to civilians having to operate alongside the military in a semi-hostile environment.
- A system of overhead coverage with real time feedback to ground forces to improve opportunities to disrupt hostile or illegal activities.
- More effective methods for moving people in a city with potential guerrilla/terrorist threats.
- Better ways for inspecting personnel and vehicles legally entering guarded compounds.
- Secure, flexible, reliable, and redundant means for communicating to both short and long distance sites.

The types of challenges the UN forces faced in Somalia are probably typical of what can be expected in many other situations. Technological advances and proper training can make the task of a UN soldier and civilian in similar circumstances much easier to accomplish. Technology has an important role to play if the UN is going to develop a satisfactory Chapter VII capability.