

U.N. force not equipped to deal with Rwanda crisis

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UNITED NATIONS, April 10 (Reuter) - Like an army trained to fight the last war, the United Nations in Rwanda again finds itself embroiled in a crisis it was neither expected nor equipped to deal with.

As in Somalia, and to some extent in the former Yugoslavia, U.N. troops were dispatched to carry out what was intended to be a peaceful, largely humanitarian mission.

Instead, it became witness to horrendous slaughter in a country with a history of genocide, usually involving the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes.

The U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), now 2,500-strong, was dispatched last October to help implement a peace accord between the government and the mainly Tutsi Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels, designed to end a three-year civil war.

The bloodletting erupted with renewed ferocity after a rocket last Wednesday incinerated a plane about to land at Kigali, the capital, carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of neighbouring Burundi. They had been attending a regional meeting in Tanzania.

For decades, U.N. peacekeeping followed a well-rehearsed drill of stepping between opposing parties once a firm ceasefire or peace accord had been arranged.

In the early years of the United Nations, this was the pattern on several fronts in the Arab-Israel dispute, between India and Pakistan and in other troublespots.

But more recently the United Nations has become increasingly involved in helping end what are often the bloodiest and most intractable of conflicts – civil wars.

In the process, U.N. peacekeeping has grown into a mighty undertaking, with the organisation gaining experience largely through trial and error.

It is now juggling 16 separate operations – from El Salvador to Cyprus and from Mozambique to the Iraq-Kuwait border – manned by well over 70,000 troops, military observers and police and costing some \$3.6 billion a year.

In 1990, it was running only eight operations, with 10,000 military and 5,000 civilian personnel, at an annual cost of about \$600 million.

Since past U.N. missions were largely confined to monitoring cease-fires and truces, the rules of engagement were : “Don’t fire except in self-defence.”

This worked even in a difficult, but largely successful operation in Cambodia, where elections last year crowned efforts to bring together four warring factions.

But Yugoslavia and Somalia changed the picture and the United Nations often finds itself a helpless bystander.

Although the use of force is permitted in some circumstances in Yugoslavia, neither the United Nations nor the troop-contributing countries wants to become embroiled in a three-way conflict among Bosnia’s Moslems, Serbs and Croats.

Instead, the threat of NATO air power has been brandished, achieving some success in easing the Serb siege of Sarajevo, the capital.

But even here the United Nations remains wary of crossing the Rubicon and appearing to side with one of the combatants, endangering its own humanitarian operations in the process.

The only shots fired in anger by NATO aircraft so far were to down four light Serb attack planes in late February.

In Somalia, where U.N. troops have a mandate to use force, in the absence of any recognised governmental authority, the world body has also learned the hard way the difference between peacekeeping – where there is a peace to keep – and peace enforcement.

Spearheaded from December 1992 until last month by a large United States force which often acted independently, the United Nations again found itself embroiled in an anarchic situation.

Sent in to feed the starving and help revive the devastated country, it soon came up against faction leaders bent on waging guerrilla war.

One of the warlords killed 24 Pakistani U.N. soldiers in an ambush last June and in October 18 U.S. troops were killed and dozens wounded, spurring Washington’s decision to pull out within a few months.

The United Nations, too, drew in its horns and began dealing with that warlord as a political force rather than as a criminal with a price on his head.

Probably more than any other operation, Somalia produced a kind of “Vietnam war” syndrome making the United Nations, like the United States before it, wary of involvement in a potential quagmire.

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