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Nato losing the battle for hearts and minds

MARK JOHN

Nato troops have been sucked into bloody combat with Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan that risks turning local opinion against them and undermining their ultimate goal of fostering reconstruction, analysts say.

When it pushed south this month, the 26-nation alliance aimed to maintain a clear distinction between Nato forces, which would go there to foster reconstruction, and US special forces, out to smash insurgent bases.

But the involvement of British and Canadian troops in some of the heaviest violence since the US-led invasion in 2001 shows that logic was flawed, and has put the relatively benign image of Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in the country in jeopardy.

"It's hard to convince people whose house you've just bombed that you are on their side," said Colonel Christopher Langton, head of defence analysis at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

Nato estimates that it has killed more than 500 Taliban insurgents since it launched the Operation Medusa offensive little more than a week ago in the southern province of Kandahar, heartland of the insurgency. The Taliban dismisses the figure as propaganda. About 20 Nato soldiers have been killed since the beginning of the operation. Nato and Afghan officials say there have also been civilian casualties in the fighting.

It was never supposed to be like this when the alliance, under intense US pressure, agreed to push south in August from the relative quiet of the north, west and capital Kabul.

Then, the message was that Isaf would pull the rug from under the Taliban by winning "hearts and minds" by helping build new roads, schools and other infrastructure. Instead, the violence has put any real reconstruction on hold and the news releases from Isaf are mostly battle reports.

"They have fallen into the trap of daily reports about the number of Taliban killed. But more important is how many people you persuade not to be fighters in the first place," said Sean Kay, security specialist at Ohio Wesleyan University.

Langton said efforts by Afghan authorities to eradicate poppy crops – the key to the livelihood of many in the south – would also hit Nato's image with locals. The international Senlis think-tank published evidence last week that rising poverty was fuelling Taliban support in the area.

The violence has also exposed the thin deployment of Nato troops in the south. It has just 6 000 men in an area the size of Britain, a number alliance chiefs originally said was sufficient so long as they had the support of ordinary Afghans. Now they say they underestimated Taliban resistance and need up to 2 500 additional troops and extra attack helicopters and transport aircraft. But analysts say that too is insufficient.

Where reinforcements should come from is also not clear. All the major Nato nations have existing commitments in multinational missions in Iraq, Kosovo, Congo and Lebanon. One idea is for Germany, which has 2 700 troops in the north, to send some south.

But this looks awkward given Berlin's insistence that the peacekeeping it signed up to do should be kept strictly separate from high-end warfare.

Tim Williams, head of the European Security Programme at London-based Royal United Services Institute, said he was confident troop offers would emerge because Nato simply could not afford to lose in Afghanistan.

"The Secretary-General (Jaap de Hoop Scheffer) has said this mission is critical to the future of the alliance... The troops that can do this kind of job are out there," said Williams.

Top Nato commanders say the next few months are potentially decisive to the campaign and fast reinforcements would allow them to deal a lasting blow to the Taliban before the onset of winter when they expect a lull in fighting.

They reject suggestions that the Afghan violence is fiercer than that in Iraq. But the comparison is increasingly being made by commentators in the Western media, threatening to undermine already fragile public support for the mission.

"The good news is that at least the issues are finally out there, so European countries might bite the bullet and finally engage properly," Langton said.

"We're at the tipping point in the campaign." – Reuters



No peace while arms trade remains big business

The spread of conventional weapons is out of control. It is time to regulate the industry, writes Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

For many years, I've been involved in the peace business, doing what I can to help people overcome their differences. In doing so, I've also learned a lot about the business of war: the arms trade.

In my opinion it is the modern slave trade. It is an industry out of control: every day more than 1 000 people are killed by conventional weapons. Most of those people are innocent men, women and children.

There have been international treaties to control the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons for decades.

Yet, despite the mounting death toll, there is still no treaty governing the sale of conventional weapons – from handguns to attack helicopters.

As a result, weapons fall into the wrong hands all too easily, fuelling human rights abuses, prolonging wars and digging countries deeper into poverty. This is allowed to continue because of the complicity of governments, especially rich countries' governments, who turn a blind eye to the appalling human suffering associated with the proliferation of weapons.

It is estimated that every year small arms alone kill more people than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki put together. Many more people are injured, terrorised or driven from their homes by armed violence. Even as you read this, one of these human tragedies is unfolding somewhere on the planet.

You only need to pick up a newspaper to see the worldwide scale of the problem. From the conflict in the Middle East, to the killings in Darfur; to gun violence in Brazil, the lack of global controls on the arms trade is causing the suffering of innocent people.

Take the Democratic Republic of Congo where armed violence recently flared up again and millions have died during almost a decade of conflict.

Despite a United Nations (UN) arms embargo against armed groups in the country, weapons have continued to flood in from all over the world.

Arms found during weapons collections include those made in Germany, France, Israel, the US and Russia. The only common denominator is that nearly all these weapons were manufactured outside Africa.

Five rich countries manufacture most of the world's weapons. Last year Russia, the US, France, Germany and Britain accounted for an estimated 82% of the global arms market. And it's big business: the amount that rich countries spend on fighting HIV/Aids every year represents just 18 days of global spending on arms.

But while the profits flow back to the developed world, the effects of the arms trade are predominantly felt in developing countries.

More than two-thirds of the value of all arms are sold to Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. It is no coincidence that many of the world's poorest countries have recently experienced armed conflict.

In addition to the deaths, injuries and rapes perpetrated with these weapons, the cost of conflict goes deeper still, destroying health and education systems.

For example, in northern Uganda, which has been devastated by 20 years of armed conflict, it has been estimated that 250 000 children do not attend school. The war in northern Uganda, which may finally be coming to an end, has been fuelled by supplies of foreign-made weapons.

And, as with so many other wars, the heaviest toll has been on the region's children.

Children under five are always the most vulnerable to disease, and in a war zone adequate medical care is often not available as hospitals are destroyed and people flee to makeshift camps. Last year, it was estimated that 41% of all deaths in the camps for displaced people in northern Uganda were among children under five.

The world could eradicate poverty in a few generations were only a fraction of the expenditure on the war business to be spent on peace.

An average \$22-billion is spent on arms by countries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa every year according to estimates by the US Congress.

This sum would have enabled those countries to put every child in school and to reduce child mortality by two-thirds by 2015, achieving two of the Millennium Development Goals.

This year, the world has the chance to say "no" to the continuing scandal of the unregulated weapons trade.

In October, the world's governments will vote on a resolution at the UN General Assembly to start working towards an Arms Trade Treaty.

That treaty would be based on a simple principle: no weapons for violations



It is time to regulate the spread of conventional weapons such as this collection of guns and ammunition, gathered from arms caches around Mozambique before being destroyed. PICTURE: BOXER NGWENYA

of international law. In other words, a ban on selling weapons if there is a clear risk that they will be used to abuse human rights or fuel conflict.

The UN resolution has been put forward by the governments of Australia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Finland, Japan, Kenya, and Britain.

These governments believe that "the idea of an Arms Trade Treaty is one whose time has come".

I agree. We must end impunity for governments who authorise the supply of weapons when they know there's a great danger that those weapons will be used for gross human rights abuses. Nowadays great strides are being made towards ending impunity for war criminals, so it cannot be acceptable that their arms suppliers continue to escape punishment.

A total of 55 governments, including much of Africa, Latin America and Europe now support an Arms Trade Treaty.

It also has widespread popular

support: more than 1-million people in over 150 countries have signed the Million Faces Petition supporting the call for such a treaty.

No longer should the peace business be undermined by the arms business.

I call on all governments to put the control of the international arms trade at the top of their agenda.

Strides are being made towards ending impunity for war criminals... arms suppliers can no longer escape punishment

PRETORIA NEWS Defeating the ends of justice

We often complain that the police don't do enough to help us, but when a Johannesburg mother reported on Sunday that her vehicle had been hijacked with her six-year-old child inside, police immediately launched a massive hunt.

For the next eight hours, up to 40 members of the police anti-hijacking unit, the dog unit and a special task force searched for the child.

It turns out it was all a pathetic hoax. The woman had not been hijacked and the child was found playing safely at a relative's home.

Police are understandably furious, saying the time and money used in the fruitless search could have been better spent helping people in real need.

This is not the first time a member of the public claiming to have been hijacked has wasted valuable police resources on what amounts to a wild goose chase.

In March an East Rand man and his fiancée were arrested for reporting a false kidnapping. The woman told police their child (also aged six) had been in the car and was missing.

The car was later recovered and the child found safe at a relative's home, but not before an enormous amount of time and money had been wasted in the search.

In 2004 an East Rand woman was arrested for falsely reporting that she had been hijacked and kidnapped. Angry police vowed at the time to make her pay more than R100 000 to cover the costs of the search operation which included 100 officers, vehicles and a helicopter.

The year before, a South Coast woman sent hoax SMSs to her boyfriend, claiming she had been hijacked. More than 20 vehicles and two helicopters were used in to search for her.

Crime is a high priority for us all and we complain when the police do not respond to our cries for help. Yet they waste thousands chasing after non-existent crimes and their victims.

While we wait to hear what price the latest "victim" must pay for defeating the ends of justice, it is comforting to know that, when they believe there's an emergency, police will pull out all the stops to act.

YESTERDAYS

1586 Anthony Babington and fellow conspirators go on trial for attempting to seize the throne of England for Mary Queen of Scots by plotting to murder Queen Elizabeth I.

1788 Denmark invades Sweden; the first US national election is authorised.

1943 Chiang Kai-shek becomes president of China.

1955 West Germany and Soviet Union establish diplomatic relations.

1982 At least 700 people are killed and 17-million left homeless by floods across north and east of India. – Sapa-AP

TODAY

Jacqueline Bisset, English actress, 62

Michael Johnson, former US athlete and Olympic gold medalist, 39

Shane Warne, Australian cricketer, 37

Goran Ivanisevic, former Croatian tennis player, 35

Stella McCartney, English fashion designer, 35



Jacqueline Bisset



"The power of art is expressed in the thing created. We have used different styles and materials through the ages, drawing from diverse experiences from era to era. Yet, hidden in the artist's creations is something bigger than ourselves, the ideal life."

Es'kia Mphahlele, 2002



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