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JTF Haiti

U.N. Military Civic Action in Cambodia

by Lt. Col. Robert B. Adolph Jr.

Although the United Nations conducted peacekeeping operations throughout the Cold War, little rigorous, analytical thought went into the process. Contributor nations provided units, usually light-infantry battalions, and the U.N. used them in such places as Lebanon, Cyprus and Egypt. The U.N. also borrowed officers from contributor nations to serve as unarmed military observers.

U.N. peacekeeping operations, in general, are still relatively immature. Most officers and soldiers remain untrained in performing peacekeeping functions. There are no required U.N. schools, no U.N. doctrinal staff guides, no recommended tables of organization and equipment, and no strategies or policy guidance for peacekeeping. Each mission literally "starts from scratch," adding to the already ambiguous and confusing peacekeeping circumstances.

Although military civic action should be an essential part of the peacekeeping process, the U.N. has not yet learned their importance, or that they require staffing and budgetary support. This situation must be corrected for the future.

Background

In March 1992, the U.N. deployed the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia, or UNTAC, a peace mission involved in supervising the administration of the

country, verifying the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces, demobilizing more than 150,000 troops, repatriating more than 350,000 displaced Cambodians and organizing and supervising a national election.

Even without funding, the military component of UNTAC, commanded by Lt. Gen. John Sanderson, an Australian, engaged in numerous civic-action projects. This was made possible through grants of funding and materials from governments of a few of the nations that provided contingent forces. In most cases, however, grants were restricted to areas where a particular government's national contingent was located: The Dutch provided funding to their national contingent battalion. The French contingent battalion received a great deal of support from French nongovernmental charitable organizations. The French and Indian governments provided medical supplies, as did the government of Japan (the Japanese provided 43 tons of medical supplies and medicines), in sufficient quantities to be distributed to every sector. The German government provided funding for pediatric medicines, but only enough to support its medical contingent in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh.

This hodgepodge of funding and material support, although welcome in the provinces where it was provided, created enormous disparities between sectors: the haves and the have-nots. Some battalions

were able to do much in the way of civic action, others very little.

One prominent problem was the lack of pediatric medicines. The fact that as much as 45 percent of the population of Cambodia is under the age of 14, according to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, presented a significant drawback to the UNTAC military physicians who were treating injured and diseased Khmer children.

In many cases military doctors used their battalions' medicines, brought with them from their own countries and meant for the treatment of their own soldiers, for the treatment of Cambodians. Much to their credit, some of the battalion commanders supported their medical personnel's desire to help.

Cambodia's medical problems go far beyond the lack of medicines: There is practically no medical infrastructure in the country. More than 15 years ago, the Khmer Rouge wiped out the educated classes, including the doctors. According to UNTAC's chief medical officer, Col. Peter Fraps, of Germany, "Only 33 of 500 qualified medical practitioners survived the cruel genocide of this country."

UNTAC medical personnel were overwhelmed by the vast medical needs of the local population. In Fraps' words, "The existing health system in Cambodia is deplorable, inhumane, life-condemning and totally bankrupt." Policy guidance from U.N. headquarters New York called for UNTAC military medical personnel to administer to the health needs of UNTAC personnel only. However, with malaria, dengue fever, tuberculosis, anemia and malnutrition endemic to many regions of the country, the military contingent living among the people in the provinces could not ignore those problems.

There is more to civic action than providing medical support to the civil populace. Digging wells (to provide a clean source of drinking water), repairing roads and bridges, building or repairing schools and orphanages, and repairing and refurbishing medical and dental clinics and hospitals are also civic-action activities.

UNTAC engineers built or repaired

hundreds of small- and medium-sized bridges and smoothed or resurfaced more than 1,000 miles of roadway. UNTAC funded these projects because they supported free and fair elections. Cambodians had to have a passageway to the polling booths.

My involvement in UNTAC civic action began with a formal proposal to the force commander to create a large civic-action staff. This proposal was not favorably considered for two reasons: First, the submission was tendered in late February 1993 — only three months before the Cambodian elections. Second, UNTAC was not mandated to conduct civic action. The force commander stated that had he received the



Photo by Robert B. Adolph Jr.

proposal earlier in the mission, he might have approved a larger civic-action staff.

A subsequent, less ambitious proposal called for the establishment of a force commander's special assistant for civic action, with one officer assistant. On March 1, 1993, Lt. Gen. Sanderson approved the creation of the Civic Action Cell, composed of two officers: myself, with the title civic-action coordinator, and an operations officer. The new CAC worked directly for the chief of staff and reported through him to the force commander.

According to the UNTAC liaison officer at U.N. headquarters New York, this was the first time a peacekeeping mission had established a formal civic-action staff

Khmers line up for medical attention at a mobile medical dispensary run by one of the U.N. battalions.

function. The decision to create a civic-action staff element, despite its size, is a precedent that could prove meaningful to both current and future missions.

There was no small irony in the U.N.'s choice of the operations officer, Maj. Arthur Alexandrov of Russia. Many commented that we were a gratifying, if unlikely, pair — American and Russian officers working together, assisting in the rebuilding of Cambodia. In only a very few years, the world had changed dramatically.

Civic action was being performed by UNTAC well before the proposal of a CAC. The force commander had even appointed a civic-action officer within the Military Public Information Office; however, the job was far too big for one man. Furthermore, the Military Public Information Office was not well-suited for a civic-action officer because his time and energies were sometimes diverted to information priorities. The conduct of civic action must be a separate staff function.

Each of the national contingent battalions had a different idea of what constituted civic action. In every province, there were Pakistani, Japanese, Australian, Chinese, Thai, Indian, Indonesian, Dutch, French, Bulgarian, Malaysian, Uruguayan, Bangladeshi, Ghanaian and Tunisian battalions, each with its own national and individual notions about civic action. No policy guidance existed to clarify this situation, and there was no fund-

ing; both are essential. Because of this, some battalions limited their activities to rehabilitative programs for cantoned soldiers (cantonnement of factional soldiers and weapons was part of the UNTAC mandate). These UNTAC-funded programs included driving schools and classes on metalwork — essentially, job training. Although the projects were satisfactory, they touched the lives of relatively few and had little impact overall.

Other battalions felt that their limited medical civic action fulfilled their civic responsibilities. Because of the lack of medicines and medical personnel, "limited" in some district medical clinics meant administering to not more than 50 Cambodians a day, even though hundreds were turned away.

Methodology

With no staff, except Alexandrov, and no budget, starting out in the CAC seemed like a near-impossible mission. It was clear that whatever might be accomplished had to begin with an assessment. We began by visiting every sector in Cambodia by helicopter.

During our provincial visits, we disseminated a CAC-written, UNTAC civic-action pamphlet outlining the UNTAC philosophy of civic action and the duties and responsibilities of the CAC, sector civic-action coordinators and senior U.N. military observers.

We evaluated both ongoing and planned civic action, briefed officers on the UNTAC civic-action philosophy, advised sector commanders on what support was available from UNTAC headquarters in Phnom Penh, and explained why conducting civic action enhanced a battalion's security posture.

To ensure that every sector commander appointed a civic-action coordinator to his staff, pressure had to be applied through the Deputy Force Commander's office. A few battalions had already appointed officers to perform this duty; others had not. To have any hope of being effective, the UNTAC CAC would need to have a subordinate staff point of contact in every sector. This requirement was fulfilled before

A cantoned and retrained Cambodian soldier shows off his handiwork at an Indian-run and U.N.-sponsored metalwork training center in Kampong Cham Province.



Photo by Robert B. Adolph Jr.

the end of March.

Appointing a civic-action coordinator for each battalion staff may have been the single most important action in whatever success we subsequently enjoyed. Despite the fact that no funding was available, most civic-action coordinators took their jobs seriously and in many cases conducted limited civic-action projects. They collected donations from their comrades; persuaded people to give their time and energies; supported nongovernmental charitable organizations; organized sporting events with the locals; and provided troop labor to support the refurbishing of hospitals, schools and pagodas.

In attempting to institute and sustain small military-civic-action projects on a shoestring, we requested that each company in a battalion adopt a project in its region or immediate area. This concept was later determined to be very successful. Even without funding, company commanders and their soldiers assisted the local schools, orphanages, hospitals and homes for the handicapped. Homes for the handicapped are important: Cambodia has more amputees per capita than any other country in the world because of the extremely common use of land mines there.

We suggested to senior-sector military observers that individual UNMOs could accomplish much if they were properly motivated, and we recommended that each UNMO team leader adopt a local project. UNMOs performed all kinds of civic action, nearly always without material or financial support: teaching English and French at local schools, supporting nongovernmental charitable organizations, coordinating medical support for remote villages and repairing schools and medical clinics. Because UNTAC could not fund civic action, officers and soldiers alike often donated their own money to support the projects.

One UNMO, Maj. Peter Stiglich, USAF, personally funded and built a playground for Khmer children. Impressed with Stiglich's altruistic drive, local Khmers named the playground "Peter Park" and built a monument there in his honor. The central government later awarded Stiglich

the Cambodian "Medal of Reconstruction."

During trips to the provinces, we noted that nearly every sector commander had examined what his battalion might do in civic action if funding were available. Many commanders had good ideas, but no money was available to bring their ideas to fruition.

The lack of money was an issue that had to be addressed. Somehow the CAC had to acquire funding, although fund raising was not a mandated function. In provinces where there were no nongovernmental charitable organizations and no U.N. agencies, the task of conducting civic action would be left to the military. In districts where there were no military units, civic action was provided by U.N. civil personnel, U.N. police, electoral personnel and military observers.

In recognizing the military's innate capabilities, the director of UNICEF allotted \$50,000 to the CAC for the military's use in repairing or building as many as 10 primary schools. These schools were located in six provinces where little funds had been spent previously for such projects. Although the projects were managed by sector civic-action coordinators, the local populace, and oftentimes U.N. civil administrative personnel, were involved. Much was accomplished with limited funds by using local labor and materials.

In response to a CAC proposal, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees agreed to provide \$100,000 for a joint project between the CAC and a French charitable organization. The funds were to be used to purchase mosquito netting for Khmers living in malarial-infested regions of Cambodia. The French handled distribution, the CAC procurement.

The problem, however, was not only funding, but rather the *kind* of funding. The CAC needed money in the form of discretionary funds for quick-impact projects. We submitted another proposal to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees for \$50,000 in discretionary funds for the repair of schools, hospitals and orphanages. This request was approved, and the funds were later disbursed to sector civic-action coordinators for projects in the

provinces.

We also strengthened the connection between the U.N. Military Information Office and the CAC. We provided the military information officer copies of our weekly reports to the force commander. In turn, the MILINFO officer planned media coverage of significant civic action, thereby improving UNTAC's public image among the local populace as well as among the world press.

With the establishment of the CAC, support of nongovernmental charitable organizations such as CARE, Action International Contra La Faim and others, was recognized as a priority. These NGOs provided what UNTAC could not: long-term sustainment of projects and programs. They were in Cambodia well before UNTAC's arrival and would remain long after our departure. UNTAC's mandate expired in the fall of 1993.

The CAC-produced pamphlet discussed earlier also outlined military capabilities to support NGO activities. Copies of the pamphlet were distributed throughout the country to every NGO. The results were heartening. Although many NGOs were initially uncertain, the CAC began receiving requests for support within a few weeks. The UNTAC CAC, in turn, sent the requests to sector civic-action coordinators for action.

Sector civic-action coordinators handled NGO requests for support in their own

sectors. If a sector's civic-action coordinator was unable to provide the support, the request was forwarded to the UNTAC CAC for consideration. All requests for multiple-province or countrywide support came directly to the UNTAC CAC.

Working with NGOs, UNTAC engineers dug ponds in which the handicapped could raise fish for food; military doctors supported privately funded inoculation programs; commanders provided security and ground transportation to those working in and near Khmer Rouge-controlled areas; and air operations provided limited heli-borne and fixed-wing transport into remote areas for personnel as well as NGO medical supplies.

Working together, we accomplished much more than if we had worked separately. At the most basic level, we attempted to match an UNTAC military capability with a stated NGO need. We satisfied an overwhelming majority of the hundreds of requests received.

Security

We had many discussions with officers from various national contingents in the provinces who viewed civic action in opposition to security issues. They felt that dedicating more soldiers to civic projects meant that fewer would be available for security duties. At every opportunity, we attempted to convince these officers that their best security might be an aggressive civic-action program.

UNTAC units and UNMO teams that conducted civic-minded projects won both respect and admiration from the locals and were often forewarned of impending attacks and recently mined roadways. Cambodians who felt that UNTAC members were their friends acted accordingly and provided U.N. soldiers with information about the movements and dispositions of hostile factions. Such valuable information could not have been secured in any other way.

An unarmed military observer, Maj. Kevin Fossett, USMC, related an incident that occurred in the heavily Khmer Rouge province of Prear Vihear in northern Cambodia. During a vehicular patrol, Fossett

Workers repair a Cambodian primary school in northwestern Cambodia. Repairs were sponsored by the Dutch Battalion with money acquired from the Dutch government.



Photo by Robert B. Adolph Jr.

was approached by a friendly Cambodian and warned about an ambush that had been set by the Khmer Rouge less than a kilometer ahead. Fossett heeded the warning and changed his route. He later verified that the Cambodian's story was true. Fossett credited civic action previously performed in the area as key to building rapport with the locals and ultimately saving his life.

The missing-in-action joint task force operating out of Phnom Penh also benefited from the positive relationships between U.S. military personnel and the Khmers. American observers assigned to the U.S. Military Observer Group informally supplied the MIA JTF with reports received from local contacts regarding American servicemen missing from the time of the Vietnam War. Lt. Col. Gene Thompson, a Special Forces U.S. military observer team chief, taught English in his spare time in Kham Pong Cham Province. One of his contacts from the school volunteered information that later assisted in an MIA JTF investigation.

The causal linkage between the local populace's providing valuable information to military members and UNTAC civic-action programs is anecdotal yet convincing. Security and information-gathering were enhanced through civic action.

Recommendations

- Establish a separate civic-action staff function for future peacekeeping missions. The staff should be equal to other staff functions such as logistics, operations and administration. Civic action must be planned prior to and instituted on the first day of a peacekeeping mission.
- Allocate a budget that will support small, quick-impact projects such as the repair of schools and hospitals and the digging of wells. U.N. staff agencies can supervise these projects and provide policy guidance.
- Provide medical support and funding for medicine. Medical support is essential in any peacekeeping area of operations. Funding for medicine is crucial and should be recognized as a separate funding category. Military doctors possess enormous



Photo by Robert B. Adolph Jr.

Indonesian engineers repair a bridge in Kampong Thom Province. Building and repairing bridges was necessary so that voters could get to the polling booths.

capability for doing good; they should be allowed the opportunity. The World Health Organization and UNICEF could provide policy guidance on issues such as medical protocols governing the treatment of infectious diseases.

- Increase the size of the medical detachments assigned to contingent battalions. Medical personnel and their commanders will feel compelled to assist the local population, and they should be financially and materially supported. The good will won by medical and all other civic action ultimately serves the mission.

- Increase the number of engineers assigned to contingent battalions, depending upon the mission requirements and the assessed needs. Engineers are essential in building and repair projects.

- Give future force commanders authority over their own budgets. Currently, U.N. career civil servants control all monies in a peacekeeping mission. Had the force commander of UNTAC had the authority, he would have funded civic action, but that power was reserved for budgeteers at U.N. headquarters. The U.N. sometimes tasks commanders with extremely difficult missions, but with no authority over one of their key resources: money.

Conclusion

The argument that U.N. organizations conduct civic-action programs, thereby

negating the need for a military component to conduct similar programs, is not a sound one. The preponderance of the people living in the provinces of Cambodia are unfamiliar with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.N. Development Programs and the U.N. International Children's Emergency Fund. Despite their good works, these organizations are relatively small and low-profile. For most Cambodians, the U.N. was represented by those whom they saw every day near their homes and workplaces: the U.N. soldiers, the electoral officials and the police.

The military is often the largest component in a peacekeeping mission. The vast majority of personnel, trucks, aircraft, engineering assets and medical facilities are military. The UNTAC military component had the capability to accomplish more in a shorter period of time than any other organization in the country.

In Cambodia, military capabilities for civic action far outstripped those of any other component. Yet UNTAC was not mandated to conduct civic action. From U.N. headquarters' perspective, such a proposal would likely have been perceived as infringing on the prerogatives of U.N. staff agencies such as UNHCR, UNDP and UNICEF.

Those prerogatives no doubt appear important from New York's perspective. But in the provinces, the sheer weight of human suffering in and around UNTAC military-component units affected each member deeply. Soldiers in the remotest regions of Cambodia faced Khmer malnutrition and disease daily. Many in the military component wanted to help and did. Yet much more could have been done if funding and staff guidance had been provided from the early days of the U.N. mission in Cambodia.

According to UNTAC's Medical Branch, as of April 1993, military medical personnel had treated 38,355 Cambodians for injury and disease since the beginning of the mission. They did it without funding from U.N. headquarters. The number of Cambodians treated accounted for 26 percent of all the cases seen. Early statistics in May 1993 suggested that the percentage of Cambodi-

ans being treated was rising.

The funding that CAC ultimately received came from local UNICEF, UNHCR and other officials who had recognized that financial support for military civic action was money well-spent. Daniel LeBlanc of UNHCR in Phnom Penh stated, "We had no doubt that the military component would follow through on the projects we funded. We also recognized that the military was an enormous, untapped resource for furthering the goals of our organization."

A military civic-action staff should be established in all peacekeeping organizations. Activities must be funded and supervised by the appropriate U.N. staff agencies — in support of the larger goals of the U.N. beyond the peacekeeping mission itself. Perhaps the best way to ensure funding for military civic-action programs is to provide future peacekeeping commanders authority over their own budgets.

The military component of any peacekeeping operation is not a charitable or developmental organization. Conducting military civic action goes to the heart of the peacekeeping mission itself. Civic action is the best means of gaining and maintaining the initiative in winning the hearts and minds of a local populace, improving information gathering and enhancing security. The good will generated as a result of civic action is more than worth the investment in terms of potential lives saved and missions accomplished. ><

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