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Send In the Marines

By KENNETH L. CAIN

When Nigerian peacekeepers landed in Liberia this week, there was joy in the streets of Monrovia for the first time in months. There was also great relief in Washington, where the Bush administration is hoping West African forces will enable American soldiers to avoid intervening in Liberia's 14-year-old civil war. But the administration's sense of relief is misguided: counting on regional forces to bring peace to Liberia without substantial American participation is a mistake, one that will likely come with tragic consequences.

As the United Nations' human rights officer in Liberia in 1995 and 1996, I had the misfortune to witness the last round of West African peacekeeping in the country. At the time, the regional coalition forces (then called Ecomog) supported and armed an ever-growing list of ethnically based rival rebel factions. The theory was that these factions would thwart the biggest rebel, Charles Taylor, from taking power by force.

The tactic backfired: Mr. Taylor's forces — fueled by a cocktail of drugs, cane juice and voodoo — won control of the majority of Liberia but, blocked by the coalition, never captured Monrovia. As a result, the war degenerated into a bloody stalemate and the chaos of a failed state. Almost every citizen was displaced by the war amid a mind-bending series of torture and cannibalism cases. By my calculation, one in every six women had been raped.

The coalition's tactical deployments did little to protect civilians. Instead, they seemed informed by commercial interests, with troops often placed in proximity to diamond mines and stands of tropical timber.

In 1997, the West African coalition broke the impasse it itself had created, capitulated to Mr. Taylor, and choreographed a lopsided election on his behalf. A measure of peace ensued, and Ecomog received credit for a rare peacekeeping "success." But what had been achieved? The coalition was the author of the very disaster it had sought to prevent: the ascension of Mr. Taylor. And the cost? More than 100,000 civilian casualties from 1990 to 1997 — and the catastrophe before us today.

The regional coalition forces managed to do considerable damage at the tactical level, too. The State Department reported that soldiers not only engaged in the systematic looting of small, easily transportable goods, but even shipped entire buildings for scrap to be sold abroad. (In the field we had an additional name for Ecomog: "Every Conceivable Moving Object Gone.")

The looting sometimes reached farcical proportions — soldiers once loaded a military barge so full of stolen goods that it sank in full view of onlookers in the harbor. But the criminalization of peacekeeping wasn't funny: United Nations officials reported observing Nigerian forces, which made up 80 percent of the coalition troops, at the port of Monrovia trafficking in narcotics. Warships delivered heroin to the port, which was under the control of the Nigerian military, where it was unloaded, divided and repackaged for distribution.

While I was in Liberia, peacekeeping forces were also responsible for sexual violence. In 1996, my colleagues and I investigated — and confirmed — reports of child prostitution. In one instance, an Ecomog contingent in the city of Buchanan was trading rice for sex with 9- and 10-year-old girls from a nearby displaced persons camp. Then a contingent from another Ecomog country arrived. Its soldiers offered the girls more rice and a little money. So the girls started frequenting that camp.

Soon thereafter, the bodies of young girls started appearing along the path that led to the newcomers' camp. The girls had been decapitated and their heads inserted in between their legs. According to the United Nations security officer who investigated the deaths, this was a message to the girls that it wouldn't be worth it to frequent the newcomers for the sake of a little extra rice.

And these are our peacekeepers of choice in Liberia today.

The lure of regional forces for humanitarian peacekeeping operations is understandable. Regional forces, the thinking goes, have significant advantages over their international counterparts: they're more likely to understand and maneuver freely in the society they've entered, they have a stronger interest in bringing security to their own neighborhood, they are more willing to absorb casualties, and they are relatively inexpensive.

But the last decade in Liberia should show us that these theories can crumble the minute they are tested in battle. Regional peacekeeping may eventually work in Liberia — but it's not likely to work overnight and without American support. For this reason, the United States must do more to stabilize Liberia.

In addition to saving lives, taking action may also enable the United States to exorcise the ghosts of Mogadishu. The Clinton administration's mistakes in Somalia in 1993 enfeebled the international response to genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia — at a cost of hundreds of thousands of civilian lives. But Liberia is not Somalia: anyone with the mud of both countries on their boots knows that in contrast to Somali hostility, the prevailing emotion in Liberia toward Americans is affection. We have a golden opportunity to move swiftly and finally get peacekeeping in Africa right.

For starters, the United States should immediately deploy at least two dozen mobile, squad-sized Special Forces units to Liberia. These units should not be limited to Monrovia — they should also venture into rural areas, where executions, looting and rape are most severe.

Even the smallest American presence on the ground will have a big impact. As part of the United Nations team in Haiti in 1995, I had the good fortune of working with a squad of 11 Special Forces soldiers, who had been assigned to keep my province secure. They were the 11 most effective people I've ever encountered. With just two Humvees and a Zodiac they were remarkably effective in quelling violence in a large area. Before Haiti, I had served in the United Nations mission in Rwanda. Working with the Special Forces, I found myself wishing I could turn back time and bring these men to Rwanda with me during the genocide — I wonder how many lives could have been saved?

Moreover, if American forces are active, their professionalism will raise the bar considerably for everyone. Competence breeds (or at least inspires) competence. Witness Sierra Leone. The initial Ecomog and United Nations arrangement was on the verge of failure until a very small force of approximately 1,000 British soldiers arrived in 2000. Since then, the situation has stabilized. The triangular combination has been infinitely more effective.

Of course, the responsibility is not America's alone. It is incumbent upon the United Nations to be vigilant and uncompromising in disciplining and reporting on the misconduct of regional peacekeepers. In the 90's, for example, the United Nations resorted to quiet diplomatic *démarches*, which were consistently useless. The United Nations needs to go public with its oversight, reporting on the actions of the soldiers sent to Liberia in a transparent and vigorous manner. It should place greater emphasis on fighting corruption and deal-making over diamonds. And it should undertake to acknowledge and fully detail the horrifying extent to which rape has been used as a weapon during the last 14 years.

Washington hailed as an achievement the arrival of a seven-member American military team in Monrovia on Wednesday. To those familiar with Liberia's civil war, it is a failure. More than 2,000 marines are on ships just off the Liberian coast. In a short time, they could be working with African troops to put an end to a military and humanitarian crisis that is getting worse by the day. Holding American soldiers back in deference to a regional force that has been demonstrably brutal and misguided is a grave mistake. And it's certainly no cause for celebration.

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