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POLICY UPDATE

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If anyone inside or outside government understands the purpose or ambition of Canada's poorly articulated mini-military mission to Mali, please speak out.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau first declared three years ago that if the Liberals were to win power, he intended to restore Canada's international honour and dignity by sending peacekeepers to Africa. Only after Mr. Trudeau became prime minister did his generals and diplomats tell him that he had been talking through his hat.

There were no Pearsonian UN missions on offer. In fact, none has existed for several decades. Mali is a prime example. Thousands of government troops have been fighting enemies who belong to an alphabet's soup of terrorist groups including, most ominously, ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Justin Trudeau's government is in such a quandary over that election promise that now, rather late in its first term, Canadians still have almost no information about its part in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission Mali (MINUSMA). Notwithstanding urgent UN pleas to speed the process up because German helicopters are leaving Mali in a few weeks, Ottawa still dawdles.

All Canada has publicly committed to so far is to dispatch a pair of CH-47 Chinook transport helicopters that will ferry small teams of troops around the country to provide medical care and improve the lot of women and children caught in the crossfire. Four lightly armed CH-146 Griffon utility helicopters that were never designed to be used as gunships will escort the bus-like Chinooks.

The mission, which is to finally get underway sometime in August, and was first mooted by Mr. Trudeau before the election in 2015, has been intensely considered by Global Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defence for well over a year and was semi-announced months ago.

What is obvious is that Mali, like so much of Africa on both sides of the Sahara, is a dangerous place. Thousands of civilians and fighters have died there since 2013, as have 169 blue helmets, making it by far the most dangerous ongoing UN mission.

Mr. Trudeau's absurd initial misunderstanding of peacekeeping and the long delay in defining a mission has affected troop morale. Generals told me two years ago that the infantry battalions under their command had been energized by the prime minister's high-minded talk about launching peacekeeping operations in Africa. As warriors, some of them would have obviously preferred a robust, narrowly defined combat mission, but they were nevertheless raring to go there – or almost anywhere – as UN blue berets or blue helmets.

For all Mr. Trudeau's proud boasts about peacekeeping, the number of Canadians deployed on UN missions on his watch has dropped almost to single digits. Furthermore, he has made a lot of



noise about greatly enhancing the role of women everywhere, including in the military, yet nearly 32 months into his mandate only four Canadian women soldiers serve on UN missions.



Figure 1: Peacekeepers carrying the coffins of soldiers killed during a militant attack on their base in Kidal, Mali, February 2016. As the author notes, 169 peacekeepers have been killed in Mali since 2013, making it the most dangerous current UN mission. (Source: HABIBOU KOUYATE/AFP/Getty Images)

As of this late date, there are still no hard figures available concerning costs or the number of troops to be deployed to West Africa, although there are unlikely to be many more than a meagre, lightly armed force of a few hundred. Nor is there any information about what the whole-of-government approach, championed with considerable success in Afghanistan, will amount to.

Moreover, there has not been any word about whether those troops will be under Canadian command, as they were to have been when Canada almost agreed two years ago to be part of the UN mission in Mali, or if they will fall under a foreign general's command.

French is the lingua franca across much of Central and Western Africa, including Mali. So the UN was particularly keen to name a French-speaking Canadian commander to oversee the 16,000 Third World troops now wearing blue helmets there. Not one but two French-Canadian generals were spun up to lead the mission (after the first general had medical issues). About the only advantage that may come of Canada's dithering is that the position might soon actually become available again!

Diplomats working on Canada's African files badly want Ottawa to become more deeply involved there than it has been in years. Many of them have been privately exasperated by the Canada Lite approach as well as the constant delays in fleshing out the mission's goals and resources.



Perhaps more humbling, the Trudeau team was shocked at how poorly its limited African ambitions were received by its usual friends and allies at the UN and in non-governmental organizations which deal with humanitarian crises in conflict zones. To try to make amends, sources in the DND say it is likely the government will announce it is adding an extra Chinook and two additional Griffons to serve as spares. But these reserve aircraft will not give the mission any more teeth or substance.

There have also been faint rumblings that the government could add another infantry company or two, or send a formidable contingent of Special Forces troops to Mali or elsewhere in Africa. But again, nothing seems to have been decided.

One of the Mali mission's announced focuses is to deploy Canadian women in uniform there to improve the dire lot of women and children caught in Mali's capricious crossfire. It goes without saying that almost all of the guardians protecting this handful of Canadian women, and the Chinooks they will use to get around, will be their male comrades.

As retired two-star generals Denis Thompson and Dave Fraser told a Senate committee recently, it is unrealistic to think that Canada, with such a small population, will ever be a big force in peacekeeping, but it could obviously be doing far more than it has said it will do in Mali. Among the gaps these generals believe Canada could fill are specialized roles in communications, intelligence and logistics.

It is not Canada's fault alone that it has done nothing much to help the UN. The U.S. has gone from providing little leadership there to providing none at all. Nor has the UN had much success convincing other wealthy countries to provide a lot of military capability. Like Canada, they have had trouble escaping the 1960s- and 1970s-era mindset that peacekeeping is benign and involves placing neutral forces between enemies who actually desire peace, or at least a ceasefire.

Few countries put their hands up to do peacemaking today. Those that do wrap themselves in a feel-good Band-Aid ironically provide terrorist groups with fresh prizes to target.

Such actions, which are invariably undertaken alongside ill-equipped and often poorly led armies from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia who are mostly there to collect a UN paycheque, will never lead to any lasting peace, though that remains the declared purpose of every UN military mission.

The government's approach until now has been to tell Parliament and the public as little as possible. It has been hamstrung by an ill-considered campaign promise and has been unable to figure a way out of it without risking Canadian soldiers' lives. Going into the desert in Mali with a small, lightly defended force is no solution.

At least six of Canada's nine infantry battalions, each comprising about 600 troops, are languishing at home with nothing to do but train and train some more. Yet it is precisely such well-trained soldiers whom the UN has badly wanted for several years.



Without any sense of embarrassment or shame the Trudeau government, moving in slow motion, intends to do as close to nothing in Africa as possible without actually doing nothing. It will then announce that the blithe campaign promise the prime minister made more than three years ago has been fulfilled.

► About the Author

Matthew Fisher is a Fellow with the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He was born in northwestern Ontario and raised there and in the Ottawa Valley. He has lived and worked abroad for 34 years as a foreign correspondent for the Globe and Mail, Sun Media and Postmedia. Assignments have taken him to 162 countries. He has been an eyewitness to 19 conflicts including Somalia, the Rwandan genocide, Chechnya, the Balkan Wars, Israel in Gaza and Lebanon, the two Gulf Wars and Afghanistan.

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