Thanks in part to the UN’s blue helmets, Africa is at its most peaceful for decades. But the job is not yet over—and can be done even better

HIS white hair neatly parted, Major-General Muhammad Khalid of the Pakistani armed forces looks out over a sandy beach from his air-conditioned office in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia. His command of local UN forces is but one of a string of peacekeeping posts he has held in the past two decades, none as comfortable as this. His troops are better equipped and organised than any he has seen, while conflict has become rare. His main worry is bureaucracy. “I cannot spend a dollar without filling out forms,” he says. “A lot has changed.”

UN peacekeepers in Africa have long acted to calm things down after bloody dust-ups in the bush. It is a job they still do. In the Abyei region of Sudan, blue helmets are keeping combatants at arm’s length, at times using their own vehicles as barriers. But elsewhere their role has expanded vastly. Protecting civilians has become a big part of many missions,
putting additional strain on peacekeepers as they find themselves in the role of policeman. Argentine officers in Côte d’Ivoire chase local bandits in coffee plantations.

The protection of national leaders has become another tricky priority. Long gone are the days when the first UN mission in Africa failed to save Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence leader, from being murdered in 1961. In Liberia Indian policewomen in full garb are patrolling the gate to the president’s office, while motorised Nigerian troops form part of the security detail. Tasks have spread in all directions. Bangladeshi troops in Liberia run job-creating computer classes. In Somalia the UN alongside the African Union backs a land war against Islamist fighters. Conducting complex national elections, a vast logistical task in places with few roads, has become a UN speciality across Africa.

To assess the success of today’s eight missions, ambassadors from the 15 countries now represented in the UN Security Council visited the continent last month. At every turn they heard suggestions that the troops could be used more effectively: hardly surprising, given that many multinational missions lack coherence. Often the staff list reads like a joke: the policing is done by Nigerians, the cooking by Ethiopians and the fighting by Indians and Pakistanis, alongside rather than against each other. In practice, co-operation often works better than expected. The ambassadors were right to declare the missions generally a success, though several will need adjustment, possibly a reduction of troops.

Liberia requires fewer soldiers and more genuine policemen. Violence still flares at times. Nigerian troops disarmed local policemen last year when they started firing at demonstrators. The demobilisation and reintegration of rebel troops has not gone well. A former child soldier with a dull stare who calls himself Domination says, “I still have nothing to my name.” But most Liberians applaud the UN. “Without them there would be fighting,” says a bar owner in the town of Ganta, in the east of the country.

In neighbouring Sierra Leone the ambassadors visited the closest the UN has to a success story. They declared that heavy weapons bought by the police, a controversial procurement decision, had been transferred to the army. Peacekeepers left Sierra Leone in 2005, three years after the end of an 11-year civil war.

A troop reduction is also likely in Sudan’s Darfur region. UN planners recommend a cut of more than 3,200 soldiers, 16% of the total. Violence has ebbed from its peak a decade ago but fighting still occurs; several rounds of peace talks have failed. Sudan is one of Africa’s big conflict spots, so it is a focus of the UN. The war between north and south has simmered down but has yet to finish completely, despite the south getting independence last year. Two other large countries with violent pasts, Congo and Côte d’Ivoire, are on similarly hopeful trajectories. Their conflicts have become less bloody but remain unresolved. The UN has managed to do little more than freeze the warring parties in place. Still, that has saved lives.

In Côte d’Ivoire, UN troops patrol the main roads, rifles poking through car windows. They provide what little security there is in the country. If they departed tomorrow, chaos would reign once again. But the mission is a shambles. Its previous head was deemed ineffective; the new one has been asked by Western ambassadors to raise his game. Troops should be reassigned from cushy digs in the de facto capital, Abidjan, to rural posts. A voluntary disarmament programme, whereby only 1,300 guns were collected, needs rehashing. Demobilisation has largely failed.

**The biggest mess of them all**

And then there is Congo. Even with 20,000 troops the UN cannot hope to pacify such a vast, impenetrable country. Its men are often helpless in the face of shocking violence. Mass rapes occur almost under their eyes. Still, the UN occasionally uses what muscle it has. It recently accused the armed forces in neighbouring Rwanda of equipping a proxy force and supplying it with recruits. Renewed fighting broke out last month but so far has not spread.

A key to success for UN peacekeeping is the provenance of the troops: horses for courses. Poor countries send by far the most men on UN missions. Asians predominate, with
Bangladesh, Pakistan and India in the top three spots. They fund their armed forces by sending them abroad at the UN’s expense. China has rapidly increased its contribution in recent years, hoping to win prestige and trust. But these armies are less well trained and equipped than Western ones. Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian general who ran the UN operation in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, has written about the problem of deciding where to deploy his small contingent of Belgians to get the best results, as they were much more effective than his more numerous third-world soldiers.

In Sierra Leone the UN peacekeeping mission was saved by a small contingent of British crack troops that stopped a rebel advance on the capital, Freetown, in 2000. At the same time, Jordanian soldiers are said to have tried to charter a ship to flee. Only once peace is secure can inferior UN troops be usefully employed. A lack of helicopters is a frequent snag. Richard Gowan at the New York-based Centre on International Co-operation, says, “What the UN really fears is a situation where they solely rely on really low-end militaries.”

Sorting out troop contributions has become urgent. Poor countries are upgrading their armies, raising the cost of each soldier. The Indians now subsidise their UN troops from their own government budget. Recently they requested a 57% increase in the UN reimbursement rate, currently about $1,000 a month per soldier. The UN countered with a 7% raise. The Indians say they may scale down their commitment.

At the same time, America may tentatively step back into peacekeeping as the memory of its “Black Hawk Down” humiliation in Somalia fades. The first senior American in 16 years is to join a UN mission as chief of staff to the Pakistani major-general in command in Liberia.