

Editorial

Mercenaries Of Mercy

The Times, May 4, 1994

Should the UN subcontract peacekeeping to the neighbours?

In less than a month of fratricidal mayhem, as many Rwandans are thought to have been slaughtered as have died in former Yugoslavia. The estimate of 200,000 mainly Tutsi victims can only be a guess : independent witnesses are few.

When the fighting erupted, the 2,500-strong UNAMIR peacekeeping force sent to Rwanda by the United Nations last year to monitor a peace settlement had neither the mandate nor the firepower to restore peace. Faced with the choice between heavily reinforcing UNAMIR or pulling out, the Security Council decided last month to withdraw all but 270 observers. Even the International Red Cross, redoubtably present in the world's worst conflicts, has withdrawn its international staff. In Tanzania, the world's largest emergency camp is being hastily constructed for

250,000 mainly Hutu refugees.

To avert further genocide, Dr Boutros Boutros Ghali, the UN Secretary-General, has appealed for a UN force powerful enough to reimpose order. American officials have responded by suggesting that the US would be prepared to help finance and transport a force mustered by the Organisation of African Unity. The OAU, which has berated the Security Council for its inaction but none of whose members came forward last month to offer troops, is thus being asked to muster what sounds like an army of mercenaries, contracted out to the UN.

All troops under the UN flag are, in theory at least, paid for by the UN membership, but a specific offer of Western money to subcontract peacekeeping to non-Western troops is a new departure. A regional volunteer force under the UN flag has obvious attractions. To some extent, Nato is

playing that role in Bosnia. Although the parallel is far from exact, history offers a model in the condottieri who acted as trouble-shooters for Renaissance princes. And the UN desperately needs to innovate.

The average time-lag between the authorisation of a standard UN force and its deployment is 60 to 90 days. If external intervention is to be used to stop the killings in Rwanda and to calm the rising tensions in neighbouring Burundi, where tribal massacres followed last October's coup and the UN did nothing the need is for forces which can be far more rapidly assembled.

There, in Africa, is the rub. The precedent set by ECOMOG, the joint West African force which has been struggling to bring peace to Liberia, is not encouraging. It is worth attempting to muster a scratch force for preventive patrolling in Burundi. But unless the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front, now closing on government forces, accepts peace talks, Rwanda would be an enforcement operation, not a "cook and look" monitoring of established ceasefire lines.

As Kofi Annan, the UN's under secretary-general for peacekeeping, pointed out yesterday, such a force would have to be highly mobile, well trained under clear lines of command and rules of engagement, and adequately equipped to defend itself and the Rwandan civilians it was

there to protect. The only troops in the region that would obviously measure up are South African. That does not invalidate the idea of mustering an African force now, ready to move as soon as the Arusha accord can be resurrected; but the immediate emphasis has to be on diplomatic mediation, on reopening the borders and airlifting help to refugees, and on choking off the supply of arms to both sides.

The broader issue raised by the American proposal is that the UN, so stretched for cash that it cannot even stockpile blue helmets in advance, cannot move fast enough to tackle fires before they rage out of control. So long as that is true, governments will increasingly dump problems in the UN's lap only when they want an excuse for doing nothing.

Sir Brian Urquhart, for many years head of UN peacekeeping, has called for the creation of a rapid-deployment force of UN volunteers equipped "to break the cycle of violence at an early stage". Such a genuinely international "army of mercenaries" would not be bought cheaply: until the UN peacekeeping budget is put on a more rational basis, the idea stands no chance. But if Western governments are not prepared to put their own troops in harm's way to prevent genocide in countries like Rwanda, they should give closer attention to this and other alternatives.

It is sobering to reflect that had the UN had such a force available in 1991 as a tripwire to stop Serb incursions into Bosnia, the Balkan wars might have been contained to Croatia, and peace might by now have been achieved.