

Box 2.5 Helicopters in Peacekeeping Operations

Helicopters play a key role in implementing peacekeeping mandates and reinforcing the UN's presence on the ground. However, the UN struggles with a severe shortage of these critical assets. As of September 2011, there were only 148 helicopters deployed across UN peacekeeping missions, leaving a shortfall of over 30 percent.

Helicopters have been used in peacekeeping missions primarily in a utility capacity, for logistical tasks such as transporting troops, search and rescue, following rebel movements, and conducting evacuations of wounded personnel, particularly in areas with limited road access or vast geographies. However, more recently and especially in 2011, helicopters have been deployed in an attack capacity, in order to support a much more assertive deterrent posture.

This was seen most recently in Côte d'Ivoire, where helicopters under UN command were a decisive component in the defeat of Laurent Gbagbo and his forces. UNOCI's helicopters, reinforced with rotary-wing asset transfers from the neighboring mission in Liberia (UNMIL), as well as from France's Operation Licorne, proved critical in the standoff. They extended the UN's presence and eventually fired on forces loyal to

incumbent leader Gbagbo, an act both of self-defense and to protect civilians.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), utility and attack helicopters have been critical for the UN's mission, MONUSCO. In accordance with its mandate to protect civilians, the mission has used its rotary-wing assets to assert its presence in the eastern regions and to deter rebel attacks. However, in 2011 India withdrew its remaining utility and attack helicopters from the mission to address domestic security needs, leaving MONUSCO with only fourteen rotary-wing assets (a shortfall of fifteen) and no attack helicopters. According to the Secretary-General, the shortage impacted the deployment of troops, joint operations with Congolese forces, and the mission's ability to support the November elections.

In Darfur, the UN and AU's joint mission, UNAMID, currently has only five helicopters out of the required twenty-four. This crippling shortfall has limited the mission's ability to protect civilians from attacks, or help facilitate the necessary distribution of humanitarian aid.

The process of finding replacement helicopters to strengthen the UN's missions in the DRC and Darfur has been difficult. So far, only a few African nations have pledged assistance.¹ Generally, the

pool of helicopter-contributing countries is limited. Of the 193 member states of the United Nations, just 13 provide all the military utility and attack helicopters currently deployed. Many countries simply lack the needed rotary assets to cover their own domestic needs, let alone the needs of UN peacekeeping. Meanwhile, those countries with a sufficient inventory are tied down in theaters of operation elsewhere.

There is hope that as NATO operations in Afghanistan draw down, Western helicopter units may be transferred to UN peacekeeping missions. Given the reluctance of many Western states regarding the handover of command and control, reforms to the use and management of UN helicopters—both in the field and at headquarters—are needed to address their concerns and to ensure that helicopters are used to maximum effect. The UN may also need to increase incentives for potential helicopter contributors, and improve its system of reimbursement for deployed assets.

Until a solution can be found, the shortfall in helicopter assets will continue to significantly impede the ability of UN peace operations, particularly in geographically diverse and less secure settings, to implement their mandates.

Note: 1. As of 30 June, UNAMID reports that an Ethiopian multirole logistics unit, a Rwandan medium rotary-wing utility aviation unit, and Nigerian reconnaissance and reserve companies are expected to deploy later in the year, while an incoming Senegalese battalion is expected to reach full strength by October 2011. MONUSCO has secured commitments from one country only, South Africa, in the form of one utility helicopter.