

# **Psychological Fitness – Experiences from UN Military Peace Enforcement Operations in the DRC April 2003 – January 2005**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

The African war, 1996—2002, formally came to an end when the Peace Agreement was signed in 2002. However, uncontrolled armed groups and local forces, foreign rebel groups and some dissident elements within the Congolese National Army, all mainly located in Eastern Congo, did not accept the Peace Agreement. As a result of their activities, widespread criminality, illegal exploitation of natural resources, ethnic cleansing, weapon smuggling and massacres continued during 2003 and 2004.

UN Military Forces, eventually organised into two brigades in the District of Ituri and the Kivu Provinces and, mandated for Chapter 7 operations, became a key asset for the protection of the civilian population, re-establishing security and enforcing the Peace Agreement. Action was taken through a series of military operations, in all 30-40 in number, with the aim of creating a secure environment for the population, disarming militiamen and bridging the conflict within the Congolese National Army.

I intend in this short paper to look at three military operations, how they were affected by Psychological Fitness and how in turn Psychological Fitness amongst the ranks of the two brigades also influenced operational effectiveness.

### **1.2 Factors influencing the Psychological Fitness**

As Brigade Commander I was only able to assess Psychological Fitness through the behaviour of the Brigade officers and how they reacted to situations, the willingness to take on dangerous missions and through my impression of how operations were conducted and, of course the behaviour of units and soldiers on the scene.

The following factors, amongst others, affected Psychological Fitness;

#### Negatively

- Unclear mandate and rules of engagement
- Unsuccessful operations
- Tiredness
- Insufficient logistic support

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- Uncertainty as to what is expected from units and individuals
- Own casualties
- Accusations of and investigations into collateral damage
- Accusations of and investigations into misbehaviour
- Feelings of being exposed to uncontrolled dangerous situations
- Criticism from superiors, media, home country and civilian population
- Commanders' absence in action

#### Positively

- Successful operations
- Credit and support from superiors, media, home country and civilian population
- Clear responsibilities, mandate and rules of engagement
- Commanders' presence in action

Psychological reaction amongst private soldiers or elements of battalions, as a result of battlefield experience and the aftermath of combat situations, were never reported to Brigade HQs. When and if such reactions occurred, they were taken care of by national representatives and contingents.

Other factors that influence the situation are of course relations within units, how a unit prepares for an international mission, the level of education and training, cultural background, and general experience of life. For United Nations military forces these areas are a national responsibility.

### **1.3 Own Casualties**

From December 2003 to May 2004, available statistics show that the **Ituri Brigade** was in action fighting militia forces for a total of 49 days, almost every third day. These figures include both our more comprehensive proactive operations at battalion level as well as other incidents such as ambushes on our convoys. Our casualties were one killed and eight wounded. More soldiers had been wounded in the period September-November 2003. In February 2005 eleven soldiers were killed in an ambush.

From March 2004 to January 2005 the **Kivu Brigade** lost eleven killed and fifteen wounded due to direct fire or in accidents connected to operations and in particular ambushes. On 6 June 2004 a platoon was ambushed. Two soldiers were killed and eleven wounded.

## **2.0 IMPROVING PSYCHOLOGICAL FITNESS**

### **2.1 Situation**

The Ituri District is situated in the north-Eastern part of the Congo, bordering Uganda. In June 2003, after widespread massacres, an EU/French- led Battle Group was deployed to Bunia, the capital of Ituri. For the most part, violence was temporarily stopped in the town. In July 2003 a UN Security Council Resolution mandated MONUC to act under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. MONUC was authorised to use force in Ituri and in Kivu Provinces to protect civilians, ensure passage for humanitarian agencies and to give support to the Congolese Transitional Government.

Additional UN troops were sent to the DRC and the Multinational Ituri Brigade was formed at a total strength of 5,000 men. The Brigade was made up of four rifle battalions and supporting units. The brigade was equipped with more than 100 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and attack and utility helicopters. The Brigade took over from the EU Force from mid-August 2004.

## **2.2 Military actions**

On 15 September, the Armed Group, L'Union des Patriotes Congolais (UPC) again tried to take over Bunia by promoting riots and orchestrating attacks on UN military units. UPC represented the Hema tribe and was quite well organised and equipped. We used our Chapter VII mandate firmly; the UPC political and military headquarters in the southern part of the town was cordoned and searched, 50 militiamen were arrested together with the UPC Chief of Staff, and a lot of weapons and ammunition were confiscated.

Riots spread all over the town and UN vehicles and troops were shot at. We cleared the town from south to north and had to fight block by block. In the evening we found quite a lot of dead and wounded militiamen. We had also arrested another 20 militiamen, identified as riot leaders. Next day our helicopters reported that armed and uniformed militiamen were massing from the northeast using civilians as human shields to approach the town. We held back the attack helicopters for the moment, but when a truck with about ten militiamen approached the town it was taken out by one of our attack helicopters. The UPC militia groups then turned around and went back into the bush. The action taken had sent a strong message to the armed groups that we were serious about our mandate.

## **2.3 Lessons learned**

The operation was extremely successful; “the United Nations had managed to fight back effectively” and had thus paved the way for further peace enforcement operations into wider Ituri. We received a lot of credit from the Force Commander and MONUC HQ, New York HQ, the African Anglo- and Francophone media and Bunia citizens. Responsibilities designated during the operation were clear, as well as the mandate and our Rules of Engagement. The Battalion Commanders and I were present most of the time, commanding the units on the streets and in the area surrounding Bunia. We were lucky to register no casualties among our ranks. Logistic re-supply worked well since we were operating only a few kilometres from our bases in Bunia.

Self-confidence and spirit and, as a result, Psychological Fitness among our troops was boosted initially, but dropped off somewhat in some quarters when we were later accused by Amnesty International of having tortured some prisoners and, by a particular Non-Government Organisation, of having used too much force. Further investigation proved nothing.

## **3.0 MAINTAINING PSYCHOLOGICAL FITNESS**

### **3.1 Situation**

With the Ituri Brigade fully organised and in place we started our operations and deployment out into wider Ituri. The District as a whole was also declared a weapon-free zone. The armed groups were allowed to keep their weapons awaiting demobilisation, but only inside certain camps authorised by the UN. Security improved slowly all over the District, but not to the level expected due to the fact that the armed groups did not fully comply. They slipped out of their authorised camps, armed themselves and carried out looting, raping and even smaller massacres. Some illegal HQs and camps had still not been dismantled.

We launched quite a number of operations to show the armed groups that we were serious about our mandate to protect the civilian population and to enforce the declared weapon-free zone. Most operations involved a multinational battalion task group supported by helicopters.

### **3.2 Military Actions**

In March 2004 we were again facing difficulties with the UPC, which apparently had reformed. Armed militiamen were seen close to and even inside Bunia. At the time I was commanding the Kivu Brigade, but in the absence of the Ituri Brigade Commander I was given command of both brigades. We prepared a March campaign to break the back of the UPC Military Wing.

On 15 March we conducted a four-company search operation in a thirty square kilometre area to look for weapons, with the aim of forcing the armed elements back into the authorised camps. In an area 40 km north of Bunia, after a heavy firefight, we dismantled an illegal militia camp, co-located with a brigade headquarters and later on two more illegal camps.

On the 16 March we carried out an airborne operation and dismantled a strong point, again after an exchange of fire, 65 km north of Bunia.

On 18 March we deployed a Battalion Task Force into the Nyamamba area near Lake Albert to conduct a major operation aimed at disarming the UPC militia. The area harboured about 300 militiamen who had been harassing the civilian population over a wide area. Two UN companies with APCs moved in from the south backed up by another company as reserve in rear. A fourth Company was lifted in by helicopter and landed north of the area, tasked to deal with one of the three militia camps and to cut off possible escape routes towards the north. Initially one UN APC platoon was ambushed in an area of elephant grass. The militiamen opened fire at our units when we approached their camps and also on a number of other occasions. The Ituri Brigade responded effectively in accordance with our Rules of Engagement. The attack helicopters were brought in four times in the close air support role, mainly to eliminate resistance at the three of the camps and to stop militiamen from fleeing. After releasing one prisoner held by the militia and dismantling all camps, the area was searched for militiamen and weapons. Twenty-four prisoners were sent to Bunia. Two of them were shot when they tried to escape. A considerable number of militiamen were killed and wounded on these proactive operations.

### **3.3 Lessons Learned**

The March campaign proved successful; militarily, UPC never fully recovered and took a low profile over the next six months. Again, we received a lot of praise from the Force Commander, MONUC HQ, New York HQ, the media and the civilian population. Responsibilities designated during all three operations were very clear, as were the mandate and our Rules of Engagement. I commanded the operations in the field myself together with the battalion commanders. We did not suffer any casualties. Since this operation only lasted for four days and the soldiers were able to rest all three nights we faced no logistic problems. The self-confidence and spirit among our troops was either maintained or restored. We were not accused of any violation of the mandate or the Rules of Engagement, or any other form of misconduct.

## **4.0 DETERIORATING PSYCHOLOGICAL FITNESS**

### **4.1 Situation**

The Provinces of North and South Kivu bordered with Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. From March 2004 the 4,000 strong Multinational Kivu Brigade and Brigade HQ were deployed to Bukavu, a town of 1 million people.

Initially the Kivu Brigade had to handle the Bukavu Crisis, when the Congolese Army unity cracked. The ex-ANC militia, at the time a part of the Congolese Army, mainly recruited from among the Congolese sympathetic to Rwanda and opposed integration of the national army; i.e. government forces with ex-militia. The ex-ANC claimed they were needed to protect the minority of the population with recent or historical roots in Rwanda. In January 2004 the Deputy Military Region Commander in South Kivu, Colonel Mutebutsi, who always claimed that he was a senior officer in the Congolese Army, came into conflict with the Military Region Commander (MRC). After a coup attempt, in which Mutebutsi tried to kill the MRC in a military attack, the crisis started to develop. Mutebutsi was suspended but continued to play a major role. Secretly he brought in more ex-ANC troops into Bukavu and was supplied with weapons, most probably from Rwanda.

I forced Mutebutsi's troops to remain in their accommodation after a number of clashes on the streets in Bukavu. Mutebutsi continued to prepare what was later known as the third Congo Rebellion. His allies

were General Nkunda, an unemployed ex-ANC commander with a wide influence, and a number of politicians, all with roots in and connections with Rwanda.

Kivu Brigade troops took too long to deploy to South Kivu and Bukavu. Administrative arrangements were delayed and I was not allocated a sufficient number of flights. My plan was to disarm Mutebutsi's troops when I had enough troops on the ground.

## **4.2 Military Actions**

On the 26 May 2004 Mutebutsi attacked elements of the Congolese Army using ex-ANC units. Heavy fighting involving all kind of weapons, including mortars, broke out in the centre of the city. A lot of civilians were killed. In the period 27-28 May the Kivu Brigade separated the opposing forces. We even used attack helicopters inside the city. On 29 May we pushed Colonel Mutebutsi's forces back to their camp. The same morning an observer team was ambushed north of Bukavu. We airlifted in a rifle platoon by helicopter, which rescued the survivors and brought back the remains of the dead military observer. The militia returned and prepared to attack and were then engaged by attack helicopters. Eight militiamen were killed and a large number wounded.

While all this was going on I brought forward to Bukavu as many of the Brigade units as possible. Force HQ reacted to my requests and prioritised the Kivu Brigade. We were reinforced by an extra company every 24 hours. The units arrived with light equipment for a four-day operation. We faced imminent logistic problems.

At the same time General Nkunda, marched from North Kivu with ex-ANC soldiers to join Mutebutsi. He was reinforced along the route, probably also from Rwanda, and his force grew to about 2,000 men.

I was planning to disarm Mutebutsi's units on 30 and 31 May. With Mutebutsi neutralised, Nkunda would probably not dare to approach Bukavu. When MONUC HQ realised what I had in mind I was given instructions by email. We were expected to be neutral. On 30 May I told MONUC HQ about my plans to deal with Nkunda's troops. My intention was to use the attack helicopters while his troops were canalised along the shore of Kivu Lake. The tactics were to warn Nkunda verbally, if needed followed by warning shots, and finally, if Nkunda still did not turn back, to attack his advance units. MONUC HQ responded; in this situation deadly force was not in accordance with the policy of my superior HQ.

Nkunda passed Bukavu airport and headed for Bukavu on 1 June. We blocked the road and delayed him for 18 hours, giving the Government Forces time to escape Bukavu. This also prevented further fighting inside the City.

On 2 June Nkunda's troops reached Bukavu and spread out in the City. Private houses and shops were looted and citizens robbed. We learned of summary executions and widespread rape, especially in the suburbs. A lot of people lost their lives or were injured. The Kivu Brigade was now policing in Bukavu, an impossible mission in this enormous urban area.

The Bukavu crisis influenced the Peace Process seriously and delayed it politically and militarily for more than five months. When Nkunda arrived in Bukavu demonstrations started all over the DRC in all major cities. The population blamed the UN for not stopping Mutebutsi and Nkunda. MONUC HQ, pressed by severe attacks on UN establishments in Kinshasa, prepared for evacuation, which definitely had brought a halt to the Peace Process. UN property was destroyed. Later we came to understand that New York HQ had expected MONUC and the Kivu Brigade to use force and did not share the views of MONUC HQ on a neutral posture in Bukavu.

I felt encouraged by this fact, and after Nkunda and his troops had left Bukavu on 6 June, we started to push Mutebutsi's troops back to their camp areas. On 8 June Mutebutsi and his troops fled the city. We cordoned and searched his positions, arrested 30 of his soldiers and took 400 weapons. Mutebutsi

appeared after a time and occupied Kamanyola, a town 40 kilometres south of Bukavu and established a defence line to the south. We attacked his troops with our attack helicopters and Mutebutsi's soldiers escaped into Rwanda. These operations restored the civil population's confidence in us to some extent. Psychological Fitness among the ranks of the Kivu Brigade improved.

The Echo National Contingent was substantial and made up of one battalion and several other units, staff officers and military observers, serving in many places in the DRC. The battalion had served with me in Ituri and had done quite well there. The Commanding Officer of the Battalion, reporting to the Contingent Commander only about national matters, was a brave and proactive officer. The battalion was re-deployed to South Kivu in March 2004. On 29 May the Echo Contingent Commander, a full colonel, suddenly arrived in Bukavu. He had probably had instructions from home. Suddenly my Echo Battalion stopped reacting to fire, did not carry out arrests, never or seldom interfered with looting and remained passive when rioting occurred. The Battalion Commander ceased to function and appeared to be deeply depressed. The Echo Contingent Commander was sending emails to New York HQ and MONUC HQ claiming that I was putting his countrymen at risk. He tried to convince all and everyone that the Kivu Brigade should remain strictly neutral when faced with military action and not interfere in Congolese Army business. In September a MONUC Investigation was convened to clarify his interference, since he was accused of having prevented the Echo Battalion from taking proper military action on 28 different occasions.

### **4.3 Lessons Learned**

During the Bukavu crisis Psychological Fitness within the Echo Battalion sank to its lowest level and this in turn influenced other battalions. The main cause is believed to be the unclear interpretation of our mandate by MONUC HQ during the crisis and the consequent restrictions put on my proposed operations. Despite this a large number of successful actions were conducted and the civilian population was given reasonable protection. Much heroism was displayed by the ranks of the Kivu Brigade. Generally, commanders were present at all major actions.

With full support logistically and without manipulation of our mandate the crisis could have been stopped at an early stage. Furthermore, MONUC HQ's interpretation of the mandate enabled the Echo Contingent Commander to restrain the Commander the Echo Battalion.

In addition, all negative factors were in place thus promoting a decline in Psychological Fitness. We were heavily criticised not only by the Congolese but also by the international media. The civilian population hated us. We were not encouraged by MONUC HQ. Our soldiers suffered considerably from insufficient logistic support and bad hygiene conditions. Many of the units were camping in parks or on sports ground, and most of the soldiers were extremely tired after only a week. We lost soldiers; three dead and eleven injured. Operations came to an end after four weeks when we attacked Mutebutsi in Kamanyola. Immediately after that two Bukavu crisis investigations into collateral damage were initiated. Again, nothing was proved.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS**

- Mission, mandate and Rules of Engagement must be clearly articulated throughout the organisation. If not, confusion and stress will negatively influence Psychological Fitness. If commanders are present in action, they show that they are willing to take full responsibility.
- Successful operations will have a very positive effect on Psychological Fitness, since they will normally result in credit and support from the media, superior HQ, home nations and the civilian population; a spiral of success.
- Own casualties must be minimised. Besides the human aspect casualties normally have an impact on Psychological Fitness.

- Lack of proper logistic support as well as tiredness is generally not crucial in the shorter perspective.
- Investigations into misconduct and collateral damage present an ethical dilemma for all commanders. These inquiries always have an immediate severe adverse impact on Psychological Fitness. On several occasions when Brigades were being investigated for sexual abuse, there was no longer a willingness to carry out operations.
- Psychological Fitness promotes successful operations; a spiral of success.

