

Topic: UN Force Intervention Brigade against the M23

Observation:

The UN's Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) provided critical support to the Congolese national army (known by its French acronym FARDC) – effectively neutralizing the M23 rebel group, which had thwarted peace and stability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) over the past 18 months.

Discussion:

The *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC) and the UN's FIB attacked and defeated the M23 during a 4-day period, 25-28 October 2013. Keys to success included initiative, surprise, unity of effort, leadership, and discipline.

During the FARDC's offensive operation against the M23, the UN's FIB played an important supporting role. FIB units were organized into three task forces. Each of the FIB task forces supported a FARDC task force from the 8th Military Region. After a spate of minor clashes/engagements between the FARDC and M23, the FARDC 8th Military Region Commander decided to take the initiative against well fortified M23 positions along the major roadway from Kanyamahoro to Rutshuru – launching a 3-pronged attack to divide and conquer M23 elements. In support of the attack, the three FIB task forces established blocking positions to prevent M23 forces from maneuvering along the roadway or linking up with one another.

The FARDC offensive against M23 forces near Kanyamahoro (the southern front of the offensive) totally took the M23 forces by surprise. M23 positions swiftly fell to the rocket fire, Mi-24 attack helicopters, and FARDC ground force attacks. FARDC forces advanced on two other fronts (central and northern), driving the M23 forces out of their positions and into a small area in the Virunga mountains near the borders with Rwanda and Uganda. UN FIB blocking forces played a crucial role in allowing FARDC forces to focus firepower on three primary objectives, confident that M23 elements would be prevented/blocked from maneuvering along the major roadway. Indeed, FIB infantry forces successfully engaged M23 elements in the south and the north, with particularly heavy fighting in the north near Rutshuru and Kiwanja.

The victorious FARDC forces that dislodged and defeated the M23 were a vast improvement over the disorganized, demoralized, and poorly trained forces that were swept aside just 11 months earlier when M23 forces captured Goma in November 2012. Most of the credit for the overhaul goes to the new commander of the FARDC 8th Military Region, Major General Bahuma Ambamba. MG Ambamba orchestrated a comprehensive effort to totally transform his forces – cracking down on discipline, improving training especially for combined operations, significantly raising morale, and earning an excellent reputation among his soldiers. With regard to soldier discipline, there have been no reports of atrocities committed by 8th Military Region soldiers in recent operations (August through October), whereas such acts/crimes had been common during earlier FARDC operations.

The new commanders of the UN's FIB and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (the overall UN mission in the DRC) also played critical roles in the campaign against the M23, as they took a proactive stance and full advantage of UNSC Resolution 2098 – which allows the use of offensive combat force to neutralize and disarm Congolese rebels and foreign armed groups. The FIB Commander, Brigadier General James Mwakibolwa, demonstrated exceptional leadership skill in utilizing the UN's air assets, artillery, and mortars to act as force multipliers supporting FARDC in its August engagement with the M23, and in positioning these and infantry assets during the October offensive. The MONUSCO Force Commander, Lieutenant General Carlos dos Santos Cruz, continuously provided strong backing for the campaign – giving the FIB Commander the necessary space/freedom to conduct offensive operations. This unity of effort among the MONUSCO Force Commander, the FIB Commander, and the FARDC 8th Military Region Commander was vital to overall success.

Although the FARDC and the UN's FIB teamed extremely well in the October offensive, a number of deficiencies were identified. Foremost among them was communication problems – owing to incompatible and ineffective UN radio equipment. Two other shortfalls were lack of aerial surveillance and shortage of attack aviation assets. Overall, however, the FARDC-FIB partnership and success against the M23 demonstrated that a UN Force Intervention Brigade was able to provide invaluable support for the host nation security force (and the UN Mission) in an environment where a large rebel group posed a [major threat to the civilian population and peacekeeping efforts](#).

Recommendations:

1. The UN should continue the practice of deploying a Force Intervention Brigade on missions where sizable rebel groups/irregular militaries pose a major threat to the civilian population and to UN peacekeeping contingents.
2. To the greatest extent possible, host nation security forces should be in the lead with regard to offensive/combat actions against rebel groups/irregular militaries – with the Force Intervention Brigade in a supporting role when needed, pending approval by the UN Force Commander. This is not to say that the Force Intervention Brigade should not be able to take independent action, as necessary, to protect UN elements and/or civilians when necessary.
3. The UN should adequately equip future peacekeeping forces, to include provision/allocation of sufficient communication, aerial surveillance, and aviation assets, as determined by mission analysis.

Implications:

If the UN does not deploy a Force Intervention Brigade on future missions where sizable rebel groups/irregular militaries pose a major threat to security, then the civilian population (as well as the UN peacekeeping contingent) may become vulnerable to attacks – and, if civilian casualties begin to mount while the UN contingent does little/nothing to protect them, then the credibility of the UN mission will suffer.

Comments:

Related references:

1. [United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo \(MONUSCO\)](#) – UN website.
2. [Ban 'strongly condemns' killing of UN peacekeeper in eastern DR Congo](#), UN News Centre, 27 October 2013.
3. [Blue Helmet Blues: UN Force in the Congo, Take Two](#), Lewis Brooks, ThinkAfricaPress, 18 October 2013.
4. [Intervention Brigade: End Game in the Congo? UN Peacekeeping Task Enters a New Phase](#), Lansana Gberie, [Africa Renewal](#), August 2013.
5. [The UN Intervention Brigade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), Major General Patrick Cammaert (Ret.) and Fiona Blyth, International Peace Institute (IPI), July 2013.
6. [Strategic Lesson Number 19: "Blue" and "Green" Forces Operating in Tandem](#), David Mosinski and Dan French, PKSOI, 18 June 2013.
7. ['Intervention Brigade' Authorized as Security Council Grants Mandate Renewal for United Nations Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo](#), UN Security Council Resolution 2098 (2013),UNSC release 10964, 28 March 2013.
8. [The M23 and the Crisis in Goma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), Derek Duncan, Global Ministries Associate for Global Advocacy and Education, 18 January 2013.
9. [Keys to Success for the African Union Mission in Somalia](#), SOLLIMS Lesson 896, David Mosinski, PKSOI, 2 November 2012.
10. [Eastern Congo: Why Stabilisation Failed](#), International Crisis Group, 4 October 2012.

Event Description:

This lesson is based on the article, "[Pincer Movements, Choppers and Teamwork: How the M23 was Pushed Back](#)," by Darren Olivier, ThinkAfricaPress, 6 Nov 2013.

NOTE: This Lesson is available in SOLLIMS at:

<https://www.pksoi.org/index.cfm?disp=lms.cfm&doit=view&lmsid=1307>