

Filling the void: Contractors as peacemakers in Africa

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The international community has witnessed a growing trend over the past ten to 15 years of for-profit firms playing an increasingly important role as partners supporting peace, stability and reconstruction operations in conflict, post-conflict and post-disaster environments around the world. Nowhere else has the need for, and use of, contractors become more apparent than on the African continent. Hired as expert field operators by clients that include national governments, the United Nations, the African Union, non-government organisations (NGOs) and multi-national corporations, these companies have proven themselves to be indispensable and cost-effective contributors to the restoration of peace and stability to populations suffering the consequences of armed conflict, civil war and natural disaster.

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Collectively, these companies can be described as comprising the Peace and Stability Operations Industry (PSOI). The PSOI is an industry that emerged, in large part, at the end of the Cold War to fill the operational gaps in international peace and stability operations. The gaps were created by the decision of governments throughout the world to restructure and reduce the size of their military forces, mainly by focusing on combat capabilities over non-combat or service support functions such as logistics, laundry and cooking. Today companies in the PSOI provide services and support in three main sub-categories, namely logistics and support, security sector reform and development, and private security.

Logistics and support

Logistics and support companies represent the overwhelming majority of operators in the PSOI, employing nearly 90 per cent of field workers and earning approximately 90 per cent of the revenue. The reasons for this size are manifold. First, the vast majority of militaries engaged in contemporary peace and stability operations do not have sufficient personnel or the support structure required for long-term, sustained theatre logistics. In the case of the US military forces this is principally because of a decision not to maintain large reserves of specialised personnel and expensive equipment during peacetime, whereas militaries hailing from less developed countries never had this capability in the first place. Second, the infrastructure in most conflict, post-conflict and post-natural disaster environments is usually severely damaged or completely destroyed, making it incapable of supporting large-scale peace and stability operations. These environments must therefore be reconstructed before any effective and lasting security, development, relief, governance or commerce programmes can be initiated.

The disproportionately large size of the logistics and support category is also due to the wide variety of functions it encompasses. Firms specialising in these functions cover the gamut of operations, ranging from construction to heavy lift and aviation, mine action, medical services, communications, warehousing and armoured vehicle servicing to unexploded ordinance disposal. In an era of military downsizing and globalisation, most sovereign governments have come to recognise that outsourcing these non-combat service support functions gives them access to valuable experience, saves money, and allows their militaries to commit their limited budgets and resources to their core functions of fighting wars and enforcing peacekeeping mandates.

The international community has consistently shown its need for and use of logistics and support firms. Increasingly, national policies have created frameworks – usually in the form of Civil Augmentation Programmes (CAPs) – that encourage bridging between private firms and military forces, such as the United States' Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP), AFRICAP (being used by the AU for their peacekeeping missions), and the Canadian CANCAP. The increasing utilisation of these

large-scale, comprehensive support contracts by national governments and international organisations clearly show that they regard the PSOI's provision of logistics and support capabilities in peace and stability operations as a long-term practical role.

Logistics and support firms are currently providing vital services in a number of African states, such as Liberia and Sudan, and were previously used in Angola, Sierra Leone and Ethiopia-Eritrea. These firms play key roles on the African continent, as the majority of African conflicts are often both internal and intractable.

Currently working in one of the world's most dangerous and prolonged conflicts, the AYR Group is a logistics and support company that provides aviation support to the AU in Darfur. The following comments by Stefan Jocks (AYR website 2007), the director of operations of the AYR Group and a helicopter pilot with more than ten years' experience in Africa, provides excellent insight into the issues encountered and solutions provided by a logistics and support firm in Darfur: '... operating a fleet of aircraft in the Darfur region in Sudan has been one of the most challenging tasks in my career. Countless bureaucratic hurdles have to be dealt with on a daily basis. Maintaining a sufficient flow of personnel, spare parts and consumables proved to be extremely difficult. Civil unrest has erupted spontaneously on many occasions, requiring aircraft to be recalled or rerouted in-flight.' Despite these difficulties, the AYR Group has over 10 000 hours of accident-free flight time to its name, and has transported some 23 000 passengers, 14 000 tons of cargo and one million gallons of jet fuel to the AU peacekeepers with no significant unscheduled downtime of its aircraft. This is the type of combination of skill and capacity that is enormously helpful to peace operations organisers, as it allows them to plan their missions with the knowledge that the support they need will be there on time and at the right levels.

Security sector reform and development

Security Sector Reform and Development (SSRD) companies make up the second sub-category within the international PSOI. These companies provide expertise in training and development programmes aimed at assisting conflict-ridden countries to rebuild their governmental, security, economic, civil society and legal sectors. Diplomats, academics, historians and humanitarian NGOs often cite the immediate post-conflict period as the most tenuous and dangerous for fledgling governments. If reform and development programmes are not quickly and effectively initiated, there is a likelihood that there will be a return to violence. Like other nations that have experienced war, African nations that are reconstructing, suffer from critical capability losses in the areas of training, policing and human security. SSRD firms have proven their usefulness repeatedly by helping countries recover from this loss of institutional memory, human resources and education. SSRD companies have the capacity to bridge the gap between peace and stability by building political infrastructure, training locals, and ensuring that local security is improved.

SSRD companies are willing and able to deploy resources months earlier than their counterparts in governmental, international and regional organisations. Accordingly it is not surprising that private companies often implement the first reform and development initiatives and are responsible for conducting triage on the most vital, yet vulnerable, components of post-conflict societies. Such companies have become some of the most important and sought-after partners in post-conflict environments, helping to lay the groundwork for future peace in countries at risk of sliding back into conflict.

SSRD firms have consistently worked with African nations to prevent a return to violence and served as a means to end violence. There are a number of firms operating throughout the continent, many focusing on Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Sudan. One particular firm, PADCO-AECOM, is heavily engaged in peace initiatives in Northern Uganda and particularly the national reconciliation programme. PADCO-AECOM has engaged in dialogue with senior officials, assessed the situation in the north, and has built capacity for conflict resolution and public participation at national and local government levels. They have also provided training courses in leadership skills, gender awareness and regulatory dialogue, as well as direct mediation services to organisations at government and grassroots levels (PADCO website 2007). The wide-ranging abilities and resources of SSRD companies allow them to make positive changes on the ground, while creating long-lasting solutions for the future in failed, failing and fragile nations.

Private security

Private security companies (PSCs) comprise the third PSOI sub-category. Though their services have proven essential in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Southern Sudan and elsewhere, they are the most controversial actors in the industry. This is largely because they are often armed and undertake particularly high-risk operations. PSCs provide security for key personnel, critical infrastructure and property in conflict and post-conflict environments.

Security has been described as being 90 per cent of the problem but only 10 per cent of the solution for peace and stability operations. This maxim recognises that although the provision of security alone cannot turn an unstable country into an asset to the international community, virtually nothing can be accomplished in an unstable environment. Therefore the first step is the creation of a safe and secure space in which international NGOs, local citizens, elected officials and businesses can work. PSCs are able to provide the specialised and robust security functions that highly unstable environments require but which the national militaries and the UN are unable to provide.

Furthermore, PSCs can often undertake operations faster, more cost effectively and with fewer personnel than their counterparts in the UN and elsewhere. Most PSCs

have decades of field expertise and regional experience. Their key personnel are usually among the most highly trained, professional and capable actors in conflict and post-conflict environments. Their knowledge and skills have long been recognised by the private sector, but they are only now starting to be used for peace and stability operations by organisations such as the UN, humanitarian NGOs and governments. This has been accompanied by a complete turnaround in the way PSCs are perceived, and it now seems that while it is acceptable to use professional private security firms to protect mines, warehouses and factories, many critics regard the use of private security to protect families, towns and villages as unacceptable.

PSCs have helped improve stability in several states in Africa, including Kenya, Nigeria, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa and Sudan. Moreover, these firms have helped train and employ thousands of people, protected the restoration of vital infrastructure such as electricity and road networks, protected staff, facilities and equipment in hostile areas, and reduced threats from terrorist and insurgent groups (RONCO website 2007). PSCs provide rapid reactions and solutions in areas where, for reasons of political risk or lack of capacity, Western governments are unwilling to send their troops. As Doug Brooks (2007:33–35) notes: '[W]ith the reality that the West is reluctant to commit its militaries, the only way Africa is going to acquire military capability to end its many conflicts is to contract the services from elsewhere. Fortunately, these private services are readily available at a remarkably affordable price.'

Industry associations

The PSOI brings rapid deployment surge capacities and specialised capabilities to international peace and stability operations. Their comparative advantage comes from their ability to make capable responses and quickly assemble experts and specialised material, not just from a single country, but from the entire world. They are also far less likely to be hampered by the bureaucratic and sometimes partisan political concerns that hinder the decision-making processes of governments, militaries and large international organisations.

The PSOI benefits from effective client oversight in the form of transparency and accountability. Client oversight is a function that allows for greater contract flexibility – a useful element of contracts in volatile environments which often lack effective legal structures – and enhances company credibility. Because industry associations represent a whole group, they can liaise and coordinate with national governments and international organisations on a level not available to an individual company. Industry associations are able to create and enforce professional standards and guidelines with the help and supervision of a broad array of international contributors, including partners in the developmental and humanitarian NGO community, national governments and the UN. Potential clients are increasingly becoming aware of the value of trade associations, and

recognise the necessity of ensuring that the companies they hire are willing and able to adhere to internally recognised industry codes of conduct.

Africa and the peace and stability operations industry

When it comes to international peace and stability operations, the private sector has become the ‘invisible elephant’ in the room. Although the international community has increased its use of the private PSOI, the untapped potential of these firms to assist with stabilisation and reconstruction in Africa is enormous. Peace and stability are the goals of all governments on the continent, and acting in partnership with the private sector on logistics, support, security, development and security sector reform services would enable African states and organisations to achieve their goals faster and more cost effectively than if they continue to rely on the UN and other international institutions alone.

Contracts with private companies have the added – and often overlooked – benefit of ensuring substantial employment and skilled training for local populations. The competitive nature of the industry dictates that contracting companies employ as many local persons as possible. Such persons not only earn a competitive wage while employed by the contractor, but also develop valuable skills that will remain in the country after the security company has left.

African decision makers are increasingly recognising the potential of the private sector to support African peace and stability operations, especially with regard to training and logistics. The establishment of the Africa Command (AFRICOM) by the US offers new opportunities to tap into US funding and advice on the use of private contractors. Although the PSOI is not capable of single-handedly reversing decades of economic and political instability that have plagued the African continent, it could make a huge contribution. While it is healthy to remain cautious about the use of the PSOI, the time has come for the debate to shift from ‘whether’ the private sector should be used to ‘how’ it can best benefit the people and governments of Africa.

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