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World Peacekeeping efforts hampered by shortage of resources — and women

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By Nahlah Ayed

UN wants to double number of women peacekeepers by 2020

The list of shortages would make any commanding officer blush. In Mali — the world's most dangerous UN mission — international peacekeepers are short an intelligence and reconnaissance unit, a special forces company, and an explosive ordinance disposal company.

In South Sudan — the world's newest country, now ravaged by civil conflict — the UN mission is in need of two hospitals, two special forces companies, military police and combat engineers.

Helicopters are in especially short supply in both these troubled countries and throughout the UN peacekeeping system. But the most glaring shortage: women.

At a time when UN peacekeepers are grappling with protecting huge civilian populations of mostly women and children affected by war — and when some of those peacekeepers have been accused of sexually assaulting women they're meant to protect — it's hard to believe that of the more than 100,000 of them serving around the world, only four per cent are women.

All this was outlined to the some 80 defence ministers and officials gathered in London today to talk peacekeeping. It's hoped that more of them will make pledges to support beleaguered forces trying to keep the peace — and to deploy more women. The problem was apparent even in the room where officials met. Only five of the representatives are women.

"We recommit to the goal to double the total number of women troops in our missions by 2020," said Hervé Ladous, the UN's under secretary general for peacekeeping operations, in an open session.

Making peacekeeping better

A day-long soul-searching exercise in London is hardly enough for the ministers to tackle all the stumbling blocks to more efficient, effective and long-lasting peacekeeping. And it's certainly not enough to try to bridge the differences on how peacekeeping or peace operations should be led and conducted.

The main preoccupation, we're told, is making peacekeeping better. Recent allegations of peacekeepers doing little to protect civilians in a July episode of violence in South Sudan, and the accusations of sexual assault in the Central African Republic, mean they must also be preoccupied with improving the image of peacekeeping.

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And in addition to material shortages that simply aren't being filled, many of the UN's 16 current missions are also facing new risks — new extremists groups, and new terrain — that require better training and preparation.

What hasn't changed is that women and children are disproportionately affected by conflict — whether in Syria, or South Sudan or the Central African Republic.

Enter the UN Security Council. It adopted a resolution 16 years ago urging an increase in women's participation in matters of peace and security. It spoke of the "important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping," and the need for their equal participation.

And yet the numbers continue to lag, despite the obvious disadvantage to peacekeeping missions that could use all the help they can get. And despite the principle of it the matter. How would the world change if half of its peacekeepers were women?

The UK Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) says research has shown women's participation in peace building ups the chances for long lasting peace.

Improved safety for women

It can also vastly improve lives for women living under protection of UN troops. Officials also believe it would also make it more likely that women report sexual assaults or exploitation.

"In some countries there is a taboo about women talking to men outside their families, which makes it impossible for male soldiers to communicate directly with them," Lady Fiona Hodgson, chair of the GAPS advisory board, wrote in *The Guardian* today. "Yet speaking to women is vital if they are to protect them properly and understand the threats they face."

That's why GAPS is urging the defence ministers to set concrete targets on increasing the participation of women in peace operations, and commit to connecting with groups representing women on the ground.

The ministers signed a communiqué today in which they committed to increasing the number of women in uniformed roles. It says they recognize the "indispensable role of women in UN peacekeeping and in conflict resolution as a whole, and underscore that their participation at all levels is key to the operational effectiveness of missions." For his part on the topic, Canadian Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan related a personal experience at the meeting today: he said that on his first deployment to Afghanistan, a soldier saved his life — three times.

"And she just happened to be a female. They bring an absolute tremendous force multiplier and we need to now turn this into action in a meaningful way." There was no mention of how.

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Canada has committed up to 600 troops, 150 police and \$450 million to peacekeeping — the most Canada has committed in more than a decade. Sajjan said Canada would even host the defence ministers meeting next year.

Perhaps bringing more women to missions could be another contribution as Canada wades back in to peacekeeping.