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MARCH
2014

EUFOR RCA: EU force or farce?

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The European Union's failure to deploy promptly its military operation to Bangui in the Central African Republic calls into question the EU's ability to assume its international security commitments as well as the CSDP priorities, even though these were revised as recently as at the EU defence summit last December.

On March the 17th, the EU was planning to officially launch its military operation in the Central African Republic - EUFOR RCA - and to start a gradual deployment of about 1000 troops, including soldiers and executive police. The plan was to achieve full operating capability by the end of May and from June on to assume protection of the area around Bangui airport. Although the mission established by the Council Decision (2014/73 CFSP) on the 10th of February was rather limited in the number of troops, scope and mandate, it still had an important support role to play. Its rapid deployment has been essential because it would have allowed the French troops deployed in Bangui since December to move from the capital towards the Western parts of the conflict-ridden country.

The situation in the CAR is increasingly serious. Since the resignation of the interim President Michel Djotodia on 10th of January and disarmament of the Muslim Seleka militias, there has been an increase in violence against Muslims, who comprise roughly 15% of the 4.5 million population. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, some 833,000 people have been internally displaced across the country. The international understanding of the EU's role was that by supporting the on-going efforts of the French soldiers (operation SANGARIS 2.000 troops) and the African-led International Support Mission (AFISM-CAR 6.000 troops) in stabilising the country, the EU would have given the United Nations enough time to organise a transition of force before the end of 2014. The UN Security Council is currently discussing deployment of a 12.000 forces for the UN peacekeeping operation to the CAR.

However, the launch of EUFOR RCA is now in jeopardy. The EU force generation meeting on March the 13th that was supposed to lead to an official launch of the operation failed to generate not only a sufficient number of troops but also the logistic support necessary to initiate the deployment. Among the troops pledged so far are two contingents of 140 soldiers: one French and one Georgian (thus contributed by a non-EU member) as well as one mixed contingent provided by

Estonia, Latvia and Portugal. That means that the EU with the help of Georgia was able to deploy rapidly only about 500 soldiers – or only half of troops needed. This stands in striking contrast with the declared EU's rapid response capability from the 2010 Headline Goal (which included full operational capacity of the EU Battle Group concept declared already in 2007).

At the EU defence summit, last December, the EU leaders also pledged to find ways to allow the bloc to deploy civilian and military missions overseas '*more rapidly and effectively*'. Three months later, despite a letter sent by the EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton to the European governments ahead of the latest force generation meeting, in which she called for the mobilisation of forces and spelled out the consequences of failure to launch the operation on time, the situation did not improve. The EU fell short in terms of infantry units, logistical vehicles and soldiers qualified in logistics. On Friday March the 14th the embarrassment was growing as the French Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence issued a joint statement accusing their European partners of failing to put forward enough soldiers and calling on the EU to assume its responsibilities in international security.

One possible explanation of the situation could be the fact that during the last few weeks the attention of the EU leaders has shifted to the growing tensions with Russia over Ukraine and discussions regarding the use of political and economic sanctions. Although preparation of the EUFOR RCA has been in progress since February, diplomatic efforts have been focused on the East. Some countries, like Poland and Moldova, withdrew earlier declared contributions citing concerns over the developments in Crimea. However, by using the Ukrainian crisis as an excuse for the EU to not act in the CAR only demonstrates the EU's inability to tackle multiple crises simultaneously. This is particularly embarrassing since the Ukrainian crisis has so far not required a military response by the EU. Moreover, the EU's struggle to rapidly generate even a 1000 troops and the necessary equipment for its deployment in CAR signals a general European weakness in rapid deployment capabilities. The failure to act may therefore lower in the long term the EU's reputation as security actor.

Another potential explanation for the EU's difficulty in deploying joint forces within CSDP could be the current financing system. The Treaty on European Union (TEU) prohibits that 'expenditure arising from operations having military or defence implications' be covered by the EU budget. The basic rule for military operations is that 'costs lie where they fall' according to which countries pay for most of the expenses they incur when participating in an operation. The distinction is made only between expenses directly supported by the contributing member states and the 'common costs' of an operation (amounting for 10-15% of the total cost), which are covered by the so-called ATHENA mechanism. The mechanism is made up of member states' contributions in accordance with their GNP. The current economic situation in some European countries understandably limits how much they can contribute, if they are not only asked to provide troops and hardware, but also to bear the financial burden. However, given the small number of troops required for a relatively short term deployment in EUFOR RCA, it seems unlikely that the financial issues is the main obstacle.

Even taking into account the current political issues or financial limitations, it is important for the EU credibility not to fail on its international security commitments once these have been made. The establishment of the EU operation in the CAR was mandated in January by the UNSC Resolution 2134 (2014). A failure to actually deploy troops would be a considerable let down for the African Union's partners and the UN community. Not only are the lives of the people living in CAR, where a massive ethno-religious cleansing is continuing, at risk but the EU's reputation as 'security provider' is also at stake. If the EU wants to be taken seriously as a '*global actor, ready to share in the responsibility for global security*' then it has to stand up quickly and demonstrate that it has serious rapid response capabilities.