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Author(s)	Murphy, Ray
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The Irish Times

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EU bewildered by Ireland's attitude to peacekeeping force for Macedonia

Recently, after intensive lobbying by Ireland, Defence Force personnel were allocated a number of positions on the EU lead preventive deployment mission in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Much to the embarrassment of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Defence Forces, the Attorney General advised the Government that Ireland could not contribute troops to this mission.

This has serious consequences for Irish foreign policy, both within the EU, and with regard to participation in future peacekeeping operations. It was also an inauspicious start to EU peacekeeping efforts.

The UN in general, and the Secretary-General in particular, has made conflict prevention the cornerstone of the organisation's quest to promote a more peaceful, equitable and prosperous world.

The Secretary-General is on record as stating that the time has come to translate the rhetoric of conflict prevention into concrete action. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Macedonia, where deployment of UN troops succeeded in containing the violence, and preventing a spill-over of tensions from neighbouring Yugoslavia and Kosovo.

The situation in Albania remains unstable, and there is the ongoing problem of preventing arms trafficking to Kosovo.

In addition, there are problems along the Albanian-Yugoslav border, and in the demarcation of the country's border with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In March 1995, the UN established the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP), to replace the UNPROFOR mission in Macedonia.

The mandate of UNPREDEP remained essentially the same: to monitor and report any developments in the border areas that could undermine the confidence and stability of Macedonia and threaten its territory. This was regarded as a very successful mission, and the military component of UNPREDEP co-operated with civilian agencies and offered ad-hoc community services and humanitarian assistance to the population.

It maintained close co-operation with the OSCE and the then European Commission Monitoring Mission in Macedonia.

Unfortunately, the functions of the force came to an end in February 1999, when the Security Council failed to renew the mandate due to the veto of China.

Speaking after the vote, the Chinese delegate said his Government had always maintained that UN peacekeeping operations, including preventive deployment missions, should not be open-ended.

China considered the situation there to have stabilised. This view was not shared by other members of the Security Council, who especially feared a spill-over of violence from Kosovo across the border.

As a result of the inability of the UN to act in this case, the Secretary-General stated that a new approach would have to be adopted by the government of Macedonia and its neighbours, in consultation with regional organisations.

In January of this year, EU foreign ministers approved the first ever EU peacekeeping mission, and agreed to replace the NATO peacekeeping operation that took over when the UN mission was vetoed by China.

This deployment was at the express invitation of the Macedonian President, Mr Boris Trajvoske. However, some Macedonian parliamentary deputies were sceptical about the EU's ability to replace the NATO presence.

At about 350 soldiers from a wide range of countries, the EU mission was described as small but significant. This first outing by the EU does not augur well for the future.

Now Ireland has reneged on its commitment, as the mission does not have a UN mandate. Under the so-called triple lock mechanism agreed as part of the Seville declaration prior to the Nice Treaty referendum, before Ireland can participate in a peacekeeping mission it must be UN authorised, and approved by the Dail and Government.

No one can take issue with the necessity for Dail and Government approval. However, the legal and political loops Ireland has chosen to apply to participation in this mission are a source of some bewilderment and irritation to our EU partners, and are characteristic of Ireland's inept posturing on issues of European foreign policy and security co-operation. There is also the matter of participation in other EU monitoring missions and under the auspices of the OSCE.

This is a lightly armed preventive deployment of peacekeepers in the European theatre. It would be difficult to find a more worthy and less controversial peacekeeping operation, but Ireland now finds itself sidelined from the EU's first tentative steps to play a meaningful role in support of this small and vulnerable European country.

Dr Ray Murphy is director, LL.M. in international peace support operations, NUI Galway. He served with UN, OSCE and EU-sponsored missions in the Middle East, Africa and the former Yugoslavia.

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