

THE HINDU

Date:10/01/2005 URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/2005/01/10/stories/2005011001771000.htm>

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India should spare more personnel for peacekeeping operations: Kiran Bedi

"I think the very presence of a woman officer reduces violence ... She is a symbol of peace, life, dignity, and reconciliation ... All peacekeeping directly benefit women for they are most victimised by internal civil wars ... That's why the larger presence of women in peacekeeping is so critical now."



KIRAN BEDI, Civilian Police Advisor in the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), heads 6,772 police officers from 91 countries in 17 missions worldwide. Sujata Srinivasan interviewed her before she left New York on what would be her last diplomatic visit from the U.N. to India. Dr. Bedi is accompanying the Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, during his visit to New Delhi on January 10 and 11. Dr. Bedi, who was awarded the U.N. Medal for Outstanding Service in May last year, will step down in February ending her three-year assignment a year earlier. Here, she discusses the role of India in DPKO missions, the increasing need for women in peacekeeping, and her experiences at the U.N.

Sujata Srinivasan: India is the third largest contributor of civilian police to the U.N. and has sent 343 officers who are primarily deployed in Kosovo. Do you think India should contribute more?

Kiran Bedi: I do believe India can spare more and should spare for its own benefit. Our IPS officers have well-rounded administrative skills and are extremely versatile. So this is a straight edge. When working for international security and peace, they act as India's best ambassadors

and come back with a larger vision of policing. They are able to experience internationally respected, good practices, and evaluate what is relevant for their work back home.

Currently, there are just four woman civilian police officers from India at the U.N. Will this improve anytime soon?

The Indian Government has to offer the U.N. more names. There is no reservation, but then more women will qualify in the Special Assistance Test (SAT) if the Government nominates more of them.

The Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, announced last September that India would step up its contribution of women officers. How far is this under way?

The honourable Minister made the right announcement. But it should be turned into a policy.

Has the policy picked up any momentum?

Not yet.

Will you be discussing this with the Home Ministry during your current visit?

Yes, I will. I can give them a firsthand account of how we can do better. India loses out because we don't nominate enough people or we withdraw people faster.

On the subject of women officers, you have always been extremely proud of the Mahila Battalion of the RAF.

Oh yes! They are the best in the world. I tell you, they're the finest; I haven't seen a parallel anywhere. In fact, special representatives of the Secretary-General sometimes call me up and say 'Kiran, can you get us the Mahila force?' Can you believe it? Their reputation has travelled far and wide. India should let go of a platoon here and a company there; these women will be our best ambassadors. India could become the biggest contributor of women in uniform anywhere in the world. India has this potential and I'm sure it will use it.

Do you believe that women bring sensitivity to peacekeeping missions, especially in areas where women and children are victims of human rights violations?

Absolutely. I think the very presence of a woman officer reduces violence. She is not standing armed to the teeth. She is standing as a symbol of peace, life, dignity, and reconciliation. Timor-Leste is an example. All peacekeeping directly benefit women, for they are most victimised by internal civil wars. When a woman in uniform wears a blue helmet or blue cap it empowers women and inspires girls. They don't scare people. That's why the larger presence of women in peacekeeping is so critical now. And that is where India's potential must be given to the world.

When compared to other countries, India seems to respond late with regard to offering people.

Yes, India does respond late.

Is it because of having to wade through the sheer mass of bureaucracy?

I think it's the mass of wading through so many levels.

In the two years that you've headed the department, have you seen any change with regard to this?

Marginally. India must identify the right people to represent the country and allow a longer tenure without withdrawing them when the U.N. wants them to continue. But they (Indian officials) say, 'No, others are waiting.' What do you mean by others are waiting? Why don't you let this person perform fully?

For instance, the U.N. needed a very good trainer to stay back in Sierra Leone. But India insisted that somebody else must replace him because that somebody was waiting for a chance. The point is not who takes a turn at the U.N. '*Isne leh liya, yeh meri bari hai.*' (He has had his turn, it's mine now.) It's not a question of '*meri bari hai.*' It's a question of an Indian performing well. What happens is that we're losing the treasure of experience. This person was gaining in seniority and had earned a reputation and everybody said, 'That was a great Indian, he's a great trainer.' But now he goes and somebody else comes with another set of skills and starts from point one.

Is this something you often encounter?

Yes, we often encounter this. This is the biggest bane.

Is this trend more conspicuous in India when compared with other countries?

It's conspicuous among South Asian countries in general. I notice this happens in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. It's the same psyche, the same culture. *Sabko U.N. ka chappa lagna chahiye.* (Everyone needs the U.N. seal.)

Sudan will be a big mission for the U.N. this year and you have completed a field assessment. India has offered to contribute officers. In what areas will they be deployed?

Our requirements would be in training, planning, administering, mentoring, monitoring ...

2004 was a busy year for the Blue Helmets, with crucial operations established in Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti and Burundi. These regions pose enormous challenges in implementing the U.N. mandate. How does your department help reconstruct a nation from a shambles?

The police systems of these countries were destroyed completely. One repeated lesson in governance is that there can be no development without internal security. A well-trained and well-equipped professional police service is the best safeguard of human rights and democracy. Hence the U.N. civilian police rebuild police structures, vet, recruit, appoint, mentor and train the local police to undo, do, and do by themselves. I have seen the remarkable difference peacekeeping efforts have made and continue to make in war-torn countries. No doubt it takes time. But with concentrated, well-thought strategies, countries get back on their feet. The biggest beneficiaries are the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable.

What are the biggest challenges in this process?

The challenges are, to begin with, assessing and realistically conceptualising the achievable target and strategies for a devastated country or region. This is followed by receiving timely and right kind of support from member-states and in selecting and appointing skilled personnel. In order to make our systems efficient, we have put in place intensive operating procedures, guidance documents and policies that provide for extensive quality standardisation. Due induction plays a vital role.

The U.N. is expected to retain a residual presence in Sierra Leone till June this year. How do you recruit, train and empower the local police to take over from your team?

It's a gigantic but well-regulated process. There are vetting procedures to ensure that those involved in abuse and criminality in the past do not re-enter. In all this, the local police are kept associated. The U.N. is not forever anywhere. It is only in transition.

How do you deal with human trafficking in areas where your peacekeeping missions are under way?

This is the most sensitive aspect of peacekeeping. But there are systems in place, particularly in Kosovo. It's the same kind that we have in India. The police make the arrest and then there are correctional systems, counselling service, aftercare, and rehabilitation.

But for this to work, there must be well-established criminal justice systems. How bad is this?

It's pretty much broken down. There are gaps which affect the victims.

The U.N. Brahimi report had outlined the importance of expanding the scope of the DPKO to include criminal justice systems. What are your thoughts?

Yes, indeed. This is becoming an area of serious concern. It's a matter of better coordination within the U.N. system to avoid duplication and overlaps. Resource availability is also an issue.

On February 7 this year, you will end your current assignment at the U.N. a year earlier than the norm. Why have you made this decision?

I need to go back to my service and my home. I need to be near my father, he is impatiently waiting for me.

Will you be involved with the U.N., such as in training police officers from India?

Unless I am tasked to do that, I have no business to interfere. I obviously cannot go to the U.N. desk at the External Affairs Ministry or the Home Ministry because these are not my areas. But this experience will certainly not go wasted. I will try to inform policy makers so that our country benefits and the international community benefits from India as well. India has a lot of potential and [the] capability to contribute.

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