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Autor: Rusconi, Giuseppe
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Armed peacekeepers on the way

The Federal Council made its position clear in a message to both Houses of Parliament on August 24, 1992. There is a real chance that Switzerland will put its first armed troops at the disposal of the UN from the beginning of 1995.

But does the Federal Council's proposal contradict the massive refusal by Swiss voters in 1986 to join the United Nations Organisation? The answer to this question is found in the Federal Council's message: "The Swiss people are aware of the role played by the United Nations in safeguarding peace. They are also aware that they cannot stand aside from international operations which have this objective. The Swiss government believes that public opinion is now prepared for intensive participation by our country in peacekeeping operations". Swiss voters would have the last word on this only if enough signatures were collected to provoke a referendum after parliament's decision.

Extending the policy of good offices

This would be the first time since the establishment of our federal state in

1848 that young Swiss men – appropriately armed – would take place in peacekeeping missions (accompanied by serious risk) outside our national frontiers. But in fact it would be no more than a logical extension of the policy of good offices which has been followed since 1988. In previous decades Switzerland took only a very occasional part in peace missions (see article on good offices). Recently, however, unarmed observers have been sent in various capacities to a number of "dangerous" regions (Middle East, former Yugoslavia). Medical units were in Namibia in 1989 and in Western Sahara in 1991. The decisions to join these UN operations were based on a growing need to show international solidarity, as well as to protect the interests of our own country.

The intention is to make troops available for peacekeeping missions by the United Nations or the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. How many troops would make up a Swiss force? The present idea is that about 5,000 armed troops would join the 600 unarmed men now working with the UN.

In what conditions would Switzerland send peacekeeping troops? They would have to be accepted by all parties to a conflict, they would not take sides, and they would use weapons only in cases of emergency. Such cases have occurred in ex-Yugoslavia, where UN troops have been subjected to repeated murderous attacks by armed criminal bands.

Who would take part?

Any soldier may volunteer for the peacekeeping units, provided he has

completed basic training, possesses a balanced character and perfect health and has good professional and linguistic abilities. Previous experience abroad will also be a help. A three-week period of special training will prepare him for his new task. Setting up the Swiss peacekeeping force will cost Sfr. 76 million, and its annual operating costs will be around Sfr. 79 million.

Giuseppe Rusconi

PAX HELVETICA

The canonisation of Nicolas de Flue in 1944 at the climax of the Second World War was a symbol of the type of peace which we could provide – Pax Helvetica. The new saint was the symbol of this peace precisely because he had been the originator of it.

The famous hermit from Ranft spoke a language which was common to the patricians of the towns and the free shepherds of the Alliance of the VIII Confederates at the end of the Burgundian wars in 1481. The real justification for their dangerous action was not the political and material heritage of Charles the Bold. It was the question of finding a correct balance in the collective management of the riches which had been gained. These were not to become an instrument of inequality within our country. For otherwise it would certainly have disintegrated.

This was a principle which enabled us to pass through seven centuries of tumult in Europe virtually unscathed. And on the rare occasions when we were unfaithful to it we were on the verge of total ruin at home.

Our neutrality was solemnly proclaimed for the first time at the Diet held in 1638. But we were not always faithful, and it was not until the occupation of our territory by the revolutionary empire of France that it was clearly understood that what was happening beyond our frontiers indicated that we would be better off if we kept our own counsel. In the Swiss cantons, both old and new, ancient and modern were obliged to come to terms.

The Treaty of Paris of 1815 – emanating from the Congress of Vienna which put an end to Napoleon's wars – stipulated that "the inviolability of Switzerland and its independence from any foreign influence are in the true interests

Switzerland's special geographical and political situation promotes its role as mediator in international conflicts. (Photos: Keystone)

