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Swiss as UN troops

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)



Swiss participation in the UN Namibia mission

Perfectionism not appropriate

UNTAG's mandate was to ensure the peaceful transfer of Namibia (once German South West Africa) to independence and to guarantee free and fair el-

of the policies of the whole of Europe" and that this neutrality was to be "perpetual".

After the final neutralisation of our antagonistic religious passions in the nineteenth-century conflicts of the "Sonderbund" and the "Kulturkampf", we were able in 1920 – between the two great massacres of the First and Second World Wars – to confirm once more the treaty of 1815 "in extremis" and with a concept known as "differential" neutrality. This was proclaimed in the London Declaration at a time when it was thought that international order was to be the guiding light of the future. In 1938 the principle was again transformed, this time into "integral" neutrality.

Today we are approaching the eighth century of our great adventure. We now intend to put ourselves at the service of a pacific strategy which has been determined without our participation by the United Nations and its peacekeeping forces. We are also hoping to reach a privileged arrangement with the political and economic conglomerate which is known as the European Community – to the point of accepting that one day the value of our work will be measured in the same coin as that of our neighbours.

This means of course that even perpetuity must one day have an end. The community of nations now feels less than previously the need for that free area of mediation, of welcome, of negotiation, of humanitarian aid – known as Switzerland. And in putting us back into our rightful place they are restoring to us a role in our own continent. We must return to the geographical, linguistic, cultural and trading elements which in the past gave us so many temptations to break apart. We shall have to think out anew the subtle balance on which Pax Helvetica has always rested mid-way between the needs that others have of our services and the needs which we have of others.

Jacques Matthey-Doret ■

lections. Switzerland took part in this peacekeeping operation from April 1989 to March 1990 by sending a Swiss Medical Unit (SMU) to Namibia – the first time Switzerland had participated in a UN military operation since Korea.

Swiss Review has been able to interview Major Bernhard Scherz, head pharmacist and materials officer in the SMU from March to July 1989.



Medical care is part of good offices either with the ICRC (our picture) or on a UN-mission.

Swiss Review: Major Scherz, what exactly led you to take part in the UN mission?

Bernhard Scherz: The director of the Federal Office of Army Medical Services, in which I was running a military pharmacy section, had been a project leader within the SMU.

What were your functions in Namibia?

I was head pharmacist and responsible for materials, mainly military materials. Since we could bring only a limited selection from Switzerland we often had headaches in meeting the usually very difficult demands of the doctors and nurses. It is not given to everyone to be able to improvise at third-world level and, to take an example, to use one type of injection needle when you are accustomed to another.

Generally speaking, what were the best aspects of the Swiss operation in Namibia?

The SMU was very well received, and its work was highly valued. And it was extremely good for us Swiss to work in daily contact with people from more than 40 nations. There was a very friendly family atmosphere.

And your negative impressions?

In view of the fact that the whole mission went off surprisingly peacefully and that Switzerland had in fact prepared too much – I mean too many clinics and too wide a range of services – there was very often a problem of under-employ-

ment. This problem was partially solved when we decided to start treating the local population. Also, there was very little opportunity for spending leisure hours outside the camp. The distances were simply too big, and our immediate surroundings were unattractive.

What lessons do you think Switzerland can draw from the Namibia operation?

Well, Swiss super-perfectionism is simply not appropriate: as I have said, the huge distances involved and a fear that there might be a big influx of patients led to too many clinics being set up which were then not used. This experience has since been of value to the latest SMU operation in Western Sahara. On the whole, however, Switzerland is in a position to render very valuable services to such UN missions.

Interview: Heidi Willumat ■