[**Shephard**](http://www.thestar.com/authors.shephard_michelle.html)**, Michelle. “How Canada has abandoned its role as peacekeeper”. Toronto Star. October 30, 2015.**

*Canada's role in UN peacekeeping missions has fallen off more sharply than that of any other developed nation in recent years.*

BODA, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC—When Lester B. Pearson spoke more than half a century ago about the need for an impartial, multinational force of peacekeepers dispatched to the most vulnerable corners of the world, he may as well have been talking about Boda.

This village embodies why peacekeeping was created. Hundreds of residents have been living in a state of limbo, wracked with anxiety, trapped by fear of slaughter in homes, churches and mosques situated along a dirt road less than a kilometre long, without benefit of police, army or government.

Pearson, Canada’s 14th prime minister, is considered the father of peacekeeping and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for the “Canadian resolution” that laid the groundwork for United Nations missions

Of course, the world is different now; new threats from “stateless” terrorism dominate world order and global politics. The two Canadians who killed two soldiers in Quebec and on Ottawa’s Parliament Hill and who, according to police, were inspired by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS and ISIL), have brought that reality to Canada.

No one wants to talk about peacekeeping in far away lands when politicians talk of war at home.

Consistently in state-of-the-nation polls, though, Canadians say that the country’s international reputation as peacekeeper is held dear, sewn into our national identity like maple leaf flags on backpacks.

But that reputation does not reflect reality. Today, Canadian troops who earned that reputation in Namibia and Cambodia have been replaced by chequebook peacekeeping.

No Canadian troops are in Boda or anywhere else in the Central African Republic (CAR). None are to be among the 12,000-strong UN mission that was approved earlier this year to stop this poor, landlocked nation of 4.6 million from slipping into genocide.

Ottawa did not offer military advisers. No Canadian helicopters were sent to transport peacekeepers and supplies in a country the size of France and Austria combined. Nor are there Canadian military engineers to build or repair the roads that wash out during the rainy season.

Taxis are weighed down with goods and passengers on the road from Yaloke to the capital, Bangui as seen through the windshield of our pick up truck.

Developed countries have steadily abandoned UN missions during the past two decades, often leaving the work to ill-equipped, inexperienced soldiers of poorer countries eager for UN wages.

But no nation has fallen off as dramatically as Canada. Twenty years ago, the country ranked as world leader in troop contributions. Today, it is 65th among the 193 UN member states, an all-time low when UN operations are at an all-time high.

There are only 34 Canadian military personnel participating in peacekeeping missions worldwide, including seven in Haiti, eight in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and one in Cyprus. There were once 3,300 in the field.

Compare this to Ottawa’s commitment to combat ISIS in a U.S.-led coalition: six CF-18 Hornet fighters, an aerial refueller, two aerial surveillance aircrafts, a 69-member elite team and up to 600 Canadian forces members.

Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird stressed the need for peacekeeping on the 20th anniversary of Rwanda’s genocide in Brussels in April. “We must be vigilant and never allow such horrific crimes to be forgotten or repeated . . . There is much more we can do.”

Addressing the crisis in CAR, Baird said, “The international community must remain engaged to prevent any further deterioration in this situation. Let us not look back when it’s too late and wonder if we really did enough.”

But any debate about the effectiveness of peacekeeping or concerns about the UN, which Prime Minister Stephen Harper has snubbed in the past, is not widely engaged.

Instead, Canada contributes about $250 million each year with little involvement.

Retired Canadian general Roméo Dallaire, the world’s most famous face of peacekeeping, devoted much of his speech as he resigned from the Senate this summer to Canada’s shifting priorities. “Today, we point to the humanitarian aid dollars we’ve given, which are never enough, and proclaim we’ve done our part. Today, we have more sabre-rattling and less credibility, more expressions of concern and less contingency planning, more endless consultation with allies, or so we are told, and less real action being taken, and more empty calls for respect for human rights and less actual engagement with the violators.

“The question is: when will Canada finally answer the call again? In my view, there is no more pressing and more appropriate place to start than with the Central African Republic.”

Dallaire, who remains haunted by Rwanda’s genocide, said in a later interview, “This is an outright abandonment. Any description that tries to minimize that is creating a falsehood in Canada’s position.”

Cameroonian Maj.-Gen. Martin Chomu Tumenta looks and acts like a commander: broad-shouldered, crushing handshake, booming voice. Before sitting to talk, he greets the high-profile diplomats and military leaders who stand at attention on the patio of the Hotel Ledger Plaza, CAR’s only luxury hotel. He appears to command the same respect in the real world, beyond the hotel’s guarded gates, in the streets of the impoverished capital, Bangui

As newly appointed force commander of the UN’s “stabilization mission” in CAR, he has a long wish list: troops, transport, hospitals, advisors . . . “What we have now are promises,” he says. “We’ve been promised just about everything, as usual. We have yet to see those things coming in.”

About 1,800 UN soldiers arrived for the Sept. 15 ceremony that marked the official start of the UN mission. Most are from Pakistan and Bangladesh — now two of the most frequent contributors to world peacekeeping but also two of the world’s poorest countries.

Newly arrived troops from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Morocco take photos of each other during the "re-hat" ceremony when the United Nations took over command from the African Union forces.

The four-hour ceremony, known as a “re-hatting,” marked when the new troops joined the 4,800 soldiers of an African Union force who then simply traded their green AU helmets for the UN blue.

The AU force, as well as 1,200 French soldiers, had been quickly deployed in December 2013 when, over three days, 1,000 men, women and children were killed, their bodies strewn on the streets of the capital. Together, they prevented an even worse slaughter.

But the crisis engulfed the entire country. Nearly a quarter of the population fled to bordering countries; the killing, raping and looting continued. The AU and French troops were quickly overwhelmed.

Calls for a UN mission intensified.

The French troops, known as “sangaris” after a local butterfly, were never intended as a permanent solution. The CAR mission is not only unpopular in France but here as well, as troops from former colonial powers are viewed with resentment and suspicion for the historical baggage they bring.

And the majority of the AU forces came from neighbouring countries, which are often accused of promoting their own interests first. Chad, a predominantly Muslim country, withdrew its 850 troops earlier this year amid accusations that soldiers had fired on Christian civilians in Bangui.

On April 10, the UN Security Council unanimously voted in favour of the CAR mission, but few countries stepped up.

“When you re-hat troops, then the local population sees the blue berets and the expectation is that the United Nations is here, our problems will be solved, which is certainly not the case,” says retired Dutch major general Patrick Cammaert, a military adviser on peacekeeping to former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who travelled CAR early last month with a Human Rights Watch investigator.

Members of the media and military take photos of CAR's president and UN officials at a Sept. 15, 2014 ceremony to mark the formal start of the United Nations peacekeeping mission.

Cammaert says all current 16 UN missions — more than half of them in Africa — struggle with the same shortcomings. “CAR needs a huge amount of mobility. Helicopters — not attack helicopters but transport, lots of them. And troops who can move quickly, stay out for three days and come back. You need foreign police units. You can do community reconciliation. These kinds of things are possible, but you have to come up with the idea and work it out. Maybe it’s new, but try it.

“You have to build it up. State authority: nil. Police, military: nil. Judicial system: nil. Infrastructure: nil.”

Cammaert, who led the UN mission in Congo, says Canada doesn’t have to send battalions but that two small teams with a surveillance system could be vital in reaching the country’s north.

“You can do this for just three months and rotate them.”

But Cammaert is not surprised this hasn’t happened, as politics and the public’s increasingly fleeting attention span trump the “never again” pledge that followed Rwanda.

“Everyone looks at the stories when children are beheaded and people are lynched on the streets and scream, ‘This is impossible, we must do something about it,’ ” says Cammaert. “And then they go have another coffee.”

Canada’s last major contribution was in 2000, when the Liberal government sent 450 military personnel to help secure the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea for two years. But notwithstanding this successful mission, Canada’s commitment had already started to drop dramatically in the late 1990s, in large part due to failures of UN missions to Rwanda and Bosnia and Canada's shameful role in Somalia that ended with the death of a Somali teenager.

Veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi chronicled those mistakes — including how the UN ignored warnings from Kigali and Srebrenica — in an August 2000 report.

Among his warnings was that the norm was fast becoming “the rich contribute money and the poor contribute blood.”

The “Brahimi Report” was intended to usher in an era of effective peacekeeping.

But less than a year after the report’s release, planes flew into New York’s World Trade Center towers, followed by war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Canada, like many developed nations, became a one-mission country, engaging in combat as it hadn’t since the Korean War.

That era ended as the last Canadian troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2011. Unlike in some European countries, such as the Netherlands, which committed combat helicopters and nearly 400 troops to the UN mission in Mali last year, the debate about a return to peacekeeping has barely registered in Ottawa.

In August, Gen. Thomas Lawson, chief of the defence staff (CDS) of the Canadian Armed Forces, asked Royal Military College professor and author Walter Dorn for advice on how Canada could re-engage in peacekeeping. If Dorn were the CDS for the day, Lawson asked, what would he tell the government?

Dorn, an advocate for Canada reclaiming its peacekeeping reputation, saw it as a positive sign. “The Canadian army is not going into another Afghanistan,” he said in an interview. “I think peace operations is one good option for deploying our forces. There is an operational imperative to have some forces deployed some of the time and some vision about what our forces can be used for.”

Lawson wrote in an emailed statement to the Star that while the Canadian Armed Forces is not a large military by global standards, Canadian troops are “making a difference internationally,” through NATO, NORAD, or through bilateral or multilateral partnerships, in addition to the 34 Canadian UN military personnel.

“We respond to direction from the Government of Canada regarding our operations, in alignment with Canada’s foreign policy,” Lawson wrote.

For the people of Boda, the arrival of the “blue helmets” is seen as salvation.

Boda is a microcosm of the conflict in a country that has seen little stability since gaining its independence from France in 1960 but has never been as fractured — or as desperate — as it is today.

The divide between religions dates to March 2013, when the militia group Seleka, mainly from northern Muslim tribes and heavily supported by mercenaries from Chad and Sudan, seized the capital. Seleka’s merciless rule gave rise to vigilante gangs from the mainly Christian population, who called themselves anti-balaka. They matched the Seleka in ferocity, attacking any Muslim in bloody revenge.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced a war crimes investigation last month, saying there had been “endless” instances of rape, murder and forced displacement. A tally of the dead conducted by the Associated Press shows more than 5,000 have been killed this year.

Ashta Issen’s 8-year-old sister is one.

The sisters had gone to wash the family’s clothes in the river one morning in May, venturing to the edge of the road where Muslims live. As they turned to leave, the shooting began. “I didn’t see anything. I just felt the pain,” says Ashta, 13, lifting her sarong to show the shrapnel scars that run along the back of her thighs and calves. Her sister was rushed to the French base, where she died.

Local leaders were meeting to talk about reconciliation when they heard the shots. “We came out and saw the girls were being taken to the French,” said Alexandre Kouroupe-Awo, the security prefect. “Things can look calm and then suddenly, something happens.”

There are three phases to peacekeeping: stop the violence, reduce tensions during reconciliation and help with reconstruction.

Past international efforts to help CAR have lacked the resources or the commitment to be anything but expensive Band-Aids.

It is hard to underestimate what this UN mission faces, or the cost of failure.

Yet in other ways the conflict here is not as intractable as elsewhere. It is still fought mainly with the machete in a tit-for-tat cycle of retribution in one of the poorest countries in the world. Recruitment is not based on an ideology or backed by well-financed global groups — not yet, anyway.

And unlike in Rwanda, the UN mandate allows the peacekeepers to use force if needed to disarm militias rather than being able to act only in self-defence.

In terms of protecting the vulnerable, it is hard to forget this: as I met with Asha and her relatives, three small children silently approached and sat down beside me. They remained unsmiling and almost frozen, not making a sound for nearly 45 minutes.

“Their father was killed trying to transport coal near the border,” says Amadou Bemba, their uncle. “Then, recently, their mother was killed when she went looking for wood.”

Like many here, Bemba is not from Boda but from a neighbouring village that was looted and burned.

Siblings Sharifa, Mohammed and Abdelakim are all under age 6. Bemba and his wife are looking after them but are also dealing with the death of their own 9-year-old son. Food and money are getting scarce.

The three siblings spend much of their day wandering Boda, following each other and seeking comfort from adults, who are often too distraught to offer any. Bemba insists his orphaned niece and nephews be photographed. “Please,” he says. “Tell what happened to them.”

When talk turns to the blue helmets, as Bemba calls them, a smile spreads across his face.

“We know they’ll help,” he says. “They can do what the French and others cannot. They’ll stop the fighting and then we can go home.”

