



## Denmark Remains Committed to UN Peacekeeping - but is Contemplating SHIRBRIG Pull-Out

by Jonas von Freiesleben  
6 August 2008

*In the middle of June 2008 several Danish media outlets reported that the governments of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland are seriously considering withdrawing their support for the United Nations Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) - a rapid deployment capacity established in 1996 at the initiative of Denmark. The Center for UN Reform Education met with Danish Defense Minister, H.E. Mr. Søren Gade, in Copenhagen for a talk about future Danish engagement in multilateral military operations.*

Danish involvement with United Nations peacekeeping is almost as old as the Organization itself. With its high multilateral profile, the small Scandinavian country of just over five million people has often been at the center of conflicts with its many blue-helmets, and Denmark is widely recognized for its activist policies at the UN Headquarter in New York. Consequently, it came as a surprise to many when news leaked in June 2008 that the Danish government is examining the possibility of withdrawing its support for the United Nations Standby High-Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG).

SHIRBRIG was established in 1996 at the initiative of former Danish Defense Minister Hans Hækkerup. The intention was initially to create a rapid deployment force consisting of 4000 to 5000 troops trained to the same standards and drawn from the seven founding Member States: Austria, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Sweden (later to be expanded with Finland, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and Spain, while six more nations; Croatia, Czech Republic, Egypt, Jordan, Latvia and Senegal would join as observers). Due to a lack in troops pledged by Member States, however, the ambition was later adjusted from a full rapid-reaction brigade to a nucleus force, which would only be able to set up the core of a deployed headquarters.

A part of SHIRBRIG - almost 700 soldiers - was deployed with great success on the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000; but has not been used on a large scale since. The planning element - some 20 officers and staff - is currently located in Høvelte outside Copenhagen.

The Danish Defense Minister, Søren Gade, recently sat down with the Center for UN Reform Education in his office at the Defense Ministry in Copenhagen for a conversation about the future of Danish involvement in international military operations. The Minister has a long personal history with the United Nations. He is a major of the reserve in the Danish Army and among others served as a UN observer with UNTSO in the Middle East from 1990 to 1991. He is passionate about peacekeeping and clearly relishes the opportunity to delve into the subject.

Gade quickly points out that the total number of Danish soldiers on international mission is among the highest in the world compared to the size of the country, and he notes that, as of late June 2008, 145 Danish soldiers are posted in various UN peacekeeping operations abroad. In addition, 1072 soldiers are currently deployed under NATO-command in Afghanistan, the Balkans and in Iraq, while 40 are stationed in the US and in Iraq as part of coalition forces.

### **SHIRBRIG and EU Battlegroups**

Asked about SHIRBRIG, the Minister explains that its demise has not been for want of trying and that it does not in any way signal dissatisfaction with the United Nations. "The concept was right, but the demand from the United Nations simply wasn't there," he says and adds that Member States of

SHIRBRIG have continually failed to show sufficient political will to provide troops to either the *force register* or to potential or real operations.

One of the key problems with SHIRBRIG, he elaborates, has been an overall lack of political will by Member States to pledge the troops needed to make it work from the beginning of the process. “The UN is only as good as its members want it to be,” he reveals. “And in the case of SHIRBRIG, either member countries were unable to relinquish the troops needed or if soldiers finally were provided, countries wanted specific influence over how they were put to use.”

According to the Minister, this led to serious questions among the members of SHIRBRIG and in the Danish government on the allocation of resources. “We came to the conclusion that although we tried hard to make SHIRBRIG work, the resources would be better spent elsewhere,” he says.

The trend at the moment seems instead to move away from SHIRBRIG with its global membership to narrower military cooperation under the leadership of regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) or the European Union (EU). In fact, although the decision to terminate SHIRBRIG has not yet been finalized, many European members of the brigade have long signaled an increased willingness to focus on EU forces, the so-called “EU Battlegroups,” as well as building African military capacities at the expense of SHIRBRIG.

EU Battlegroups are military forces under the direct control of the European Union Council, each consisting of at least 1,500 combat soldiers. The initial idea of a European military force was first developed during a high-level EU meeting in 1999, and today fifteen battlegroups have been established, most of which consist of multinational contributions. The groups rotate actively, so that two are ready for deployment at all times. In 2004, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan welcomed the plans and emphasized the potential value of the battlegroups in helping the UN boost its rapid deployment capabilities. “And there seems to be political will in the different European capitals to supply the troops needed for the groups,” Gade notes.

Denmark is currently barred from participating in any military cooperation under leadership of the Union due to a special agreement reached with the EU after a Danish referendum rejected the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The Minister does not hide his dissatisfaction with the agreement; viewing it as a direct impediment to further Danish military engagement in the European Union. “If we get rid of it [through a new referendum] we could participate,” he adds.

## **Africa**

Because of the restraint the agreement imposes, Denmark is currently focusing on military aid to African countries, the African Union as well as increased cooperation with the four other Nordic countries; Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

The Minister recently led a meeting between Nordic defense ministers at which they decided to investigate the possibilities of creating a combined Nordic contribution which could be used by the UN in a mission in Africa. “It’s just a vision at the moment,” Gade adds, “but we are definitely interested in looking into it seriously.” He also notes that they discussed the idea of strengthening African Union efforts to build a rapid reaction force as well as other ways to boost African military capacities in relation to peacekeeping operations. “We are talking about building military capacities in order to enable the Africans to take more responsibilities themselves.” He adds that Denmark is already working bilaterally with the African Union on military matters as well as with capacity building within the Ethiopian-based Eastern African Brigade (EASTBRIG). The brigade is one of the most advanced of the five regional brigades, which the AU hopes to bring together as the African

Standby Force by 2010, and has largely been modeled after SHIRBRIG. Great Britain, Sweden, France, Portugal, and other European countries have similar efforts ongoing in other regions.

The Minister also says that Denmark could play a key role in enhancing the naval capacities of African countries. Considering its long traditions as a seafaring nation, he views Denmark as perfectly suited to aid within this field. “Safe seas are of immense importance to a region’s growth potential,” he emphasizes, although it is, he adds; “an often overlooked part of creating stability in a region.”

Based on Security Council resolution 1772 (2007), Denmark has already deployed one navy vessel to escort ships chartered by the World Food Programme through the pirate-infested waters of Somalia. “In Denmark we have the naval know-how and could really help with boosting African capacities, for instance by improving their coast guards,” he says while pointing to the Gulf of Guinea as another potential area of Danish engagement.

### **The United Nations**

The Minister is keen to point out that the development away from SHIRBRIG and towards increased cooperation with regional or sub-regional African organizations, the other Nordic countries and the European Union by no means signals dissatisfaction with the United Nations. He emphasizes that Denmark is firmly anchored in the United Nations and that will continue. According to the Minister it is always a question of how the resources are used most efficiently. “But overall,” he says, “the UN is doing a great job.”

*This interview is a part of a larger research project on UN rapid-deployment capabilities currently being undertaken by the Center for UN Reform Education and scheduled for later publication.*