

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Blue overalls, not blue helmets

Germany needs a "Peace Corps" for development and reconstruction missions in the Third World.

On Sunday, Dec. 20, half a million Germans of all ages took to the streets protesting the recent racist terrorist attacks against refugee hostels and foreigners in the country. The demonstrators carried lighted candles—a symbol of non-violent action that was used effectively during the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This was the first time that Germany had witnessed non-violent mass protests of such a scale since the pre-war Persian Gulf crisis of late 1991, when several hundred thousand youths took to the streets, protesting against the imminent danger of war.

The candlelight rallies, human chains, vigils, and other forms of protest represent a light of hope that the German population may change the style of the nation's politics so that it can make a unique contribution to the creation of a world whose affairs are ruled by the principle of non-violence.

One of the new institutions that is now under discussion, which could further this goal, is a national Peace Corps. It could, as is currently being discussed in Germany around the intention to send Army non-combat units to Somalia for irrigation, transportation, and reconstruction projects, be deployed in emergency situations in the developing sector. This would be a quasi-civilian mission of special sections of the Armed Forces, operating through an existing military command structure.

A proposal for the conversion of Army units into task forces for relief missions was first made in October

1990 by Jürgen Warnke, then minister of Third World affairs. He said that after the end of the Cold War, the united Germany should become a "big power for peace," a state that played a leading role in Third World development. Warnke proposed the creation of a Peace Corps separate from the Armed Forces, which would draw on the desire of the youth to help and build, rather than to shoot and kill.

The Peace Corps would operate like a rapid intervention force, drawing on idle transport capacities and matériel of the German Armed Forces, operating like the military but without firearms. The forces would not have blue helmets, but blue overalls, and would be equipped with portable energy-generators and water-processing kits, field hospitals, kitchens, and the like.

The Peace Corps would use Army engineering methods, where they have proven to be efficient. There is a recent example of how this could work. Two years ago, shortly before Christmas 1990, a team of German Army pioneers completed the construction of a hospital from prefabricated Army matériel in the city of Rudbar, in the middle of the Iranian Elburz Mountains. The region had been turned into a wasteland by a heavy earthquake several months before. No more than eight German Army pioneers and 30 Iranian workers, who received instruction on the site, built the modern hospital with 2,100 square meters of medical facilities, in no more than 14 weeks.

What worked in Rudbar two years

ago, on a comparatively small scale, can be done in any other emergency zone in the developing sector, or in the war-stricken Balkans.

The first phase of the creation of a German Peace Corps would be oriented toward relief missions, carried out according to a map of those regions of the Third World that are most exposed to disasters and epidemics: Black Africa as a whole, most of Ibero-America, Central America, large parts of Asia, large parts of the Middle East, and the territory of former Yugoslavia after two years of war.

The second phase, to begin already during the implementation of the first phase, would envisage long-term development projects as a means of preventing the outbreak of disaster before the crisis escalated into the collapse of the basic civilian infrastructure, into conflict and war.

The transport aspect is crucial. Mobile bridges and some air transport capacities are there already: Germany inherited engineering matériel from the abandoned East German Armed Forces, with the unification of the two German states in October 1990, and more of this special equipment can be produced.

The Peace Corps would also need a contingent of specialists in the construction of homes, highways, and railroads, of systems of fresh water supply and efficient power generation.

By 1996, Germany intends to have a reduced standing Army of 370,000 men and women, some of whom will be assigned to "blue helmet" missions of peacemaking and peacekeeping under the auspices of the United Nations. What Germany should contribute beyond that, are the same number of men and women that can be deployed in "blue overalls" missions of the type described above.