Enhancing Integrity in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions: Challenges and the Path to Reform

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Abstract

Corruption remains one of the major causes of concern in any state. It exacerbates poverty, inequality, and injustice, ultimately fostering more corruption. It undermines the rule of law and remains a root cause of instability and insecurity in any state. It weakens the state's capacity for effective governance and may eventually lead to civil war. The National Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, during its investigation into the causes of the 1990s Civil War in the country, found that the main cause of the war was endemic greed, corruption, and nepotism which deprived the nation of its dignity and reduced most people to a state of poverty. The tasks of modern United Nations peacekeeping missions are much more complex than traditional responsibilities, sometimes even requiring support for the formation of new institutions. Post-conflict corruption can be a serious impediment to peacebuilding and reconstruction. It may directly affect several key peacebuilding activities in a fragile state. Curbing corruption is thus vital in post-conflict environments to strengthen the rule of law, restore trust in public institutions, and build and sustain peace. Failing to account for the threats posed by corruption during peacekeeping may put the success of the mission at risk.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLV, No. 639, January-March 2025.

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Introduction

he United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions have remained a cornerstone of international efforts to maintain peace and security in regions emerging from conflict. These missions, which are often deployed in complex and volatile environments, are tasked with various responsibilities including protecting civilians, supporting the rule of law, and facilitating the transition to stable governance. However, these democracies have continually grappled with the issue of corruption. Along with terrorism, poverty, and organised crime, corruption is deemed a 'Global Problem' and has severe consequences. Corruption is generally defined as the 'Misuse of entrusted power for direct or indirect personal gain'.¹ Corruption could be categorised as 'Grand' or 'Petty' corruption. Grand corruption pervades the highest levels of government, leading to major abuses of power that erode the rule of law, economic stability, and confidence in good governance. Petty (or administrative) corruption involves the exchange of small amounts of money and granting of minor favours, which can also result in significant public losses. In some cases, administrative corruption benefits not only those who first receive the bribes but also higher-ranking officials to whom some of the proceeds are passed.

Forms of Dishonesty

Various forms of corruption are present within the peacekeeping missions, posing a serious risk to the operations of these missions.² In 2008, while the UN celebrated 60 years of successful peacekeeping, it did not delve into the charges of sexual abuse and other misconduct. The British charity Save the Children issued a report alleging that children as young as six are trading sex with aid workers and peacekeepers in exchange for food, money, soap and, in very few cases, luxury items such as mobile phones. It also highlighted instances of rape, verbal sexual abuse, child pornography and prostitution, and trafficking of youngsters, many of whom were poor, displaced, or orphaned by conflict. Human Rights Watch accused the UN of covering up allegations of embezzlement against peacekeepers implicated in arms and gold smuggling while serving in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).³ In addition, several missions have been shown to involve financial misconduct like bribery and theft. For example, the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire and the UN Transitional Administration

in East Timor (UNTAET) were found to have issues related to fuel mismanagement, theft, and fraudulent activities. These activities have wasted valuable resources and eroded the trust of local populations in the UN's ability to provide peace and stability.

Sexual exploitation and abuse are critical issues that undermine the trust people have in peacekeeping missions. The exploitation of women and even the operation of sex rings involving children—sometimes in situations where food is exchanged for sex—has been a persistent problem, particularly among more powerful military personnel. These activities are unacceptable and violate the dignity of the population that is not capable of defending themselves. It severely tarnished the reputation of the UN. While there have been efforts made to bring about change, no concrete reform has been seen.

Post-conflict corruption can be a rather serious impediment to peacebuilding and reconstruction. Some of the most common acts of corruption in post-conflict situations have been associated with fuel, food, non-existent soldiers, extortion, narcotics, illicit mining, bribery, theft, or illegal sale of government property. One of the main factors for systematic post-conflict corruption is the existence of political power-sharing institutions in a country recovering from conflict.

Impact of Ethical Concerns on Credibility of United Nations Peacekeeping Missions

Corruption contributes to maintaining and intensifying violence once a conflict has broken out. Additionally, corruption can also impede economic and humanitarian initiatives.⁴ When corruption impacts the defence industry and peace operations—for instance, through kickbacks, bribes, collusion, extortion, the awarding of noncompetitive contracts, unfair offset agreements, and manipulation of soldier payrolls—the vulnerability of peacekeeping missions increases even more.⁵ By combining a conflict environment with weak and unstable institutions, corruption makes it more difficult for the UN and other organisations to carry out their job and jeopardises the success of UN peacekeeping deployments.

The trust of local residents is undermined by corruption in peacekeeping efforts. Bribery, embezzlement, and other corrupt activities by peacekeepers damage their credibility and foster

animosity among the people they serve. This may result in resistance and outspoken opposition to the mission's goals. Moreover, important funds meant for reconstruction, humanitarian relief, and the upkeep of local organisations are also diverted by corruption. Corrupt officials may embezzle funds meant for these crucial programmes, impeding the mission's capacity to accomplish its goals and exacerbating already-existing disparities and social unrest. This can hinder the host nation's long-term recovery and stability, and have disastrous effects on people who are already at risk.⁶ When peacekeeping forces engage in corrupt practices, they may unintentionally aid particular groups or people, escalating already-existing tensions or possibly triggering fresh acts of violence. This might prolong or even rekindle war, undermining the same peace that the mission is tasked with maintaining.⁷

Last but not the least, corruption scandals significantly harm the UN's reputation. Public confidence in the organisation's capacity to effectively address global issues and uphold international peace and security is severely undermined by these scandals. The UN's capacity to gather funding and support from other countries for upcoming peacekeeping missions may suffer significantly as a result of this harm to its image.⁸ For instance, the UN's reputation suffered and public confidence in its capacity to adequately safeguard vulnerable populations was fairly weakened by the sexual exploitation and abuse scandals that beset the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).9 Corruption has posed grave problems for the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC. The mission's goals have been seriously weakened and claims of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers have severely eroded local people's faith. In addition to harming the victims, these instances have eroded public trust in the UN's capacity to safeguard vulnerable groups.¹⁰

Role of International and Local Partnership

UN peacekeeping operations are tasked with maintaining peace and stability in post-conflict areas. These operations are inherently linked to humanitarian aid and the protection of human rights, which are fundamental elements of the UN Charter. Collaboration between international organisations, such as UN bodies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), with national entities and local communities, strengthens the effectiveness of peacekeeping

missions. One example is the collaboration between national societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in conducting humanitarian work. According to the ICRC, such collaboration is crucial in addressing humanitarian needs during times of crisis, particularly when the demand for aid rises. It also helps in locating and reuniting the families of the victims, which is crucial for peacebuilding in areas of violence.¹¹ Likewise, in peacekeeping situations, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' engagement with local people is essential. It ensures that the needs of vulnerable populations are met effectively, which helps peacekeeping operations succeed overall.¹²

Role of Technology in Combating Integrity Gaps in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions

Transparency and accountability are essential for ensuring legitimacy and guarantee the efficient use of resources in highstakes environments where these missions frequently operate. Technology has become a game changer in combating corruption as it provides innovative ways to improve operational effectiveness, accountability, and trust. This can be achieved in the following ways:

• Enhancing Transparency with Data Mining. Data mining is a powerful tool for auditing and monitoring financial and administrative processes in peacekeeping missions. It enables the analysis of large datasets to detect patterns of collusion, identify anomalies, and uncover red flags in procurement and payments. For example, anti-corruption software uses intelligent mining techniques to identify fraudulent transactions or inconsistencies in contracts. By leveraging data mining, peacekeeping operations can proactively detect corruption, ensuring that resources are allocated transparently and effectively.¹³

• Securing Systems with Blockchain Technology. With blockchain technology, financial transactions, documents, and contracts may be managed in a decentralised and impenetrable manner. Blockchain technology can be used in peacekeeping operations to monitor the distribution and use of funds, preventing them from being exploited for private benefit. Blockchain also guarantees the safekeeping of asset

registries, procurement contracts, and land records, thus lowering the possibility of manipulation.¹⁴

• Predicting and Preventing Corruption with Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI offers instruments for anticipating and averting corruption in peacekeeping operations. AI algorithms can uncover hidden linkages by examining past data and highlighting odd transactions or instances of partiality in procurement procedures. AI can also improve decision-making process by providing peacekeepers with useful information that allows them to take preventative action against possible corruption.¹⁵

• **Building Trust and Efficiency.** Incorporating technology into peacekeeping operations not only fights corruption but also fosters confidence among international stakeholders and local communities. Technology-enabled transparent procedures provide host communities confidence that resources are being spent sensibly. Additionally, technology tools simplify operations, freeing up peacekeeping missions to concentrate on their primary goal of preserving stability and peace.¹⁶

Strengthening Data Management with Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE) and Common File Storage and Sharing Cloud (COSMOS) under the Unite Aware Initiative. Tools like SAGE and COSMOS have been established by the UN' Unite Aware Initiative, a technical framework, to improve situational awareness and expedite data collecting in peacekeeping missions. These technologies are intended to give peacekeepers centralised operational data storage and real-time insights, facilitating improved coordination and decision-making in challenging situations.¹⁷ To ensure that SAGE and COSMOS fulfil their intended function of enhancing situational awareness and operational efficiency, peacekeepers should get regular training on how to operate these systems.¹⁸ It can significantly improve accountability and operational effectiveness in peacekeeping missions, ultimately strengthening trust and delivering justice in post-conflict regions.19

Al can also provide mission oversight and monitoring. During the 9381st UN Security Council meeting, the members talked about the harsh realities of Al and its applications. The participants concurred that the Al system will boost early warning systems' analytical capabilities and be useful as a monitoring system. Additionally, it may monitor ceasefires, spot trends of violence, and support human efforts, mediation, and peacekeeping.²⁰

Role of Whistleblower and Reporting Mechanism

Whistleblowers are the most important and trustworthy source of information on fraud and corruption in any system. Whistleblowing and reporting mechanisms are crucial tools for preventing misconduct and detecting corruption within organisations, including peacekeeping missions. However, they frequently face insufficient legal safeguards and institutional immunities.²¹ One of the primary issues with the current system is that the UN Ethics Office often functions more as a grievance mechanism for staff complaints related to work performance rather than a body facilitating reports of serious misconduct. Many accusations received involve improper behaviour against the complainant by their management rather than actions that could harm the organisation. This misuse dilutes the intended purpose of whistleblowing policies, undermining their effectiveness.²² The case of United States diplomat James Wasserstrom examined unethical behaviour within the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). It highlights the structural obstacles that UN whistleblowers must overcome.23

Training and Capacity Building for United Nations Peacekeepers Concerning Transparency Deficits

UN peacekeeping policy lacks comprehensive standards or guidelines to prevent corruption, and despite its widespread impact, corruption is rarely addressed in peacekeeping training programmes. Corruption is mentioned only five times in the 157-page Department of Peacekeeping Operations – Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions Planning Toolkit for Peacekeeping Missions, indicating that this important issue is not given enough attention.²⁴ Integrating counter-corruption training into leadership programmes enables staff to recognise and successfully reduce risks to combat corruption in UN peacekeeping missions. Practical instruction in risk assessments, reporting wrongdoing, and moral decision-making should be provided to peacekeepers, backed by explicit protocols for protecting whistle blowers.

Lessons Learned from Past Missions

A few lessons learned from past peacekeeping missions relating to the issue of corruption are as follows:

• Understanding that Corruption Endangers the Success of Missions. The realisation that corruption poses a risk to the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations is among the most significant lessons learned. Early missions frequently misjudged the degree to which corruption could jeopardise their goals. For instance, corruption damaged public confidence in the UN and local government in nations like South Sudan and DRC.²⁵ As a result, the UN has come to recognise that combating corruption is essential to establishing lasting peace.

• The Significance of Accountability Systems. One consistent problem in peacekeeping operations has been the absence of strong accountability systems. Peacekeeping forces have occasionally been linked to corruption, including financial embezzlement and exploitative behaviour. The credibility of missions in Haiti and Kosovo, for instance, has been damaged by claims of financial mismanagement and misbehaviour.²⁶ The Brahimi Report on UN Peace Operations highlighted the necessity of more accountability and robust supervision procedures in peacekeeping operations.

• **Resource Management Transparency.** One important lesson that has emerged is the importance of transparency in resource management. Many peacekeeping operations take place in areas where the reconstruction of institutions and infrastructure depends on foreign assistance and resources. On the other hand, corruption may worsen if these resources are mismanaged. The UN Mission in Liberia, for instance, had difficulties making sure that help got to the right people without being embezzled by dishonest officials.²⁷

• Establishing Robust Collaborations with Regional Organisations. The need to forge solid alliances with regional organisations to fight systemic corruption is another important lesson. In these situations, enforcing anti-corruption policies without local support may encounter opposition and have little efficacy. The UNTAET, for instance, emphasised the

significance of including local stakeholders in anti-corruption campaigns.²⁸ The mission was able to promote better accountability and openness by collaborating with community leaders, civil society organisations, and local authorities.

• Impact of Capacity Building. Building capacity is a successful tactic in the fight against corruption in host countries. Training programmes for local law enforcement, courts, and public officials are frequently a part of peacekeeping efforts. These initiatives aim to improve the ability of institutions to identify, stop, and deal with corruption. To improve its capacity to fight corruption, the UN Integrated Mission in Sudan, for example, concentrated on training local law enforcement and judicial staff. In a similar vein, the UNMIK offered technical help to fortify governance structures and encouraged the creation of anti-corruption organisations.

• Activating Civil Society and Media. The media and civil society are essential in advancing accountability and transparency. For instance, to reveal corruption and advance good governance, the UN Mission in Sierra Leone worked with regional journalists and NGOs. Involving the media and civic society not only raises public awareness of corruption but also gives people the authority to hold their leaders accountable.

• Implementation of Context-Specific Strategies. One important lesson is that combating corruption requires context-specific tactics. Peacekeeping operations take place in a variety of settings, each with its special dynamics and difficulties. Fighting corruption with a one-size-fits-all strategy is highly unlikely to be successful. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic took a customised approach that addressed corruption in the diamond trade, a key cause of instability in the area. In a similar vein, the MINUSTAH in Haiti focused on judiciary and police corruption.²⁹

• **Importance of Long-term Engagement.** Long-term involvement and consistent dedication are necessary to combat corruption. For instance, the UN mission helped Bosnia and Herzegovina develop anti-corruption structures, but the process was sluggish and continued to need assistance even after the mission concluded.

• Encouraging Global Cooperation. Corruption frequently crosses national boundaries, especially when it comes to organised crime and illegal cash transfers. In order to solve these problems, the UN has realised how crucial it is to work with global institutions like the World Bank and Interpol. For instance, the UN worked with foreign partners in Liberia to prevent money laundering and develop financial transparency measures. By combining the resources and experience of several groups, these collaborations increase the efficacy of anti-corruption initiatives.

Assisting the UN to combat corruption may come with a lot more ease now, since the 2021 UN General Assembly Against Corruption resolution on combating corruption and strengthening the UN's commitment to fight corruption provides a clear pathway on how integrity may be entrenched in all its work, including its peacekeeping missions. The resolution comes as the countries face a growing threat from corruption undermining stability, trust, and governance, and calls for international cooperation, preventive measures, and the use of audits and other tools of technology to stamp out corruption.³⁰ These principles are especially important for UN peacekeeping missions which are deployed in many of the toughest and most resource-constrained environments in the world where the risks of corruption are acute.

Recommendations for Overcoming Integrity Gaps in Peacekeeping

Peacekeepers at all levels must possess effective anti-corruption abilities. There is no standard solution to solve all problems relating to corruption in the UN peacekeeping missions. However, some of the recommendations to prevent the menace of corruption in peacekeeping missions are as follows:

• The UN should prepare guidelines for the Special Representatives of the Secretary General, their staff, and peacekeeping forces on addressing corruption inside mission operations.

• For senior appointees in the peacekeeping missions, relevant counter-corruption training should be included in the UN Senior Mission Leaders' Course.

• All central procurement for peacekeeping missions must be undertaken through a task force specially selected for the purpose.

• The UN should develop a stronger and speedy mechanism in investigating allegations of corruption and must ensure adequate protection to whistleblowers.

• Al must be used in averting corruption in peacekeeping operations.

• The state parties must include 'Corruption' as a criminal office in their state legislations.

• The state parties must ensure measures to enable the identification, tracing, and seizure of proceeds of crime of corruption for the purpose of confiscation.

• The Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) must have a transparent system of oversight in procurement of contingent-owned equipment.

• The TCCs must design suitable curriculum and train their troops in the UN policies relating to anti-corruption measures.

Conclusion

Corruption delays the stabilisation of society by encouraging armed organisations to continue their illegal activities, which hinders efforts like disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration. Combating corruption and locating its sources becomes especially important in peacekeeping operations by the Security Council due to the high stakes involved in saving the lives of the affected civilians. Focusing on corruption during operations at peacekeeping missions is not solely about the success of the mission, but more about protecting the reputation and credibility of the UN as a peacekeeping institution. If member states, the people in the area, and global partners believe in the framework, then the relevant peacekeeping operations will be successfully able to provide sustainable peace and security in the regions following a conflict. The degree to which the UN has managed to coordinate its peacekeeping interventions with the tenets of transparency, accountability, and justice will determine its place in the future of peacekeepers and the world at large.

Endnotes

¹ The definition is, however, limited since it portrays corruption as a oneway process driven by the greed of corrupt officials. Almost all corrupt transactions have two players-the person who is receiving the bribe, and the corporation or individual who is offering it. Moreover, the balance of power is not necessarily on the side of the corrupt person with 'Entrusted Power', since outside influences can serve to overwhelm weak and ineffective administrations. Rajeevan Anuradha, 2007, 'Understanding corruption from a development perspective: How can it be curbed?', *HDRU* Brief No. 06/07, Colombo: UNDP Regional Centre, accessed 21 Feb 2025

² Corruption in UN missions can take many forms, including bribery: offering, giving, or accepting an undue advantage to a public official or private sector employee; theft: stealing money or other assets; misuse of trust funds: using trust funds for personal gain; misuse of official position for personal gain; natural resource exploitation: taking advantage of natural resources for personal gain; sexual exploitation and abuse: taking advantage of local staff for sexual gain; collusive bidding: working with others to win a bid; and information brokering: selling information for personal gain. Sexual corruption is a very serious issue, where sexual favour is the 'Currency' of corruption. 'Corruption, Peace and Security: Knowledge tools for academics and professionals', *UNDOC Module Series on Anti-Corruption*, available at: https://grace.unodc.org/grace/academia/module-series-on-anti-corruption.html?lf_id=, accessed 27 Feb 2025

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²¹ Brook Judge, 'A Gross Institutional Failure: The UN Whistleblower Protection System Does Little to Protect Whistleblowers in Policy or Practice', May 2020, accessed 18 Feb 2025

²² 'United Nations Secretary-General Report on the Administration of Justice at the United Nations', A/67/265, 2012, accessed 16 Feb 2025

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case became a landmark for whistleblowers when the UN Dispute Tribunal ruled in his favour, criticizing the Ethics Office's uncritical acceptance of an OIOS investigation report. Judge Goolam Meeran called it a "Worse case of insensitive, highhanded, and arbitrary treatment" and highlighted the Ethics Office's failure to uphold its mandate to ensure staff integrity in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *UN Dispute Tribunal*, 'Decision on James Wasserstrom Case', 2012, accessed 11 Feb 2025

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