

UN Peacekeeping Operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo – A Success or Failure?

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Abstract

UN Peacekeeping Operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have been ongoing for over two decades. The UN Security Council has calibrated the mandate of the peacekeeping mission in the DRC from time to time and armed the mission with Force Intervention Brigade to undertake robust peacekeeping and enforce peace. In spite of this, civilians continue to be targeted by the armed groups. A potent armed group M23, which had been defeated in 2013, is back in action. It exercises control over large areas in North Kivu Province of the DRC. Other armed groups such as Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) continue to target the civilians and peacekeepers. The country is witnessing protests against the peacekeepers for their inaction. There are mixed opinions about the performance of the peacekeeping mission. The article takes a dispassionate view on the performance of the mission and reasons for the shortcomings.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continues to be affected by violence, insecurity and instability in spite of UN Peacekeepers being deployed in the DRC since 1999 initially as United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic

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of the Congo (MONUC) and later with effect from 01 July 2010 as United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). MONUSCO, in spite of its progressive drawdown is one of the largest peacekeeping missions operating in any country.

Despite the fact that MONUSCO has large strength of uniformed peacekeepers and heavy financial outlay, there is no peace and stability in the Eastern region of the DRC. There are more than 100 armed groups active in the country. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) has reported that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the DRC has increased to almost 6 million. Ongoing violence and conflict are responsible for about 96.5 percent displacement.¹ The violence and conflict in Eastern DRC is also a main reason for about 27 million Congolese suffering from food insecurity.

Present Situation in the DRC

Tutsi-led armed group, Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) whose name stands for the 'March 23 Movement', has re-emerged from dormancy in the later part of 2021. Its leadership accuses the DRC Government of ignoring the promises to integrate its fighters into the national army. Since late 2021, the group has seized swathes of territory in North Kivu province prompting hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Despite international efforts to defuse the conflict, M23 forces have continued advance towards Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu. It now threatens to encircle Goma, the city that borders Rwandan border. The Security Council vide UN Security Council Resolution 2098 (2013) created its first-ever 'offensive' combat force intended to carry out targeted operations to 'neutralise and disarm' the notorious M23 armed group, as well as other Congolese rebels and foreign armed groups in strife-ridden Eastern DRC.²

The military component of MONUSCO has been attempting to neutralise / disarm the armed groups by adopting a deterrent posture and use of force. Due to the inherent constraints, the stated goals of the Mission have not been achieved. The Mission has fallen short of expectations with respect to protection of civilians and assisting in the extension of state's authority. Bigger sized armed groups, such as the M23, and the Democratic Forces for

the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), have neither been defeated nor their capacity and numbers reduced significantly. These continue to be a potent threat to the State as well to the civilian population. Out of frustration and supported by the spoilers to peace, some elements of the local population are protesting against the Mission and resorting to violence. Anti-UN protests in July/August 22 in the Eastern region of the DRC resulted in 36 people, including 4 peacekeepers, being killed and 170 wounded. Protesters were demanding United Nations peacekeepers to leave the DRC.³ There is a deep-seated crisis of trust, consent, legitimacy, and credibility against MONUSCO.

Though the Congolese Government has consented for MONUSCO to operate freely, there are major challenges in this regard. The national army, part of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) is part of the problem. Both MONUSCO and the FARDC have failed to build legitimacy and consent among the ordinary people. Authorisation of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) to MONUSCO raised expectations with the civilians and the local authorities. The Mission has fallen short of expectations, and therefore, its credibility seriously affected.

MONUSCO as Chapter VII mission is equipped with a robust mandate to protect the civilians under threat of violence. The Mission is also mandated to undertake stabilisation tasks. The host government expects the Mission to support the state, and use force in defence of state authority. Military actions by the peacekeepers challenge both the principles of impartiality and the limited use of force. Consequently, both the spoilers to peace and also, at times, the state authorities use this to incite the local population against the peacekeepers and discredit the Mission.

MONUSCO's relationship with the government has had its ups and down. Best results have been achieved when there is primacy of politics and when the state authorities, neighbouring countries, and the Mission have worked in harmony. Case in point is the defeat of M23 in 2013 when the International community, African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), DRC Government, the FARDC and MONUSCO put their hands together resulting in the defeat of M23 and its remnants had to flee the DRC.

Again now, the M23 is active in the Eastern region of the DRC. History seems to be repeating. The underlying causes of the conflict remain unresolved. There are dire consequences for the civilians. Pursuing military actions alone is not the answer to a long standing problem. Since its independence from Belgium in 1960, Congo has seen several international forces deployed on its territory in the context of peacekeeping operations but nothing much seems to have changed in the Eastern DRC for the common man on the ground. Peace remains elusive and he continues to suffer.

Mixed Performance of UN Peacekeeping in the DRC

MONUC/MONUSCO have been tasked by the Security Council to protect civilians from violence, facilitate humanitarian access, and disarm, demobilise, and reintegrate former combatants back into society. Over the years the Security Council has periodically altered the mandate of the Mission, including by creating a 'Force Intervention Brigade (FIB)', the first of its kind for a UN peacekeeping mission, which is required to carry out targeted offensive operations to neutralise and disarm the armed groups in Eastern Congo. Despite a robust mandate as given to the FIB and also the brigade having superior weapons compared to the armed groups, the Mission has not fully delivered on its mandate. This is evident from the figures mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of this article.

MONUSCO's effectiveness in protection has varied widely. At times very effective and on other occasions a failure. There are documented examples of both successes and failures. Whenever MONUC/MONUSCO has made a concerted and integrated efforts to protect civilians and deter violence, it has made a real difference. There is also evidence of failure on part of the Mission to act proactively and robustly in situations when there were reports of emerging threats to the civilians. The Mission, though armed with a robust mandate and the tool to execute the same in terms of FIB, has failed to provide sustainable peace. It has emerged that while robust peacekeeping is necessary, it is only a first aid and that does not heal wounds unless the basic issues that are responsible for the conflict are addressed. Effective implementation of a protection strategy cannot be separated from the active engagement with the host government in reforming its

security institutions to support appropriate disarmament and reconciliation strategies. The military component can try to disarm the armed groups forcefully, but it will continue to be a futile exercise if the larger political issues are not addressed.

Reasons for Peacekeepers Inability to Deliver the Mandate

The UN peacekeeping Mission's mandate has been revised over the years to increase the Mission's capacity to use force, and other means, to protect civilians. Efforts have been made by various actors to build peace in the DRC. Some civil societies too are actively involved at the grassroots level to transform the situation. Unfortunately, despite these efforts the culture of violence and brutality remains high. It is worth examining as to why peace continues to remain elusive. Reasons which explain why the DRC has failed to achieve peace despite concerted efforts made by the UN and other actors are discussed below:

- **Large Size of the Country.** The territory of the DRC is about the size of Western Europe. By area, the DRC is the second-largest country in Africa and the 11th largest in the world. It has a population of around 108 million. Vast sections of the country (the eastern provinces in particular) remain politically and logistically disconnected from its capital at Kinshasa and, therefore, the government. Further, the lack of road and rail infrastructure makes it worse. This situation has made a significant portion of the population feel disenfranchised and marginalised. With a ready supply of arms from dubious mineral trading entities and external actors with questionable interests, disaffected groups have been quick to carve their destinies parallel to those of the DRC state. This has created a situation in the DRC where mineral-rich areas of the east are infested with militias and thus, difficult to neutralise.
- **Natural Resources.** The DRC is blessed with a whole range of minerals but cursed by the people who handle these. Coltan is indispensable to the manufacture of all modern technological devices. It is used to make heat-resistant capacitors for laptops, cellphones, and other high-end electronic devices. Approximately 80 per cent of the world's supply of Coltan is found in the DRC.⁴

Gold, cobalt, cassiterite and high-grade copper reserves are present in equally significant numbers. Cobalt is one of the key metals to produce electric vehicles. Bulk of the trade in these minerals is by illegal means. Most of the armed groups' activity is centered on and around the mining sites. There is lack of infrastructure and also support to the peacekeepers from the host authorities, and others, to prevent illegal activity. Many entities that benefit a great deal from the mineral wealth of the DRC do not extend any importance to the related socio-political issues. Several mining companies domiciled in western nations fund military operation in exchange for lucrative contracts in the east of the DRC.⁵

- **Involvement of Neighbours.** DRC's peace process has been characterised by the involvement of external actors who have played critical role in the peace initiatives taken by the international community. Some of these actors have participated in the peace processes mainly to guard their own national interests rather than for seriously bringing peace to the DRC. Their interests are mainly based on the need to ensure that the DRC does not provide rear bases for rebel groups to strike at them. The presence of armed groups such as *the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda* (FDLR) in the North and South Kivu provinces gives Rwanda and *the Allied Democratic Forces* (ADF) and *the Lord's Resistance Army* (LRA) gives Uganda a reason/excuse to intervene in the DRC. Operating from north-eastern Congo, the ADF has, in the past, received funding, supplies, and training from the Government of Sudan, as well as from sympathetic Hutu groups.⁶ M23, the armed group that once again poses a serious renewed threat to humanitarian relief is actively supported by Rwandan Defence Forces.⁷
- **Interpretation of Peacekeeping Mandate.** There are varied interpretations of the Mission's mandate, and what peacekeepers should do or not do, by the host authorities, local population, Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs), and other agencies operating in the country. There is also a lack of strategic communications strategy to

counter misunderstandings, and to sell the mandate and explain its limitations to the Congolese people, and even internally to the different components of the Mission, to get their wholehearted support. TCCs feel that they should be consulted at the UN Security Council's level in mandate formulation as they best know the situation as it exists on the ground.

- **Lack of Focus Areas by the Host Government.** Due to lack of finances and for other reasons, the Congolese Government has not focused on education, creating jobs, and enhancing livelihoods. It has also not focused on the Security Sector Reforms (SSR), disarmament and integration of the former elements of the armed groups and human rights. The issue of settling the refugees and internally displaced persons has also been neglected. Not addressing these issues and lack of focus poses a major risk to the peace initiatives undertaken by the UN agencies.
- **Justice System.** Most of the perpetrators of crimes against the civilians have not been brought to justice due to under-funding, inability to reach remote areas, and questionable integrity of judicial officials. The victims and their communities feel let down and live in constant fear. In order to transit to sustainable peace, the justice and correction systems have to be put in place on priority basis.
- **National Ownership.** Where the Mission's and government interests converge, there have been good results. And when it doesn't happen, especially when the Congolese Government chooses its own path there are serious challenges for the Mission's Senior Leadership. This has been particularly true in the areas of human rights, operations by the national army, and in SSR. The security forces in the DRC, historically have been employed to secure the interests of few elites and those in power as against those of the larger population. The UN peacekeepers can only assist the government but the ownership has to be that of the national authorities. After all, the primary responsibility to protect its civilians is that of the host government.

- **Bottom-up Approach to Resolving Local Issues.** There has also to be a bottom-up approach for resolving ethnic conflicts for lasting peace to be achieved, in addition to the top-down approach. This requires considerable effort and patience. In the DRC, only a few components of MONUSCO and non-governmental organisations have adopted bottom-up approach to peacemaking and peacebuilding in fragile flashpoints. There has been no attempt to resolve land disputes, reconstruct local institutions for the peaceful resolution of conflict, and also to promote reconciliation within divided villages or communities.

Recommendations

Over the years, the civilian population's expectations from MONUSCO to protect them and the Congolese territory have increased. Some elements in the government and the FARDC expect that MONUSCO should provide the FARDC unconditional support, especially for operations against the armed groups, which it cannot as it impinges on the legitimacy and impartiality of the UN peacekeeping. Despite the challenges, constraints, and the limitations enumerated above, MONUSCO can contribute more meaningfully. Some recommendations in this regard are below:

- There exists great amount of mutual suspicion between various ethnic groups/communities that is so deep rooted that it frequently results in violence. The Mission needs to promote and facilitate political and inter-community dialogue to dispel the existing suspicions and fears and promote trust and confidence between saner elements of the warring communities. The Civil Affairs Section of MONUSCO, in partnership with the host authorities, should work towards confidence building between the warring communities, particularly those in the remote areas.
- The issues of illegal mining and exploitation of natural resources need to be tackled in a sustainable way. The interim report of the Group of Experts on the DRC has made several useful and practical recommendations to prevent flow of funds to the armed groups from illegal exploitation of natural resources. These recommendations

need to be implemented by the DRC government, UN Security Council (UNSC) and the member states. Illegal plunder of the wealth of the DRC clearly threatens international peace and security. The UNSC should rise above the interests of its individual member states and put in place deterrent measures against the countries whose companies or nationals engage in pillaging in the DRC.

- Efforts must be made to resolve land disputes, and to reconstruct grassroots institutions for the peaceful resolution of conflict. Reconciliation must be encouraged within divided villages or communities. International and Congolese authorities can easily do so/ support these initiatives with the resources at hand.
- The DRC's political leadership and the elite have to be encouraged to evolve a political framework that would bring in long term peace and stability to the country and also be at peace its neighbours. UN and the regional organisations need to ensure buy-in of this by the national authorities. The Senior Mission Leadership could facilitate this and should use their good offices at the time of crisis and political tensions and encourage political compromises and demand of political commitments. The UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region needs to be more proactive on issues that have regional and international ramifications. The Mission needs to facilitate and obtain support from international actors for meaningful of a national process to be in place.
- Expectations from MONUC/MONUSCO have been very high. If these are not met it leads to the loss of Mission's legitimacy, impartiality, and credibility. This was evident from the events that followed national elections in 2011 and the ongoing protests. A strategic communication policy and methodology both at the political and operational levels need to be put in place so that expectations can be managed.
- The UNSC, since 2019, has been highlighting the need to progressively transfer MONUSCO's tasks to the Government of the DRC and other relevant stakeholders

based on certain conditions to be met, such as the consolidation of state authority and reduction of threat posed by armed groups etc. Towards this end, MONUSCO and the Government of the DRC should jointly, and periodically, carry out reviews as regards the issues that challenge peace and security and evolve a phased and comprehensive exit strategy.

- Violent protests against MONUSCO/targeting of peacekeepers in the DRC from time to time are an indicator of the fact that consent and goodwill of the people for the Mission is as important as that of the state. Building consent at multiple levels is necessary for the enduring success of UN peace operations. It is also the key to finding lasting political solutions to internal conflicts. Mission should build consensus and consent around its bases and areas of its presence with the local communities and win hearts and minds of the people by undertaking quick impact and goodwill earning projects.

Contributions of MONUC/MONUSCO

The UN peacekeeping operations in the DRC have spanned over nearly 23 years. These have witnessed three presidential elections and numerous political and security crises involving national and regional actors and non-state armed groups. The Mission has reinvented itself, tried to adapt to changing conflict dynamics, and had to calibrate its posture due to demands from the Security Council, the Congolese government and regional states, as well as in response to recent funding cuts. Notwithstanding, the criticism it has faced from time to time, it has made great contributions in the DRC. These are enumerated below:

- UN peacekeeping missions in the DRC have strategically contributed towards the reunification of the country.
- MONUC/MONUSCO had a strategic impact in preventing a recurrence of a major conflict with its neighbours.
- The Mission has generated useful inputs for informed deliberations and decisions on the DRC over the years by the UN, AU, EU, ICGRL, SADC, World Bank, IMF, donors, and private sector investors. MONUC/MONUSCO

information collection has come handy in prosecutions by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to meet the ends of justice.

- Finally, the presence of UN peacekeeping mission has enabled the international and national actors and the private sector to provide services and stimulate the local economy.

Conclusion

With the current strength of 17918 personnel, MONUSCO is one of the largest multidimensional peacekeeping operations across the world.⁸ While MONUC, later MONUSCO, has been provided with significant resources, the Mission has also been given an extraordinarily ambitious mandate. It is difficult to objectively assess the performance of the Mission as it operates in extremely challenging circumstances, some of which are beyond its control. The current security situation does demonstrate that the DRC Government is yet not in a position to take over from MONUSCO and effectively protect its civilians. The dilemma is that a sudden and full exit would create a security vacuum detrimental to the DRC and the region. On the other hand, an extended stay of MONUSCO is also not desirable as it is delaying the implementation of effective security strategies and peacebuilding mechanisms by the government who has the primary responsibility to protect its civilians and mineral wealth. Some have suggested a transition from UN peacekeeping forces to African Union-led peace operations as a way forward. This will have its own challenges and ramifications. Ultimately it is the national government that has to shoulder the responsibility. The Congolese themselves have to reflect on their problems and find solutions.

UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC has been criticised for a wide range of issues, failure to act when civilians are under threat, human rights abuses by peacekeepers, and taking too much time to react. Repeated protests by the locals and targeting of peacekeepers also highlights the fact that all is not well with peacekeeping. The DRC situation offers the international community an opportunity to recalibrate and innovate its peacekeeping model. Peacekeeping should be seen to be effective only when it meets people's needs, local expectations and satisfaction.

Endnotes

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