

Misinformation and Disinformation in UN Peace Operations

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Abstract

One of the challenges of the current United Nations (UN) peace operations is the 'mis and dis information' campaign by the armed rebel groups as well as the not-so-friendly host states to malign the peace operations. Mis and disinformation undermine the trust of local communities, complicate negotiations, and even fuel conflict. This, in turn, besides placing the peacekeepers lives at risk, tends to alienate the local population. This article discusses how unchecked mis and disinformation campaign can adversely impact the performance of UN peace operations and transforms Blue Flag from a symbol of security into a target for attack.

Introduction

Peacekeeping is one of the most effective tools available to the United Nations (UN) in promotion and maintenance of international peace and security. Unfortunately, in many endless internal conflicts, political solutions are either absent or not acceptable to the warring factions, thus, ceding space to the internal or external spoilers. These kinds of conflicts are prevalent, pervasive, durable, and insoluble, since the issues of the dispute are emotionally charged. They give people their sense of belonging through their bond with her or his community and defining the source of satisfaction for her or his need for identity.¹ Even when an UN peace operation is launched, sometimes mission's mandate lacks focus and clear priorities; thus, present-day peace operations face several intractable challenges. Multifaceted threats, in the prevailing operational environments, are on the rise, triggering

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avoidable injuries and fatalities to the peacekeepers. Another challenge is delivering on protection mandates and contributing to long-term, sustainable peace and development. More so, in today's social media driven environment, missions face lack of situational awareness, inadequate resources (personnel and equipment), and sometime UN force's reluctance to take risks to tackle these threats. This volatile situation gets further accentuated by Mis and dis information, which creates an extremely unfavourable environment for UN peace operations.

In today's digitally connected world, significance of information and communication needs no explanation. Information has real-life consequences as it can prove to be a life-saver – when it's authentic and true but, unfortunately, the opposite also happens. Today's global youth are digital native and more likely to be connected online than the rest of the population, making them the most digitally connected generation in history. In conflict-affected areas, people have little access to fair and impartial news media. Lack of information in the face of endless violence and ever evolving uncertainty adds to the frustration and anger on the perceived failure of UN or other foreign intervention. This ecosystem is a fertile ground for twisting the facts, planting stories against the peacekeepers, and creating well-crafted disinformation. At the same time, easy spread of information by social media and messaging applications further aggravates the issue. This has cumulatively resulted in the rapid spread of wrong information: misinformation and disinformation. These two words, misinformation and disinformation, so often used interchangeably, are merely one letter apart. But behind that one letter is the hidden 'critical distinction' between these confusable words i.e., intent. Unfortunately, it is the peacekeepers who are experiencing its ill-effects on ground.

Misinformation is 'false or inaccurate information'. Examples include rumours, insults, and pranks. On the other hand, disinformation is deliberate and includes malicious content such as hoaxes, spear phishing, and propaganda. It spreads fear and suspicion amongst the population.² Therefore, disinformation is misinformation that is intentionally spread, with intent to deceive and mislead; and this makes disinformation more powerful, potentially destructive and disruptive, especially in times of crisis, emergency, or conflict. False information about UN peacekeepers

is also nothing new; what is new is the scale at which false information is being mass-produced and the speed at which it spreads today. A growing barrage of motivated disinformation has targeted UN peace operations, particularly the missions in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), Mali (MINUSMA), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and South Sudan (UNMISS). Disinformation, like peacekeepers are exploiting natural resources, colluding with armed groups or jihadists, sexual exploitation, and even supporting foreign troops is part of local campaign. It ultimately transforms 'Blue Flag' from a symbol of security into a target for attack and fuels open violence against UN personnel and partners.

Some unfortunate and reprehensible instances of grave misconduct by UN peacekeepers, like sexual exploitation and abuse of vulnerable population, provide ready credibility to the local campaign and make even the false allegations against peacekeepers more reliable. Advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has further strengthened disinformation by creating synthetic media, fake photographs, and cloning of voices of known personalities, called deep-fakes. AI can amplify bias, reinforce discrimination, and enable new levels of authoritarian surveillance.³ Thus, disinformation makes it more difficult for peace operations to implement their mandates and endangers the safety of peacekeepers. In the overall analysis, disinformation is an integral part of broader challenges that are confronted by the UN peace operations. These may also include international and regional geopolitics and, most often, prevailing tense relationships with the host-state governments and populations.⁴

Case Studies

Disinformation and misinformation campaigns have repeatedly targeted the UN peacekeepers in Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, South Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These campaigns run from inside as well as outside the countries, increased in frequency and scope since 2022, endangering contingents, and jeopardising the missions' ability to implement their mandates.⁵ To illustrate the impact of misinformation and disinformation, some cases from the ongoing UN peace operations are as under:

- In the DRC, the spread of rumours and false information about the Ebola virus contributed to mistrust and violence

against healthcare workers in 2019. “Fake news and misinformation about Ebola, Covid-19, and the vaccines that can curb these deadly diseases were rife and there was a lot of mistrust within communities” Yakubu Mohammed Saani, Country Director of Action Aid DRC explained.⁶ Few rumours were like- “White people came with Ebola”, though they were around before Ebola. “You white people come for your own interest, to make money off Ebola”.⁷ “People who died from Ebola are deliberately being killed in treatment centres”. This type of misinformation contributed to more than 130 attacks on healthcare facilities, during which dozens of people were killed. This made it difficult for UN peacekeepers and other organisations to work with the local communities to prevent the spread of the disease.

In 2022, consequences of misinformation and disinformation campaign by locals led to events of 25-26 July 2022, as narrated by Bintou Keita, Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), DRC during a seminar at the USI in October 2022. Angst against the peacekeepers was created through a sustained disinformation about the UN role. The local attack on the UN facility resulted in the death of at least 15 people in a violent demonstration in the North Kivu, DRC. Those killed included two Indian police officers and a Moroccan ‘blue helmet’. MONUSCO came under local criticism for its perceived inability to stop fighting in the conflict-torn East DRC, whereas peacekeepers are in the region to protect civilians. The SRSG added, “Fear, anxiety, and trauma are all having an impact on how we carry out our mandates”.⁸

- In Mali, a fake letter alleging that peacekeepers were collaborating with armed groups was posted on Facebook and it went viral on WhatsApp.⁹ Rumours and conspiracy theories about the UN peacekeeping mission contributed to anti-UN sentiments and attacks against peacekeepers. Thus, it has become more challenging for the UN mission to gain trust and cooperation of local population as well as making their vital task of protecting civilians that much difficult. Now Malian Government has asked UN to withdraw Peacekeeping Mission on the pretext that mission has failed to achieve its mandate. What happens to the civilians in Mali after the mission pulls out at the end of 2023? There are proponents of hiring Private Military Contractors (PMC) to protect civilians.

- In the CAR too, rumours and false information about the intentions of peacekeepers contributed to anti-UN sentiments and attacks against peacekeepers. This made it more challenging for the UN mission to build relationship with the local community and effectively carry out their mandate. In 2021, France suspended financial support and military cooperation with the CAR, accusing it of being complicit in a Russian-backed disinformation campaign targeting France's presence in Africa.¹⁰
- In South Sudan, social media platforms have been used to spread false information and hate speech, contributing to the escalation of violence and displacement of civilians. The spread of false information has also undermined the credibility of the peace process and made it more challenging for the UN mission to mediate between the warring parties. The Government of South Sudan is also to blame for the same. A free and vibrant media is one of the best ways to combat fake news and hate speech but the South Sudanese Government had created a near blackout of independent journalism in the country. Unfriendly news outlets were closed, journalists arrested and intimidated.¹¹ This allowed outside influence through Facebook posts.

Managing Information Landscape

Disinformation is a significant challenge to UN peacekeeping missions as it undermines the trust of local communities, complicate negotiations, and even fuel conflict. New technologies have totally revolutionised the information landscape and today, these channels of communication and influence constitute both, critical assets and significant challenges for missions. Thus, information management has to be an integral part of all mission planning, execution, and evaluation. It remains a challenge for mission leadership, to proactively mitigate and contain mis- and dis-information risks. To succeed, UN peace operations need to be equipped with the necessary strategies, competencies, and resources. In the multi-faceted approach to tackle mis- and dis-information, 'Training and Strategic Communication', both, at operational and tactical level, are considered most important. In this regard, following steps are being taken:

- **Training.** Peacekeepers are being trained to identify and counter disinformation. For this they must be aware of:

- Host nation's media landscape, its politicisation, polarisation and propaganda machinery.
- Providing training to journalists and civil society organisations on how to recognise and report disinformation.
- Use of technology assists peacekeepers, but it has its own limitations – no tool available to analyse Arabic, due to variety of dialects.¹²
- Perception management plays a major roll to counter disinformation. In 2006, after war, Security Council enhanced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon's (UNIFIL) mandate and increased the number of peacekeepers to a maximum of 15,000¹³; in actual from 2000 to 13000. This enhancement was perceived as interference of the west in Arab Countries, which was not acceptable. Thus, mission leadership, at all level, must clear perception of local population about responsibilities/tasks of mission by highlighting mandate.
- Though it's a very important issue, missions have limited resources and capabilities to counter.
- UN to provide guidance on training, including collecting and sharing best practices with troop contributing countries.

- **Strategic Communication.** Disinformation is not merely a technical or tactical issue but more of a political and strategic issue that requires the proactive attention of mission leaders. It requires a mission-wide coordinated approach and could be mitigated by building missions' strategic communications capacity. Communications, which are credible, accurate, and human-centred, is one of the best and most cost-effective instruments to counter disinformation. While we live in an increasingly digital world, direct person to person communication often remains the most powerful way to build trust and counter false narratives. Missions must conduct town-hall style gatherings in local communities with village elders, young people, women groups, and others to learn, and to listen to provide them with accurate information, to dispel rumours, and build trust. It strengthens the understanding amongst the local

population of our missions and mandates and, in turn, strengthens peacekeepers' understanding of the local population's concerns, grievances, expectations and hopes. But, to be effective, it must be grounded in evidence, based on verified data, open to dialogue, rooted in storytelling, and delivered by credible messengers. UN missions must also publicise its success stories at local, regional and national level. The missions should also work with local media and civil society organisations to promote accurate reporting and educate the public about the mission's objectives and activities. In short, it must be integrated into planning cycles and risk management efforts to promote successes, manage expectations, and help address misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.¹⁴

- **Fact Checking.** Accurate and timely information is essential for decision making and successful achievement of the mission's objectives. Missions to establish fact-checking mechanisms to verify information before disseminating it, to ensure that the information shared is accurate and reliable.¹⁵ Missions must maintain transparent communications with the public to help build trust and dispel false rumours and misconceptions.
- **Partnership.** The missions should partner with host government, civil society organisations, local media, and other stakeholders to promote accurate information and counter disinformation.
- **Monitoring and Reporting.** The missions should monitor and report on disinformation and misinformation campaigns, which helps to raise awareness and builds resilience against such tactics. To ensure effectiveness, we must adjust as necessary and adapting our strategy to the tactical necessities of the specific contexts we operate in.
- **Accountability.** The missions to enforce measures to hold those who spread disinformation accountable, including through investigations and legal action.

Conclusion

Both at headquarters and on the ground, UN personnel are attempting to address disinformation against the UN. Nonetheless, the scale at which this challenge has grown far exceeds the UN

ability to respond. They need greater capacity and coordination to monitor and analyse disinformation, both online and offline. They need more streamlined approval processes so that they respond to disinformation more quickly. In the longer term, they need to shift toward preventive approaches, including proactively reshaping narratives about the UN and contributing to a healthier information environment through support to local journalists. At the mission level, adopting a whole-of-mission approach across uniformed and civilian components to foster a networked communication in the field will be beneficial. For this, military, police and civilian officers skilled in strategic communications be considered or trained for.

Thus, addressing disinformation is not solely a task for missions' leadership but effectively tackling disinformation requires putting it in the broader political context and understanding its drivers - a task that falls on a broad array of actors within and outside of the UN, both at UN HQ and mission leadership and host govt.

Endnotes

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