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UN Peacekeeping in the DRC: Examining MONUSCO's Withdrawal and the Road Ahead

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ABSTRACT

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has had numerous conflicts since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, which has disproportionately and negatively impacted the nation's political and socio-economic development. Currently, more than 120 Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) is present in the DRC, and they are constantly attacking public properties and institutions. It has resulted in an increase in displacement, refugee problems, and recruitment of children to the NSAGs, a decrease in agricultural products, poverty, and human rights violations. The United Nations (UN), since the first civil war in Congo (1996-97), has been trying to decrease the conflicts and support the government in various ways to construct institutional mechanisms to ensure the welfare of the Congolese people. The UN deployed a peacekeeping mission named MONUC in 1999, and in 2010, this mission was renamed MONUSCO. Due to various factors, in December 2023, the UN withdrew MONUSCO from DRC by the end of 2024. This paper examines MONUSCO's contributions to DRC and analyzes its achievements and challenges.

Keywords: Conflict; Democratic Republic of Congo; Non-State Armed Groups; MONUSCO; Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been troubled by ongoing conflict fueled by political instability, border conflicts, ethnic tensions, and competition for the country's immense natural resources. Decades of clashes between armed groups, widespread violations of human rights, and devastating incidents of gender-based violence have caused unprecedented levels of protection needs, vulnerabilities and risks, displacing people within the country and forcing people to seek asylum across Africa (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024)¹. Currently, the DRC contends with multiple civil wars and a constant threat from Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG). NSAG's such as March 23 (M23), Mai-Mai, Cooperative for Development of Congo (CODECO), Allied Democratic Force (ADF), and Ngumino are violating the humanitarian and human rights situation

of DRC. The eastern parts of the DRC, namely Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu, continue to face threats from the NSAG. Active conflict in DRC disrupts agricultural activities and worsens economic conditions. In addition, cholera, malaria, and measles are just a few of the preventable and treatable diseases that plague the country's chronically weak health system. The renewed hostilities involving the M23, the DRC army, and various other armed groups have resulted in the displacement of people (UNICEF, 2023)².

The United Nations (UN) has played a significant role in advancing and protecting human rights in the DRC. In 2010, the United Nations established a peacekeeping mission- the 'United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO)'³ to prevent conflict and maintain peace and harmony. The UN Security



Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 2717¹ to withdraw the MONUSCO mission from DRC⁴⁻⁸.

BACKDROP OF CONFLICT



Fig. 1: Map of Democratic Republic of Congo

DRC attained independence from Belgium in 1960; since then, the country has had numerous conflicts, which have negatively impacted the nation's political and socio-economic development. The three key elements that exacerbated the hostilities in the country were weak economic policies, fragile governance, and geopolitical interests.

Furthermore, the rivalry for the nation's natural resources also paved the way for enhancing conflicts. The DRC harbors substantial global supplies of metals such as cobalt, gold, copper, and other minerals.

Currently, the DRC contends with multiple internal hostilities and a constant threat from Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG), such as March 23 (M23), Mai-Mai, and Cooperative for Development of Congo (CODECO), Allied Democratic Force (ADF), and Ngumino. The eastern DRC-Iruti, North Kivu and South Kivu are the main targets of the NSAGs. In particular, the M23 rebels constantly attack the public properties and institutions. It has resulted in a high flow of displacement and a refugee crisis. Recently, the M23 rebels attacked the Goma airport and became a tension for both DRC and their people. There are various conspiracy theories that suggest that the rebel groups of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi are operating on DRC soil and getting funds from them.

MONUSCO PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

The country has been experiencing an alarming and deteriorating security situation. On July 1, 2010, the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic

of the Congo (MONUC²), an earlier UN peacekeeping operation, was replaced by MONUSCO³. In compliance with Security Council Resolution 1925, the latest Mission has been given permission to employ all necessary tactics to fulfill its mandate, including assisting the DRC government in its efforts to stabilize and consolidate peace and protecting civilians, humanitarian workers, and human rights advocates who are in immediate danger of physical harm. MONUSCO has been assigned various other responsibilities, such as supporting the political process and enhancing disarmament and demobilization efforts. According to the United Nations Security Council, MONUSCO promotes physical protection, dialogue, engagement and the setting up of a protective environment in priority areas identified through updates and comprehensive threat assessment developed during the reporting period about the transition process.

Under the MONUSCO mandate, the United Nations has built a system-wide protection strategy, including Joint Protection Teams, Community Liaison Interpreters, Joint Investigation Teams, Surveillance Centers, and Women's Protection Advisers. To safeguard civilians and advance regional stability, MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade⁴ has backed focused offensive operations against armed groups in eastern Congo, including a victorious campaign against the M23. MONUSCO has also set up local protection committees and community warning networks in areas threatened by conflicts. The networks and committees work with local law enforcement, security agencies, and non-governmental organizations to safeguard citizens from harm. The recent resolution 2717 (2023) by the UN Security Council described the initiatives and commitments taken by President Tshisekedi towards protecting human rights in DRC. Setting up a country-level transitional justice process and launching consultations in various provinces aims to eliminate the attacks of NSAG⁹.

It has been noted that since 2010, the UN has negotiated with various players, including non-state actors, to restore peace and stability in DRC. MONUSCO operations were successful, particularly regarding disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration. 'This programme successfully reduced violence through community recovery and stabilization projects, which aimed to mitigate community-level drivers of conflict through the support of high-intensity labour, income generation and vocational training activities'. It was also partially successful in taking back refugees and ex-combatants to their lives. In specifically dealing with human rights, the UN has established a 'Joint

²MONUC stands for United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

³MONUSCO stands for United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

⁴United Nations (2013), Intervention Brigade Authorized as Security Council Grants Mandate Renewal for United Nations Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo, <https://press.un.org/en/2013/sc10964.doc.htm>.

¹United Nations (2023), Security Council Adopts Sweeping Resolution 2717 Outlining Peacekeepers 'Gradual, Responsible, Sustainable Withdrawal from Democratic Republic of Congo, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15538.doc.htm>.



Human Rights Office⁵ and created a national 'Access to Justice' program for victims of sexual assault, aided in the development of a draft law on victim compensation, and created a "UN Comprehensive plan against Sexual Violence in Conflict", which was later incorporated into the national plan of the DRC. After UNJHRO advocacy, the Minister of Interior approved an action plan against sexual violence by the Congolese National Police (PNC) in November 2019. The Prime Minister also signed an addendum to the Joint Communiqué in connection with the Government of the DRC and the UN on the 'Fight against Sexual Violence in Conflict' in December 2019, which updated the Government's commitments to combat Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV). Through the construction of a country-level toll-free line, the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) has been associated with the 'Ministries of Gender and Health' to offer victims of gender-based violence remote psychological and legal aid during the epidemic.

Despite the efforts taken by the UN in collaboration with the DRC and with the regional organizations to restore the 'peace and stability' in DRC, the UN faces specific challenges and obstacles to implementing peacekeeping operations meaningfully. The challenges can be categorized into two: Structural and Operational. The structural challenges pertain to the organizational structure of the UN human rights mission and its mandate. The lack of a bureaucratic structure, including labour, juristic limitations, and budget inadequacy, are the other issues that adversely affect the working conditions of the UN. The operational challenges consist of in-field challenges that affect the peacekeepers and other UN personnel while doing their work in collaboration with the Government of DRC, civil society, and regional partners. These include poor operational efficacy, particularly when it comes to fending off unconventional threats like terrorism and peace enforcement missions.

Moreover, peacekeepers need more specialized tools, knowledge, and intelligence to deal with NSAGs. Other primary concerns behind UN peacekeeping crises are the following: first, the loss of fundamental UN peacekeeping principles, which could result in peacekeepers being involved in the conflicts they are supposed to be resolving. As such, peacekeeping must adapt and change to adequately meet the difficulties of the modern period¹⁰.

WITHDRAWAL OF MONUSCO AND THE ROAD AHEAD

The UN Security Council (Resolution 2717) decided to withdraw MONUSCO from DRC and hand over responsibility to the Government in three phases. The withdrawal of the MONUSCO from DRC is due to various reasons. One factor is the development of anti-Muslim protests in the region. The

people found that MONUSCO is somewhere inefficient in promoting peace and stability and preventing the attacks of NSAGs against civilians. For example, in 2019, widespread protests against the UN mission broke out in response to the atrocities committed by the ADF in North Kivu, which MONUSCO was powerless to stop.

Nonetheless, the scope and intensity of violence in this most recent wave of protests make it noteworthy. Pressure on the UN mission in the DRC increased as political elites joined in criticizing MONUSCO. In the DRC, there has been a rise in misinformation regarding MONUSCO, which has exacerbated people's hatred toward Mission, according to the International Peace Institutes 2022 study. The UN's belief that the Congolese Government can now handle the issue is indicated by MONUSCO's pullout. The DRC's prior request for the Mission's removal impeded the UNSC decision. The longest-running and most comprehensive peacekeeping deployment in the UN is about to leave in chaos; this decision by the UN increases specific questions like- whether the withdrawal of the UN would be a possible remedy for restoring peace in the region or whether the Tshisekedi government is capable of managing the situation or not? As the UN has been operating in DRC since 1999 and now in 2024, the UN has been partially successful in restoring peace and preventing conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the measures and efforts taken by the UN so far to prevent the conflicts in DRC, the UN still needs to succeed with its Mission. It is because of the complexity of the conflict, or it is because of the politics of big powers in the region- including the neighboring countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi for capturing the natural resources of DRC. It is very complicated for the UN to take military actions against NSAGs, even though the Force Intervention Brigade has been working with MONUSCO directions. Apart from the UN, regional organizations such as the East African Community and the Southern African Development Authority are working with the Tshisekedi administration to restore peace and stability in the region. From the 1960's to 2024, the people of DRC have undergone various threats and conflicts. Hence, restoring peace in DRC is very complex. Given the complexity of challenges and multiplication of No-n state actors, one would have to wait and see how the dynamics of peace and stability will unfold in the DRC, following the withdrawal of MONUSCO.

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