Prioritization and Sequencing of Peacekeeping Mandates: The Case of UNMISS

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) in March 2020. In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a workshop on January 30, 2020, to discuss UNMISS's mandate and political strategy. A similar event was held on February 6, 2019, ahead of the last mandate renewal of UNMISS.

This workshop offered a platform for member states, UN staff, and outside experts to develop a shared understanding and common strategic assessment of the situation in South Sudan. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make informed decisions with respect to the strategic orientation, prioritization, and sequencing of UNMISS's mandate and actions on the ground.

Discussions during the workshop's first session focused on the current political and security dynamics in South Sudan, including developments in the formation of a transitional government, the status of the peace process, and the root drivers of conflict. In the second session, participants examined how to adapt UNMISS's current mandate to strengthen the mission and help the UN achieve its objectives over the coming year.[1]

Conflict Analysis

Since the signing of the Revitalized Agreement to Resolve the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018, South Sudan has seen a sustained reduction in political violence.[2] Under Chapter II of the agreement, signatories agreed to cease hostilities and began the process of demobilizing and reintegrating their forces.[3] However, progress on Chapter I of the agreement, which calls for the establishment of a Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU), has largely stalled as parties have reached an impasse on outstanding issues related to security arrangements and the

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1   UN Security Council Resolution 2459 (March 15, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2459

2   *Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 12, 2018.

3   The R-ARCSS was signed by the two dominant conflict parties, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement In Government (SPLM-IG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement In Opposition (SPLM-IO), led by President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, respectively. It was also signed by a group known as the Former Detainees, other political parties, and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance.

reconfiguration of South Sudan's thirty-two states. If the signatories are unable to resolve these issues and form a government before the extended deadline on February 22, 2020, existing gains risk unraveling. At the same time, civilians continue to face significant security threats, including local-level intercommunal violence and abuse by security services and non-state armed actors.

Drivers of localized insecurity, which were present before the conflict's onset in 2013, have been amplified during the civil war. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons fuels criminality and intercommunal violence. Attempts to disarm communal militias are complicated by their connections to national elites and distrust of the government. Conflict-related environmental degradation and displacement have increased land disputes, which have been further politicized by the current debate over reconfiguring state boundaries. Efforts to resolve these disputes are hampered by limited governance in most states, some of which lack functioning courts. The R-ARCSS has limited avenues for addressing these structural drivers and remains disconnected from local-level peace processes.

Security Situation

South Sudan's security situation has improved following the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, producing the longest cease-fire since the conflict began in 2013. One result has been a marked decrease in political violence across the country, which is now confined to small pockets and mostly involves non-signatory parties, such as Thomas Cirillo's National Salvation Front. In January 2020, the Community of Sant'Egidio brokered negotiations in Rome that brought additional non-signatory armed groups into the process, resulting in an immediate drop in violence across greater Equatoria.[4] Although reduced political violence has provided civilians and humanitarian actors greater access to move freely, this progress has been undercut by an increase in constraints and obstruction by the government and others since the

signing of the agreement.

The sustainability of these gains in security remains uncertain. Absent progress in forming the RTGoNU, the signatories may revert to armed conflict to achieve their political objectives. Moreover, there is insufficient funding for the implementation of the R-ARCSS. Although external donors, notably the US, have contributed significant resources to the government-led funding structure, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission reports a lack of transparency, which results in late and partially distributed funds for different components of the R-ARCSS.

Moreover, insecurity remains widespread at the local level, especially in greater Jonglei.[5] Civilians face targeted killings, abuse, arbitrary detention, and sexual and gender-based violence from state security services, armed groups, and communal militias. In the event of a relapse into conflict, human security is likely to deteriorate rapidly, with a surge in demand for civilian protection.

UNMISS's mandate prioritizes protecting civilians, supporting the R-ARCSS, monitoring human rights, and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Peacekeepers are focusing on preventing clashes between major armed groups, especially around Leer and the former Unity state.[6] However, their terms of engagement, along with resource and logistical constraints, limit their ability to address localized violence carried out by armed civilians. Protection of civilians efforts mostly focus on UNMISS's six protection sites in the country, which were accommodating 190,455 civilians as of November 2019.[7] Civil affairs teams have attempted to address some localized insecurity beyond these sites through forward deployment under the mission's new "hub-and-spoke" strategy, which allows for more field-level engagement in identified hotspots. To support the R-ARCSS, UNMISS provides good offices to signatory groups and supports local peace processes, although it has limited resources for the

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4   *Rome Declaration on the Peace Process in South Sudan*, Rome, Italy, January 12, 2020.
5   Greater Jonglei refers to South Sudan's pre-2015 state boundaries, and now includes Jonglei, Fangak, Bieh, Akobo, and Boma states.
6   The former Unity state also refers to the pre-2015 state boundaries, and now includes Reweng, Northern Liech, and Southern Liech states.
7   UNMISS, "PoC Update," November 12, 2019, available at https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_update_11_november_2019.pdf .

latter. Across all of these activities, missions face continued challenges from government forces and armed groups, which occasionally detain or block access to mission staff, in violation of the status of forces agreement.

Uncertainty on the Formation of a Transitional Government

The process of forming an RTGoNU is at a crucial juncture ahead of the February 22, 2020, deadline. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement In Government (SPLM-IG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement In Opposition (SPLM-IO) are at an impasse on transitional security arrangements and the reconfiguration of South Sudan's thirty-two states. There has been some progress on transitional security arrangements, with a limited number of troops from both sides deployed to training areas after being stationed at cantonment sites. However, cantonment sites and training areas lack the necessary resources and transport infrastructure to facilitate the processing of additional soldiers. Meanwhile, external mediation has been unable to break the deadlock on the issue of reconfiguring state boundaries. The government of South Africa held two rounds of consultations between the SPLM-IG and SPLM-IO in December 2019 and January 2020, with representatives from the SPLM-IO rejecting the outcomes of both.[8]

At this point, the prospects that an agreement will be reached on the RTGoNU are unclear. If the SPLM-IG and SPLM-IO manage to break the impasse, likely under pressure from regional mediators, the formation of an agreement would be a significant step in implementing the R-ARCSS. However, political tensions and the risk of relapse into conflict, while reduced, would remain. Moreover, the process is likely to stay in the hands of the elite, with limited participation from civil society or the millions of South Sudanese who continue to be displaced internally and externally. Alternatively, the deadline could pass without an agreement, in which case the SPLM-IG would likely take full control of the government, leading the SPLM-IO to exit the political agreement and the R-ARCSS, resulting in a relapse into conflict.

Regardless of the outcome, UNMISS remains committed to using its good offices to facilitate an agreement between both sides, along with Uganda and Sudan, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, and international partners.

Prioritization and Sequencing of UNMISS's Mandate

Participants mostly agreed on the continued relevance of UNMISS's strategic priorities as identified in UN Security Council Resolution 2459 (2019). There was consensus on the continued relevance of the overarching strategy for UNMISS's support to the R-ARCSS. Given the fluidity of the ongoing political process, some participants discouraged Security Council members from making significant changes to the mandate and emphasized that it needs to allow the mission to deliver on its existing strategic priorities efficiently and effectively. Some participants also voiced concerns over UNMISS's current protection strategy and the mission's inability to address increased localized insecurity. Others noted that UNMISS could respond to this challenge by adjusting its programming within the current mandate. Some participants argued that the mission should engage more robustly on human rights or provide more support to transitional justice, but most agreed that this did not require a change in mandate language. Some participants also encouraged the Security Council to consider worst-case scenarios when developing the mandate to ensure it provides the mission flexibility to act as needed.

Protection of Civilians

Participants recognized the need for the mandate to maintain a strong emphasis on the protection of civilians (POC) while shifting resources and programmatic activities to respond to the changing security situation. UNMISS's POC efforts are calibrated to prevent direct attacks on protection sites rather than to address localized insecurity.

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8 "SPLM-IO Rejects South Africa's Proposed Arbitration on States' Number," *Sudan Tribune*, January 18, 2020.

There was consensus among participants on the need to expand protection efforts beyond protection sites and to increase community engagement, with several approaches suggested. For example, a more mobile peacekeeping force, with the requisite logistics support, could patrol beyond the standard radius around protection sites or patrols could frequent communities more often and be accompanied by community liaison assistants at the professional officer level. Implementing these approaches could allow the mission greater agility to respond to localized violence.

Participants suggested deploying additional female peacekeepers to further facilitate community engagement as part of POC efforts. However, one participant noted the need for a more informed approach, which would require an initial assessment of how UNMISS is integrating gender considerations into its analysis and the development of methodologies to address identified shortfalls. More specific recommendations included for troop-contributing countries to recruit more female peacekeepers and to deploy mixed-engagement platoons.

Participants also discussed the need for the mission's protection strategy to be flexible enough to respond to the worst-case scenario of a collapsed R-ARCSS and renewed large-scale conflict. Noting the likelihood of a surge in protection demands in such an event, especially in Juba, three potential solutions were considered. First, more protection sites could be built preemptively, although some participants noted the drawbacks of expending significant resources on a hypothetical scenario. Second, POC teams could be made more agile, with a focus on accessing major urban areas like Juba and Leer, which would likely be at greatest risk of armed conflict. Third, one participant called for the development of an early-warning system focused on political violence. UNMISS maintains early-warning systems to predict risks to civilians and attacks on mission staff but lacks targeted analysis of the potential for relapse into conflict, which became apparent in 2016 when the collapse of the ARCSS caught UNMISS leadership off guard.

Participants debated whether proposed reforms to

UNMISS's protection strategy should be achieved by changing the mandate language. One participant argued for further strengthening and prioritizing language on intercommunal conflict, citing the positive impact of the increased focus on this issue in the 2013 mandate for the UN–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).[9] Other participants contended that current barriers to greater community engagement and contingency planning stemmed from staffing and resource problems, which could be better addressed through reforms initiated at the mission-leadership level.

Support to the R-ARCSS

Participants agreed on the need for mandated language on support to the peace process to be flexible, given the uncertainty and fluidity of the political situation. One suggestion was to introduce additional caveats that could further tailor the mission's strategy to respond to different scenarios. However, participants also noted the need to avoid significant changes to the overarching strategy for supporting the R-ARCSS and to retain the focus on the provision of good offices and technical support. Participants also welcomed united messaging from Security Council members to South Sudanese political leaders to signal the importance of making immediate progress on outstanding issues and of committing to forming an inclusive government and to making the compromises necessary to do so. A unanimous Security Council position could send a strong message to the signatories of the R-ARCSS—one that the upcoming mandate renewal could further reinforce.

In terms of programmatic shifts, participants agreed upon the need to continue supporting and participating in the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism and to continue supporting the work of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission at the subnational level. The participants recognized the importance of security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) in addressing local and national conflict. As a result, some participants suggested strengthening the mandate's language on providing the government with technical support

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9 UN Security Council Resolution 2113 (July 30, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2113.

for these processes. Some participants also discussed the need for mandated language to explicitly link efforts to support peace processes at the local and national levels. Potential programmatic approaches included greater engagement by the civil affairs division in local mediation and more integrated planning and political outreach, taking into account local conflict analysis.

Monitoring and Investigating Human Rights Abuses

Participants were divided on the need to bolster language on monitoring and investigating human rights in the context of continued abuses. Given the threats posed to human rights by armed groups and communal militias, some participants suggested that the mandate give UNMISS greater authority to hold perpetrators accountable. Suggestions included focusing more on building the capacity of nationally owned accountability mechanisms and gathering more information on instances of sexual and gender-based violence. Other participants, while supporting UNMISS's commitment to protecting human rights, warned that a stronger mandated focus was unlikely to get support within the Security Council and would reduce resources and government support for other tasks, notably SSR, DDR, and cease-fire monitoring.

Rule of Law and Accountability

While most participants agreed that the mission's mandate should remain focused on sustaining the R-ARCSS and protecting civilians, two participants suggested expanding the mandate to address structural drivers of conflict, particularly weak institutions, to prepare for a long-term shift toward peacebuilding efforts. At the local level, they recommended increasing the number of staff trained in building capacity to uphold the rule of law, with a specific focus on state courts. They also discussed using civil affairs teams to sensitize the

population to the truth and reconciliation process. At the national level, they recommended that UNMISS provide technical support to constitutional reforms aimed at achieving justice and reconciliation, with a focus on the establishment of a high court. These efforts could be supported by greater coordination with the UN country team and UN Peacebuilding Commission. However, a majority of participants stressed the need to remain focused on short-term challenges in forming the RTGoNU before expanding mandate language to address long-term issues.

Conclusion

While the overall situation in South Sudan remained largely consistent over the last year, with sustained reductions in political violence under the R-ARCSS, civilians still face significant and ongoing insecurity. Absent substantial political breakthroughs over the coming months, the resurgence of violence between the parties remains a serious risk. Beyond the national-level political process, localized insecurity and weak governance continue to hinder long-term peacebuilding efforts.

Overall, UNMISS's mandate remains relevant to the current political and security environment. There are opportunities, however, to ensure that mandated language provides the mission with the flexibility to support the R-ARCSS or, conversely, to respond to contingencies in the event of a reversal. Likewise, there are opportunities to adjust the mission's approach to the protection of civilians, such as by projecting its presence beyond protection sites and increasing community engagement. While some of these adjustments may be best approached through changes in mandated language, others could occur at the initiative of the mission or through increased engagement from regional states and organizations, UN agencies, and major development donors.

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