

November 6, 2008
Contact: Erin A. Weir

DR CONGO: GIVE PEACEKEEPERS POLITICAL SUPPORT AN A ACHIEVABLE MISSION

The UN peacekeeping mission in the DR Congo (DRC) is stretched beyond all reasonable expectations. The force has responded in earnest as several hundred thousand Congolese have fled homes and displacement camps, intent on escaping the violence that has reignited in the North Kivu province in recent days. But the UN force, known as MONUC, will continue to be incapable of protecting civilians and stabilizing the province without greater international military support; a clear, well-resourced mandate; an enhanced ability to interact with local communities; and, above all, the guarantee of sustained, high-level political support.

The Humanitarian and Protection Crisis

Since fighting reignited in North Kivu in August of this year, an estimated 250,000 people have been displaced, bringing the total number of internally displaced people in North Kivu alone to over one million people. UN agencies and humanitarian non-governmental organizations have been scrambling to respond, but the scale of the crisis, coupled with the highly fluid, unpredictable movement of the displaced, has made it difficult to anticipate needs and deliver assistance. A volatile security situation has also meant that aid workers have only limited access to vulnerable areas, and innumerable people have been forced to survive without any support at all.

Many cases of forced return and forced recruitment have surfaced recently in North Kivu, in clear contravention of international law. In the last week of October, many displaced people have returned to their homes, or in some cases, back to their original IDP sites, only to find that they have been looted or burned. People who were forced to flee with little more than the clothes on their backs now find that they don't have anything to return to.

The dramatic increase in internal displacement is just the latest manifestation of the violence, insecurity and massive humanitarian need that have been a constant feature of life in North Kivu for years. In recent days, diplomats and

Policy Recommendations

- ❑ Donor governments should strengthen MONUC by supporting the Special Representative of the Secretary General's specific requests, including two additional battalions and improved air mobility, presented to the UN Security Council in early October.
- ❑ The EU should immediately deploy a short-term rapid reaction force to secure key strategic locations and allow MONUC to reorganize itself.
- ❑ The UN Security Council should underscore that civilian protection is MONUC's primary responsibility, as outlined in resolution 1794, and provide clear guidance on how to fulfill this responsibility most effectively, while ensuring that it has the resources needed to do so.
- ❑ The UN Security Council should authorize a substantial increase in MONUC Political and Civil Affairs staff deployed alongside MONUC military units.
- ❑ The governments of the United States and the United Kingdom should demonstrate high-level political support for MONUC, and engage with the governments of the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda to facilitate the political resolution of the conflict.

politicians have flooded into Goma in a demonstration of concern for the unfolding crisis. But as is typical with the international response to crises in Africa, their arrival on the scene is late. If those same leaders had remained engaged when the *L'Acte d'Engagement* signed in Goma in January began to fracture, then the most recent wave of displacement might have been averted altogether.

Protection is not just a short-term proposition. Humanitarian assistance, essential as it is, is nothing more than a temporary panacea, and the international community must not be allowed to substitute short-term humanitarian support for a long-term commitment to the resolution of the root causes of the conflict in the eastern Congo.

MONUC and its Civilian Protection Mandate

MONUC, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, is currently the largest UN peacekeeping operation in the world. It has also been a test case for the multidimensional peacekeeping approach, which seeks to incorporate robust military engagement, civilian protection, facilitation of the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and development of good governance and lasting democratic institutions.

At the core of MONUC's mandate is the responsibility to protect civilians under imminent threat of violence. This is both the most difficult and most controversial aspect of MONUC's mandate, and one that critics are quick to point to as a major gap in its performance. The ongoing vulnerability of civilians to forced displacement and rampant systematic sexual violence is continuously cited as the single largest failure of UN peacekeeping forces in the DRC.

MONUC soldiers have sought to enhance civilian protection this year through increased foot and vehicle patrols in vulnerable areas, the deployment of 39 small forward bases throughout North Kivu, and, in some cases, direct cell phone communication with local protection committees that can inform MONUC commanders directly when there are civilians under threat. However, competing responsibilities and the apparent unwillingness of certain commanders to prioritize protection tasks have left serious gaps in MONUC's ability to keep people safe.

MONUC, as it is presently constituted, faces severe restrictions in its ability to promote stability and protect civilians. The Mission has only about 6,000 troops deployed in North Kivu, which amounts to roughly one soldier for every eight square kilometers. MONUC forces have limited capacity to communicate with the local population, as most of the soldiers, who are drawn from countries around the world, don't speak French or Kiswahili, and interpreters

are scarce. Proactive protection and the prioritization of patrols are made difficult by poor intelligence gathering capacity, and even reactive protection efforts are hampered by abysmal roads, densely forested terrain, and limited access to helicopters and appropriate land vehicles.

Further, many MONUC troops have little or no direct training in civilian protection tasks. Constant troop rotation means that MONUC soldiers have almost no understanding of the historical or political dynamics of the conflict, and there are no Civil Affairs or Political Affairs officers permanently assigned to the field sites to provide real-time analysis and to guide the decisions of MONUC commanders.

New Tasks and Complicating Factors for MONUC

With civilian protection efforts already compromised by the lack of appropriate resources, MONUC forces have seen the scope and complexity of their mandate vastly increased over the last 12 months. MONUC is confronted with a huge agenda of urgent tasks: monitor the ceasefire; provide training, logistical, and operational support to the Congolese national military, the FARDC; and repel frequent rebel attacks on strategic towns and locations, such as the recent offensive around the provincial capital of Goma.

To make matters worse, the Congolese national army is a weak and often criminal partner, prone to abandoning their posts and capitalizing on the chaos to loot and terrorize the population. The government and the army manipulate MONUC's position, while political support is completely lacking locally and largely lacking internationally. MONUC is therefore in an impossible position.

Under the terms of the January 2008 Goma agreement, MONUC is asked to play the role of neutral intermediary, monitoring buffer zones between the FARDC and the rebel group led by General Laurent Nkunda, the CNDP. (According to the more recent "disengagement plan," they must also now monitor a wider scope of "zones of separation.") This neutrality, however, is entirely compromised by MONUC's role as FARDC supporter under the terms of the Nairobi Communiqué, the November 2007 agreement between the governments of Rwanda and the DRC. In keeping with the Communiqué, MONUC forces are expected to provide the FARDC with extensive logistical support, including transport, supply, strategic back-up, and even combat support. In other words, MONUC is expected to both police and directly support the FARDC in operations within the same province.

The CNDP, the Congolese government and its military forces have all capitalized on this discrepancy and the confusion that it has caused. Both sides have committed clear contraventions to the ceasefire agreements, however the FARDC have done so in a particularly disruptive way. Government forces have routinely fired on Nkunda's rebel forces from next to and even inside MONUC installations. This endangers internally displaced people who have gathered near MONUC bases and makes it appear to the CNDP that MONUC is complicit in Congolese army attacks. Similarly, when MONUC has called on the FARDC to vacate buffer zones, the government and local officials have manipulated the population to believe that MONUC is in league with the CNDP and that the Mission is actively resisting the government's efforts to defeat the rebel forces. In this way, the government and the FARDC have ensured that MONUC is targeted by everyone.

The civilian backlash against the force is alarming. Manipulative rhetoric, as well as a lack of popular understanding of MONUC's mandate and the role that the Mission can be expected to play vis a vis the FARDC, has fueled this new security threat against MONUC. Also underpinning the civilian anger is years of frustration over the fact that MONUC forces have not managed to staunch the attacks against the population.

In just the past year, MONUC forces in areas such as the volatile Rutshuru axis have begun to wear plexiglass face-masks on their helmets and to cover vehicle windows with wire mesh in an effort to protect themselves from civilians throwing rocks, a situation that has already resulted in serious injury. On several occasions, mass protests have erupted, blocking MONUC vehicles. In one such case an armored vehicle was actually toppled over and set on fire, with the soldiers inside forced to run from the crowd.

Armed only with lethal force, MONUC military have just two options: stand and take it, or retreat. As one MONUC official put it, "We aren't here to shoot at civilians...We clearly have a responsibility to the people of Congo, but I also have a responsibility to my men. How much longer can I ask them to put up with this?"

Nonetheless, civilians still clearly view MONUC as a source of protection. When violence erupts, MONUC installations in the field are often surrounded by internally displaced people seeking protection through proximity to the UN soldiers. This suggests that the violent attacks may be more a result of manipulation by parties to the conflict, rather than spontaneous expressions of anger.

The Way Forward

Buttressing MONUC

The most recent crisis has once again galvanized the international community to "do something," but this new impetus to help needs to be strategic. The only way to ensure lasting security and stability for the people of North Kivu is to not only respond to the immediate humanitarian needs, but also to find a resolution to the long-term military and political crisis.

While MONUC has clearly had difficulty in protecting civilians, this failure has much to do with a blatant lack of resources to carry out a massive and complex task. MONUC forces are already in close contact with civilian and humanitarian staff of international agencies and closely involved in the development of the strategy for the Protection Cluster. Certain protection efforts have shown results, and with more resources it is very possible for MONUC to play a more effective civilian protection role. New initiatives should either be aimed at enhancing MONUC's capacity to deal with the protection and monitoring tasks that the Mission has been charged with, or should seek to add value to ongoing efforts through niche tasks and complementary efforts. The conflict in North Kivu is complex enough without competing international initiatives that just add to the confusion.

Therefore, discussions surrounding the mandate of a possible new Multi-National Force should focus on how such a force could complement MONUC's efforts and simplify the Mission's tasks. The best use of a robust military capability in North Kivu would be precisely the military task of securing key towns and strategic positions, such as Goma, Sake, and Rutshuru, against rebel attack, thereby freeing up MONUC resources to concentrate more fully on their protection and monitoring tasks.

Clarifying and Supporting MONUC's Mandate

While the Security Council has unabashedly loaded MONUC down with ever more numerous and difficult responsibilities, it has not seen fit to provide new resources to meet the new demands. It is very clear that the MONUC mandate is patently un-achievable within the current resource constraints.

On October 29, 2008, the Security Council called on MONUC to "continue to implement fully its mandate, in all its aspects, in particular by robust actions to protect civilians at risk and to deter any attempt to threaten the political process by any armed group."

This sort of empty rhetoric is disingenuous as well as dangerous for both MONUC forces and for the civilians left in their care. It is a statement designed to mollify home constituencies to appear to have prioritized the protection of civilians without committing to the expensive business of actually enhancing MONUC's ability to do the job. (The Council promises to "study expeditiously" how to increase MONUC's capacity, but this might have been more useful when MONUC first made the request for additional support and not after violence and mass displacement took place.) The Security Council is deflecting responsibility from political leaders to the under-resourced UN soldiers under fire in the Congo.

In the upcoming MONUC mandate renewal process, the UN Security Council must, therefore, reconcile MONUC's tasks with its resources. If no new resources are forthcoming, then the Council must accept and take political responsibility for a reduction in the number and complexity of MONUC tasks. Council members must very clearly and honestly prioritize the many responsibilities of the Mission, and provide MONUC civilian and military staff with both the resources and the political cover to dispense those priority tasks well.

Building Civilian Awareness of the UN Mission in the Congo

At present, MONUC military forces are the face of the Mission and, in fact, the entire international community, in many parts of North Kivu. Civil Affairs and Political Affairs branches of the Mission are woefully under-staffed, and security constraints frequently mean that the few staff they do have are not able to access field sites with any sort of regularity. While military officers are well versed in security issues and military tactics, they have no background in the history of the conflict or the political and social dynamics of the communities to which they have been deployed. The result is a frequent inability to spot or react appropriately to protection threats, such as forced return and forced recruitment.

In order to fill this critical gap, MONUC Civil Affairs and Political Affairs officers need to be deployed alongside MONUC military installations to provide military commanders with real-time analysis of evolving situations and protection threats, interface with local community leaders, and help diffuse political tensions. Furthermore, there is a critical need to sensitize the population to the realities and constraints of the MONUC mandate, and to the logic behind MONUC military activities in order to mitigate the effects of government manipulation.

Finding a Political Solution

A better resourced MONUC with a clear, well articulated mandate would indeed be well placed to create a secure space for diplomatic interventions. However, military intervention, much like humanitarian assistance, cannot solve the root causes of conflict in North Kivu -- no matter how effective. Moving forward, the new U.S. administration, along with counterparts in the British government, must make a consistent, coordinated effort to pressure all parties to adhere to their commitments under the Nairobi Communiqué and the Goma peace agreement. There must be sustained, high level pressure on regional leaders, including the Presidents of DRC, Rwanda and Uganda, to engage in constructive discussions, stop enabling spoilers across one another's borders, and end the manipulation of MONUC forces and their reputation with the local communities. Furthermore, the U.S. and UK governments must show their utmost support for the mediation efforts of the African Union.

Peacekeeping Advocate Erin A. Weir and Development Associate Teresa Weathington assessed the UN peacekeeping mission in the DR Congo in late October.

About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises. As the leading advocacy organization on refugee crises, we successfully challenge policy makers and aid agencies to improve the lives of displaced people worldwide and increase stability before conflict spreads.

Refugees International declines government or UN funding, allowing our advocacy to be fearless and independent. Our field-based knowledge of humanitarian emergencies and expert recommendations are sought out by global leaders whose decisions bring immediate relief to refugees and solutions to large-scale crises. Due to our efforts, refugees receive food and medicine, displaced people return home, peacekeepers protect the displaced from harm, and stateless people obtain legal status.

Learn more at www.refugeesinternational.org.