

Service and Sacrifice: UN peacekeeping assignment 'lifetime opportunity' for Nepalese doctor

For over six decades, Nepalese women and men have served around the world as United Nations peacekeepers. The South Asian nation is currently the fifth largest contributor to [UN peacekeeping](#), with over 5,700 personnel serving in more than a dozen countries. They protect vulnerable communities and support countries working to move from conflict to peace, doing so at great personal risk and in harsh conditions.

UN News spoke with one such peacekeeper, Captain Poonam Khadka, who served with the joint African Union-UN peacekeeping mission ([UNAMID](#)) in the Darfur region of Sudan last year. Captain Khadka completed her assignment in Darfur and returned home to Nepal in January of this year. The following interview took place while she was still serving with the Mission.

UN News: Please state your name, position and where you are from; tell us a little bit about your background.

Poonam Khadka: I'm Captain Dr. Poonam Raval Khadka, the Senior Medical Officer working with the Nepal Force Reserve Company (FRC) Level 1 Hospital at UNAMID headquarters in El Fasher, North Darfur. I joined the Nepal Armed Forces in 2011 and have worked in its military hospitals ever since. My family background is rooted in the Nepalese military; my husband, my father-in-law and my brother-in-law, literally most of my immediate and extended family, have worked in the military. The strong military background is my main motivation in my work, especially when you get this rare opportunity to serve in UN peacekeeping missions, where I can make a contribution to global peace and stability and provide support to people in need all over the world.

UN News: How long have you been with UNAMID and what are your responsibilities?

Poonam Khadka: I joined UNAMID in mid-2017. My main responsibility is to treat and care for patients who come or are admitted to our Level 1 Hospital. Additionally, I am the Gender Focal Point for the Nepal Contingent. The latter assignment affords me the opportunity to interact with the local communities during sensitization campaigns where we educate them on the importance of health care and hygiene, particularly in the IDP [internally displaced persons] camps. These sensitisation campaigns focus mainly on the critical need for handwashing during cooking or toilet use, drinking safe water, eating healthy food in addition to the protection of the environment through organizing clean-up campaigns in their communities.

UN News: What led you to join UN peacekeeping?

Poonam Khadka: Actually, I was nominated by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations ([DPKO](#)) as well as my Government. It is compulsory, in my country, for everyone working in our military hospitals to work in a UN peacekeeping mission before he/she completes a master's degree. Personally, I was driven by the need to serve humanity and to support vulnerable people, particularly those living in conflict areas or those affected by natural calamities.

UN News: Which UN missions have you served with?

Poonam Khadka: This is my second UN peacekeeping assignment. Prior to joining UNAMID, I served with the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ([MONUSCO](#)) from 2014 to 2015.



UN Photo/Amin Ismail

Captain Poonam Khadka while on mission in Sudan's Darfur region. UN Photo/Amin Ismail

UN News: Describe what a typical day at the mission is like for you.

Poonam Khadka: In UNAMID, we are on duty 24/7. This also depends on the patient conditions in our hospital as sometimes we have to stay overnight to attend to very sick patients and other emergencies. Otherwise, we work the normal 6 hours per day.

We have also done external assignments as was the case during the last Nelson Mandela Day commemorative event held in ZamZam IDP Camp, near El Fasher, North Darfur where we partnered with other military personnel from the Indonesian and Egypt Contingents to conduct a health camp. We sensitised residents there about water-borne diseases, the usage of oral rehydration solutions at home and how to keep hands clean to minimise food contamination.

UN News: What are some of the highlights of serving with the peacekeeping mission?

Poonam Khadka: UN peacekeeping missions operate in a multi-cultural environment where each and every member learns new things and exchanges ideas with colleagues and the host community. During my tenure with UNAMID, I have taken the initiative to attend HIV/AIDS awareness sessions and participated in various cultural and sporting activities organized by the Nepal Contingent to mark various UN International Day observances.

UN News: What are some of the challenges for you personally?

Poonam Khadka: The long distance and time away from close family is perhaps my greatest challenge as my current location is very far from my country. The weather in Darfur sometimes is challenging for me, especially during the sandstorm season and the incessant humid and hot weather.

UN News: What do your family and friends back home think about your service with UN peacekeeping?

Poonam Khadka: My family and friends are very proud of what I do as they know that we are in Darfur representing our country, Nepal. My family appreciates that our Nepal Contingent is in Darfur to build peace and security and to assist in conflict resolution in the region.

Working as a peacekeeper and being a female military officer, who is also a doctor working in UN peacekeeping, fills me and my family with a lot of pride.



UN Photo/Amin Ismail

Captain Poonam Khadka while on mission in Sudan's Darfur region. UN Photo/Amin Ismail

UN News: How would you describe your overall experience as a UN peacekeeper? Is there one particular experience/memory you will take back with you when you return home?

Poonam Khadka: Coming from a South Asian, male-dominated environment, where female voices are gradually being understood by our communities, I am encouraged that lately gender equality issues are being mainstreamed into the workplace and in families. For instance, I come from a family of five brothers and sisters. My parents opted to send me, a woman, to China to study for five years, while my brothers studied locally in government engineering colleges.

Nowadays, in the larger cities in my country, people are changing their mindsets about gender parity but the women in the remote areas still encounter problems in accessing education and their voices remain unheard in their communities and families.

Personally, I am gratified by the chance to work in a UN peacekeeping mission, as this has offered me the opportunity to internalise gender-related issues. Working for MONUSCO and now for UNAMID has helped build my self-confidence immensely, especially in gender-related approaches in the workplace.

UN News: What would you say to others in your home country who are considering serving with the UN?

Poonam Khadka: Working in a UN peacekeeping mission is a lifetime opportunity as it accords people like me a chance to interact with people from different countries with different norms and cultures. I learn from them and they learn from me. As a female peacekeeper, I feel proud and grateful that I have the chance to work with other female and male peacekeepers from around the globe.