

South Sudan: UN peacekeeping review urges emphasis on supporting political process

A latest review of the United Nations peacekeeping operation in South Sudan has found that reaching a political solution to the ongoing conflict is the most effective way to protect civilians, a senior UN official said Tuesday, urging a renewed focus on supporting the political process.

“A sustainable political resolution of the conflict is also the only avenue to chalk out a viable exit strategy” for the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Bintou Keita told the Security Council.

UNMISS was established in 2011 as a capacity building tool to assist a Government that lacked the capability to deliver services to its people, she said.

However, following the December 2013 outbreak of violence, UNMISS evolved into a Mission where protection of civilians, including from national security institutions, has become the main focus.

“This requirement unfortunately, remains valid,” she said, noting that tens of thousands of civilians are estimated to have been killed since the conflict began in December 2013 while over four million have been displaced, half of which are now refugees in neighbouring countries.

As documented once again by the Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry which published its report last Friday, human rights violations and abuses, including horrific incidents of sexual violence, have reached alarming levels, and impunity for these crimes remains the norm, Ms. Keita said. Moreover, over 200,000 internally displaced peoples continue to be protected on UNMISS bases, with the assistance of humanitarian partners.

The review found that largely over 50 per cent of the Mission’s uniformed personnel are currently devoted to protecting these sites.

These sites only represent a fraction of the South Sudanese civilians in need of protection.

“There are no easy answers to this dilemma. There will never be enough troops to protect both the ‘protection of civilians’ sites and extend UNMISS’s protection footprint to other areas of large displacements, in a country as large as South Sudan,” she said.



OCHA/Charlotte Cans

People at a Protection of Civilians Camp in Malakal, South Sudan, peacefully demonstrating and carrying signs, waiting on the side of the road for a UN convoy to pass by. (file)

Increasing the effectiveness of protection efforts beyond these sites will need to continue being a major priority of the Mission, notably through the development of an integrated and 'people focused' system-wide protection approach, aimed at filling existing gaps, generating synergies and removing duplication and thus possible wastage of resources.

Since the Security Council decision in August 2016 to deploy the Regional Protection Force (RPF), the security conditions in Juba, have changed substantially. Today, while the risk of instability and violence remains, the threat of military conflict in the capital has considerably diminished.

The current environment of Juba, therefore, may call for some adjustment of the RPF mandate as currently scripted, Ms. Keita said.

Following the review, the Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operation has ordered a military and police capability study to explore how less troops can be dedicated to the 'Protection of Civilians' sites, and more are projected throughout the country to protect other civilians under imminent threat of violence.

This capability study will also need to address the configuration of the RPF.

South Sudan came into being with extremely limited institutional capacity in all areas of governance and government services, with the exception of military forces. This situation has not improved in subsequent years.

Poor governance and economic collapse have compromised already weak rule of law institutions. In the current political and security environment, the review found that a full-scale return to capacity-building rule of law

institutions is not warranted.

“It is our considered judgement that the most effective way to protect civilians in a sustainable way is to reach a political solution to this conflict,” she said.

The four-pillared mandate of UNMISS remains valid, but the focus of the Council and the region should undoubtedly be on its fourth pillar, which is to support the political process, she said.

“Without progress on the political process, the Mission is likely to have to be deployed for a considerable amount of time, at a considerable cost to the international community,” she concluded.