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Prioritization and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates: The Case of MINUSCA

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STIMSON

On October 8, 2020, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report organized a virtual workshop to discuss the mandate and political strategy of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). These discussions are part of a series of workshops that examine how the activities included in peace operations' mandates can be better prioritized, sequenced, and grounded in political strategy. This was the fourth consecutive year in which these partners convened discussions in support of the mandate negotiations on MINUSCA. This meeting note was drafted collaboratively by IPI, the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report. It summarizes the main points raised in the discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants. The project is funded with the support of the government of Germany.

Introduction

The UN Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in November 2020. In 2019, the mission's mandate and strategic engagement in the Central African Republic (CAR) shifted to supporting the implementation of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation signed earlier that year.¹ Nearly one year later, the presidential, legislative, and local elections are seen as another pivotal moment in the country's political process and offer the mission another opportunity to refine its support to the country.

In this context, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Stimson Center, and Security Council Report co-hosted an online roundtable on October 8, 2020. This roundtable offered a platform for member states, UN stakeholders, and independent experts to share their assessments of the situation in CAR. The discussion was intended to help the Security Council make more informed decisions with respect to the strategic orientation, prioritization, and sequencing of the mission's mandate and actions on the ground.

Participants largely agreed that MINUSCA's current mandate remains relevant and encompasses the areas necessary to facilitate the mission's effective engagement on political, security, and peacebuilding issues. They also highlighted that the mission is well positioned not only to prioritize its activities in response to changing dynamics in the country but also to deliver its support in an integrated manner. In particular, the mission has begun prioritizing integrated UN support for the elections with the goal of bolstering the integrity of the electoral process.

Recognizing the fluidity of the country's political situation prior to the inauguration of the new elected government and the conclusion of local elections in 2021, participants cautioned against major changes to MINUSCA's mandate. Instead, they encouraged the mission to continue balancing between supporting the electoral process and encouraging full implementation of the peace agreement, on the one hand, and responding to humanitarian needs and protecting civilians, on the other.

Participants called for the UN to continue advocating for more financial assistance for CAR to support governance, humanitarian, and development

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2499 (November 15, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2499.

priorities. They also highlighted the value of more effective regional coordination between CAR and its Central African neighbors, as well as partnerships between the mission and other international actors.

Conflict Analysis

Following significant political and operational efforts by national authorities and MINUSCA, CAR's voter registration process was relatively successful, with an estimated 1.76 million Central Africans registered between June and October 2020 (46.5 percent of whom are women).² The vast majority of the country's 3,500 voter registration centers, which also serve as polling centers, functioned as expected. Only around 3 percent were not fully operational, mainly in the western prefectures of Nana-Mambéré and Ouham-Pendé.

Despite this progress, national authorities confront challenges to conducting free, fair, inclusive, and timely elections. While the government put in place voting procedures for some citizens in the diaspora, it did not establish similar procedures for the over 250,000 Central African refugees of voting age living in neighboring countries, many of whom are Muslims.³ This is despite the fact that the Central African multi-stakeholder consultative framework on the elections, the UN, and other international partners consistently emphasized the importance of allowing refugees to vote. Because of this gap, participants raised questions about the inclusivity of the electoral process and its potential long-term impact on social cohesion and the protection of civilians.

Moreover, while many of the polling centers are located in cities and villages, approximately 58 percent of the population lives in rural settings.⁴ This gap presents logistical challenges, especially considering the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on citizens' willingness and ability to travel. Disinformation campaigns and hate speech around the electoral process are further intensifying an already tense political atmosphere.

Participants also noted the likelihood that security risks to civilians will increase in the run-up to the elections. Risks will especially increase in mining and commercial areas and in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps. Armed groups have already obstructed various stages of the voter registration process and may look to exploit political competition during the pre-election period to expand their territorial control and increase their political leverage. The timing of the election also corresponds with the beginning of the dry season, which generally sees an uptick in mobilization by armed groups and violence against civilians. This will further exacerbate the risks facing vulnerable populations, including IDPs and those engaged in transhumance.

Nonetheless, the Central African government and its international partners are continuing to support the organization of a successful election. To complement its strategic committee for the elections, the government activated a technical multi-stakeholder consultative framework on the elections to help with preparations and mitigate election-related disputes. MINUSCA worked closely with the national security forces to prepare an integrated electoral security plan that the government adopted in October and conducted sensitive outreach to armed groups to keep the electoral process running. Other international actors supporting the electoral process include the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which committed to conducting two election-related missions, one to help prepare for the elections and one to observe them.

Identity, Citizenship, and Inclusion

The upcoming elections are also exposing deep-seated tensions around identity, citizenship, and inclusion. These historical drivers of violence against marginalized groups are major challenges for long-term peacebuilding and social cohesion. For example, the contested definition of who is a citizen remains a flashpoint, as it determines who is

² UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2020/994, October 12, 2020, para. 8.

³ "Présidentielle en Centrafrique: Un nouveau délai pour le processus électoral," RFI, September 24, 2020.

⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization, "Central African Republic: Selected Indicators," 2018, available at <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/37>.

allowed to compete in the elections, who is allowed to vote, and whom the elected government is supposed to serve. Some participants worried that this unresolved issue may exclude some Central Africans from the upcoming elections, cause some to call into question their credibility, and increase the risk of election-related violence. One participant observed that while these issues are always salient, they gain visibility during election periods as political actors mobilize constituencies along identitarian lines.

Another participant brought up the limited representation of Muslims among the candidates competing for prominent political positions. This was seen as representative of deep and pervasive social cleavages, as demonstrated by the lack of political willingness to allow Central African refugees to vote and to safely return to the country. Participants emphasized that these issues will affect the country's political stability in the long run.

Implementation of the Peace Agreement and Security Conditions

Participants affirmed that the national government and its international partners continue to see the peace agreement as the most viable framework for peace and political stability over the coming months. Nonetheless, repeated violations of the agreement by signatory armed groups and the impact of these violations on civilians have diminished the agreement's popularity and eroded trust in the peace process.

Over the past year, several signatory armed groups, including the Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC), Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (3R), Union for Peace in CAR (UPC), and Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC), have repeatedly violated the peace agreement. Some participants also highlighted increased fighting among certain armed groups, as well as increased coordination between 3R and UPC to expand their territory and thus strengthen their leverage prior to reopening negotiations on the peace agreement. These violations, together with the limited

presence of the national armed forces outside the capital, present a persistent threat to civilians throughout the country.

The mission sees its political and security interventions in support of the peace agreement as linked to the protection of civilians. MINUSCA's provision of good offices and facilitation of dialogue have complemented its robust posture and use of force, including through joint engagement with the African Union and ECCAS.⁵ For example, the mission has focused its security efforts on mitigating the expansion of 3R in the western prefectures while opening political space and providing military escorts for the government's engagement with 3R's leader. Similarly, the mission is using all of the tools at its disposal, including a robust posture, provision of good offices, and high-level political engagement, to mitigate armed violence in the northwest.

Participants noted that the incentives leading some signatory armed groups to violate the peace agreement, such as the desire for greater leverage in negotiating with the government and influence over the electoral process, will remain unchanged without consistent and robust political deterrence. Inconsistent implementation and monitoring of the peace agreement have contributed to stark discrepancies between the signatories' commitments and actions. Participants therefore signaled the importance of strengthening the government's leadership on ensuring adherence to the peace agreement. They also emphasized the UN Security Council's role in overseeing a sanctions framework for violations of the agreement.

The Humanitarian Situation and COVID-19

While the upcoming elections are at the forefront of domestic and international attention, the country's humanitarian crisis continues to threaten peace and stability in the region. Recent estimates suggest that approximately 2.6 million people—more than half of the population—are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.⁶ The UN and humanitarian actors on the ground struggle to adequately

5 UN Doc. S/2020/994, para. 24.

6 UN Secretary-General, "Remarks to the High-Level Meeting on the CAR," October 1, 2020, available at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-10-01/remarks-high-level-meeting-the-central-african-republic>.

respond to the population's needs. Humanitarian actors are underfunded and face challenges accessing the northwest of the country, where 3R controls much of the territory. Attacks against UN personnel and humanitarian workers, illegal taxation, and the use of land mines have restricted the efficient and safe movement of national authorities and humanitarian actors, preventing them from accessing many of the people most in need of assistance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these humanitarian challenges. With approximately 4,850 confirmed cases of coronavirus, CAR has not been impacted as severely as some other countries on the continent.⁷ Nonetheless, MINUSCA and humanitarian actors have had to reduce their operational capacities and limit travel. Moreover, UN agencies, funds, and programs and other international partners have adjusted their priorities to support national authorities in responding to the pandemic.

Prioritization and Sequencing MINUSCA's Mandate

Participants agreed that MINUSCA's current mandate and priorities allow it to flexibly respond to the changing dynamics in the country. Recognizing the fluidity of these dynamics in the run-up to the elections, they largely recommended against significant changes to the mandate.

However, participants did offer suggestions for refining the mandate's language to reinforce its support to the electoral process, political engagement after the election, and support to humanitarian actors. They also encouraged the Security Council to reaffirm MINUSCA's role providing political support to the peace agreement and to emphasize the tools available for the mission to adopt a robust security presence. Moreover, participants called upon UN member states and international financial institutions to ensure that Central African authorities, MINUSCA, and the UN

system have the financial resources needed to implement their mandates.

Support to the Electoral Process

Supporting peaceful, free, fair, inclusive, and timely elections is MINUSCA's main focus over the coming months.⁸ The mission has facilitated voter registration, including in the challenging security environment of the country's northwest. It has also engaged in high-level diplomacy to ensure the deployment of government forces to secure the voter registration process. In parallel, it has helped develop an integrated plan to ensure the security of the elections. Despite the relative success of these efforts so far, participants raised concerns about MINUSCA's limited capacity to cope with all the issues arising from the electoral process, including potential threats to civilians.

MINUSCA's ability to give the local elections the same level of attention as national elections was also questioned. Participants stressed the importance of the local elections in early 2021 for enhancing local buy-in to the peace process and accelerating the decentralization of governance and security sector reform. In addition, local leaders have played a critical role in encouraging the population's trust in, acceptance of, and cooperation with MINUSCA. However, participants highlighted a gap of several million US dollars in the trust fund managed by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to finance the local elections. As such, they suggested broadening the mandate's language to more directly focus on support to the local elections.

Finally, some participants suggested that the current mandate could provide an opportunity for the Security Council to begin outlining its priorities for engaging the new Central African authorities. This could help orient MINUSCA on the council's expectations for how it should continue supporting implementation of the peace agreement and maintain a constructive relationship with the government after the elections. Participants also mentioned priorities for the new government, including developing institutional capacity to

⁷ UN Doc. S/2020/994, para. 46.

⁸ See: UN Security Council Resolution 2499 (November 15, 2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2499, para. 32.c.

protect civilians, ending discriminatory practices by administrative authorities, and extending national authority by deploying security forces outside the capital.

The Protection of Civilians

Participants emphasized that for now, MINUSCA remains the primary actor protecting civilians in CAR. During crises and when violence erupts, civilians seek shelter around the mission's bases with the expectation that it will protect them.

MINUSCA's protection of civilians mandate was strengthened in 2019 and sets clear expectations for the mission's role, despite its limited resources. The mission has already undertaken some initiatives to increase its presence in the field. It has deployed community liaison assistants to increase community engagement, which has created new channels for early warning and rapid response. The mission has also adopted standard operating procedures on early warning and reinforced its joint operations center to better integrate risk assessments and contingency planning into its work.

Participants stressed the importance of the Security Council in sustaining momentum on improving the mission's protection of civilians efforts. Some recommended that the council encourage the mission to emphasize preventive approaches to protecting civilians and to take a more mobile posture that would allow it to rapidly respond to early warnings of potential threats. One participant also asked whether the mission's small operational footprint in many areas was adequate for current security conditions and encouraged more proactive discussions about deploying an integrated quick-reaction force.

Support to State Security Forces

MINUSCA's mandate to support the extension of state authority has been hindered by a number of factors. CAR's large territory has impeded the deployment of state economic and security services, particularly in provinces prone to armed violence. Despite significant progress, national security forces, including the armed forces,

national police, and gendarmerie, do not have the capacity to deploy, lead, and sustain operations across the country and remain dependent on MINUSCA's operational and logistical support. One participant observed that national forces have mostly been deployed to regions under the influence of anti-balaka militias, which are generally supportive of them. As a result, several participants mentioned that MINUSCA requires additional resources and guidance on how to support national security forces, both during the election period and during coordinated operations.

To this end, one participant highlighted the importance of fully operationalizing the special mixed security units provided for in the peace agreement. The roll-out of these units is considered an important benchmark for state stability, state building, and national reconciliation, especially as a means to diversifying the national security forces to better reflect Central African society. Another participant underscored the value of helping the government rebuild the credibility of the security forces in the eyes of communities, particularly as part of the mission's long-term exit strategy.

As MINUSCA continues to support national security forces throughout the election period, participants advised the mission to remain attentive to conduct and discipline issues, as there have been reports of abusive behavior by the Central African security forces against civilians. In this regard, they emphasized the continued application of the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy across all areas where the mission provides tangible support to the armed forces.

Finally, some participants pointed to the need for MINUSCA and other international partners such as the European Union Training Mission to support justice-related processes in the country. To this end, the mission could continue collaborating with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and supporting the operationalization of the Special Criminal Court in Bangui.

Partnerships and Regional Coordination

Several speakers called for international partners to provide more support to the Central African

government and MINUSCA. As it stands, the majority of the 2019 Security Council resolution on MINUSCA relates to the responsibilities of the Central African authorities and the mission, with little detail on how they should engage other partners. This call for partnerships and greater resource commitments was echoed during the high-level meeting on CAR convened on the margins of the seventy-fifth session of the UN General Assembly.⁹ The Security Council could emphasize what partners can do to complement the work of MINUSCA and bridge resource gaps. At the logistical and operational level, for instance, development partners should support infrastructure development in remote areas. At the political level, regional cooperation could be reinforced both through bilateral partnerships, including with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan, and through subregional organizations such as ECCAS. These regional actors could help address CAR's conflict dynamics and their cross-border consequences, particularly in regards to the refugee population.

As for the broader UN system, one participant noted that the Peacebuilding Commission could play a larger role, particularly through its country-specific configuration on CAR. This could not only spur partnerships between different international actors but also increase engagement and alignment on peacebuilding activities. Finally, thinking ahead toward an eventual exit strategy, MINUSCA and the UN country team should continue cooperating to facilitate a sustainable transition.

In general, participants noted the importance of

maintaining the visibility of CAR and MINUSCA on the Security Council's political agenda to raise awareness of pressing issues on the ground and mobilize resources to address them.

Conclusion

Despite the fragile context and its limited resources, MINUSCA has shown that its mandate provides the strategic direction to help it effectively complement the work of the government and other international actors while responding to changing dynamics. However, the approaching elections are giving rise to heightened political tensions and security concerns and threatening the implementation of the peace agreement. The humanitarian situation also remains dire, and existing efforts have been inadequate to meet the needs of the population.

Given the fluidity of the current context, there is a general consensus that MINUSCA's new mandate should not alter the mission's priorities or strategic approach before the elections. However, specific language should be revised to allow the mission to maintain and reinforce its posture in the year ahead. Suggestions for revisions to the mandate's language included: focusing more explicitly on supporting local elections; articulating clearer priorities for engaging the new government in the post-election period; reasserting the importance of implementing the peace agreement, including by enforcing the sanctions regime; increasing mobile protection capabilities; and reinforcing international, regional, and bilateral partnerships.

⁹ UN Doc. S/2020/994, para. 7.

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