



Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians

CASE STUDY Central African Republic

The UN has used several accountability mechanisms to investigate failures by the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) to protect civilians. The mission drew criticism for attacks that occurred between May and August 2017, which led the secretary-general to establish an independent special investigation headed by Brigadier-General Fernand Amoussou. The investigation was completed in January 2018, with some of the main findings circulated in a note to correspondents. The note identified gaps “with regard to [troop- and police-contributing countries’] training and their understanding of POC” and “deficiencies in civil-military-police planning.”¹ A joint task force was created to oversee the implementation of the recommendations.² A few months later, a massacre in Alindao prompted further inquiries and investigations into the mission’s underperformance in the implementation of its protection of civilians (POC) mandate.



Alindao, Basse-Kotto, November 2018

The Incident

In November 2018, the Alindao camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) was attacked by a large group of civilians and fighters from the rebel group Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC). The IDP camp was located on the premises of a Catholic cathedral and was the site of a MINUSCA temporary operating base with peacekeeping troops.³ At least 112 civilians died in the attack, including many children, elderly people, and disabled persons.⁴ Although MINUSCA’s human rights division reported that the attack was “well-coordinated and carried out in a premediated manner,” one UN official highlighted that “this was not a sophisticated attack,” implying that more could have been done to prevent and stop it.⁵

The attack on Alindao occurred as the mission faced competing priorities in many hotspots across the country. The Burundian troops who were covering Alindao had been redeployed to other areas after ex-Séléka armed groups threatened to march on the

¹ UN Secretary-General, “Note to Correspondents on the Findings of the Central African Republic Special Investigation,” January 24, 2018.

² UN Security Council, *Situation in the Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2018/611, June 18, 2018.

³ Amnesty International, “‘Everything Was in Flames’: The Attack on a Displaced Persons Camp in Alindao,” 2018.

⁴ Ibid.; MINUSCA, “Attack on the Displaced Persons’ Camp in Alindao, Basse-Kotto Prefecture, on 15 November 2018: Breaches of International Humanitarian Law and Atrocity Crimes Committed by the UPC and Anti-Balaka Associated Militias,” 2019.

⁵ MINUSCA, “Attack on the Displaced Persons’ Camp in Alindao”; Interview with official in the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), New York, January 2019.

capital, Bangui, following Operation Sukula, a joint UN-government operation in the city's PK5 neighborhood.⁶ The Burundian peacekeepers were replaced by Mauritanian troops.

The Mauritanian troops protecting the site did not prevent or respond to the attack on the IDP camp in Alindao and were criticized for their underperformance. Only fifty-four troops were covering Alindao even though it was the third largest IDP site in the country, with more than 20,000 people at the end of November 2018. Because the Mauritanian contingent was so overstretched, it took a static position instead of a more robust, proactive stance.⁷

Reports pointed to individual soldiers' lack of understanding of POC and the rules of engagement and a rigid command-and-control structure that prevented soldiers from taking decisions.⁸ The lack of effective communication also impaired the timeliness of the response.⁹ According to one UN official, soldiers tended to diffuse any sense of responsibility by blaming each other or pointing to broader, institutional failings attributable to all mission components.¹⁰

Indeed, the attack on Alindao resulted from a range of shortcomings attributable to all mission components at all levels, especially in terms of analyzing hotspots and setting priorities. There were many factors that should have pushed the mission to plan for a crisis in Alindao, including the presence of UPC and anti-balaka fighters inside and outside the IDP sites, the absence of local authorities, the nonexistence of telephone systems, the vulnerability of the IDP site around the cathedral, and reprisal killings and cyclical fighting that had been going on for months.¹¹ MINUSCA's Protection Working Group had identified Alindao as a high-priority risk area on its POC hotspot map. However, among the five biggest POC hotspots in CAR, Alindao was the only one where the mission had no multidimensional presence combining police, military, and civilian personnel. It was described by one UN official as a "huge outlier" that had not been prioritized.¹² At the

⁶ In April 2018, Operation Sukula was jointly launched by the Central African armed forces and MINUSCA to arrest criminal groups in the volatile PK5 neighborhood. The operation led to increasing intercommunal violence and resulted in 70 people being killed and 330 injured, most of them civilians. UN Security Council, *Letter Dated 23 July 2018 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Resolution 2399 (2018) Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2018/729, July 23, 2018.

⁷ According to a UN official, the Mauritians had initially agreed to operate in two prefectures with a maximum of three units, but they were actually deployed to nine bases. Due to leave schedules, 20 percent of the force went on leave at once, using armored personnel carriers for transport. As a result, only fifty-four of the intended eighty troops were present in Alindao. Troops were deployed to six posts around the cathedral's IDP camp, each with three to four people. Other troops were located at the main Elim base in the Muslim neighborhood of Lapara in the northwest of Alindao, which was two kilometers away from the cathedral's IDP camp. This posture contrasted with the robust patrols, including night patrols, carried out by the Burundian troops who had been in Alindao before being redeployed to Bangui. There were also accusations from IDPs that Mauritanian troops were supporting the UPC. *Ibid.*; Amnesty International, "Everything Was in Flames"; MINUSCA, "Attack on the Displaced Persons' Camp in Alindao."

⁸ "Fifty-four were interviewed. No two had the same understanding of POC and their own [rules of engagement]." Interview with DPO official, New York, January 2019.

⁹ Only one of the six military posts could directly communicate with the Elim base. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Interview with UN official, January 2019.

¹¹ UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/147, February 15, 2019.

¹² The five hotspots were Alindao, Kaga Bandoro, Batangafo, Bambari, and Bria. The formed police unit in Bambari was supposed to cover Alindao's area. Interview with UN official, January 2019.

same time, the mission had insufficient resources to cover all the major protection crises in the country, forcing it to constantly decide among competing priorities.

The Mauritanian troops stationed in Alindao reportedly neglected to engage with the community on a regular basis, and they lacked language skills and a basic understanding of local actors. The lack of permanent civilian presence—typical for temporary operating bases at that time in hardship areas without the necessary facilities to host civilians—also made it difficult to properly analyze the situation and engage.¹³ Community liaison assistants had not been deployed to Alindao due to capacity constraints and for procedural reasons, putting some responsibility for the failure on the mission's support and administration components.¹⁴ Civilian sections had not visited Alindao for at least four months. Several UN officials also referred to the failure to properly use existing analysis and reports raising the alarm, as well as issues with internal clearance and information sharing.¹⁵ In addition, coordination with humanitarian actors appeared to have been insufficient at the local level.¹⁶

More generally, there was a delay in an increase in troops that had been decided in 2017 as the situation in the country deteriorated and the mission's mandate expanded.¹⁷ As a result, MINUSCA's military component was overstretched, with multiple unsustainable temporary and forward operating bases that lacked mobility and had limited support and resources.

The Accountability Process

In the case of Alindao, nearly all the accountability tools at the disposal of the Secretariat were activated before and after the incident. The conduct and discipline team had previously been involved in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse and underperformance that amounted to misconduct, including the troops' lack of compliance with rules of engagement.¹⁸ The force commander had issued four letters complaining about troops using disproportionate force and losing their weapons.

¹³ There were only seven civilians and two community liaison assistants covering the area from the UN base in Bambari.

¹⁴ Internal rules on local recruitment prevented community liaison assistants (CLAs) from other duty stations from being moved to Alindao. A CLA could only be deployed temporarily for thirty days to establish a community alert network or six weeks to develop a community protection plan. The civil affairs section had plans to deploy one CLA to every contingency or temporary operating base, and twenty-six CLAs were in the process of being recruited.

¹⁵ A joint mission analysis center team sent to Alindao in April had highlighted the need to destroy checkpoints, deploy civilian personnel, and install radio communication for communities. However, while joint mission analysis centers share one version of their reports within the mission, the version that includes recommendations is highly confidential and is only shared with the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) and deputy SRSG. The POC unit is therefore not automatically informed of POC recommendations.

¹⁶ In Alindao, the NGOs Action Against Hunger, Caritas, and Cordaid were present. However, the information flow between NGOs, the International NGO Safety Organisation, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN Department of Safety and Security, and MINUSCA was described as tortuous. One official referred to it as a "telephone game" during which the severity of the information can easily be lost. Interview with DPO official, New York, January 2019.

¹⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2387 (November 15, 2017), UN Doc. S/RES/2387. Hundreds of troops from the Republic of the Congo accused of sexual violence and exploitation had also been repatriated and had not been fully replaced.

¹⁸ Interview with UN official, January 2019.

The human rights division conducted its own investigation into violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Alindao, and its report included a section on MINUSCA's response to the attack. The report notes IDPs' accusations of "inaction, bias and lack of professionalism... in the contingent's area of responsibility," allegations of "inappropriate fraternization with the UPC," and contradicting claims as to whether warning shots were fired by peacekeepers. The report also mentions that MINUSCA undertook a separate investigation to "review the posture and conduct of its peacekeepers during the incident."¹⁹

In addition, the Office of Peacekeeping Strategic Partnership (OPSP) conducted a special investigation into the incident in January 2019. From its side, the Security Council included a section on the mission's effectiveness in Resolution 2448 when it renewed MINUSCA's mandate in December 2018.

As one UN official stated, Alindao received a lot of international attention in the aftermath of the massacre, arguably more than in the three years that preceded the incident.²⁰ In total, six high delegations visited Alindao, on top of joint protection teams, joint investigation teams, and other UN teams. However, all these investigations were internal, as highlighted by Evan Cinq-Mars: "While the casualties in Alindao exceeded other incidents that prompted the launch of special investigations, the incident did not prompt the UN to act as it had in response to other incidents. Instead the UN relied on internal investigations by MINUSCA and the Department of Peace Operations."²¹

Paradoxically, the multitude of investigations had some adverse effects on accountability. One UN official explained that it seemed to have helped personnel "rehearse alibis" and allowed communities to build stronger arguments against the mission.²² In addition, although internal investigations were conducted, they lacked transparency and appeared to be prone to self-censorship, internal pressure, and politicization. For example, one UN representative referred to the reluctance of a senior mission official to go on record during the special investigation and blame the Mauritanian troops for their underperformance. It was an independent report by Amnesty International that brought greater public visibility to the case of Alindao, increasing international pressure for the UN to take corrective actions.

While the impact of these inquiries was mixed, the UN took concrete steps at several levels to address the shortcomings identified. Security Council members' police and military advisers were briefed on the findings of the special investigation led by the OPSP at an off-site, unofficial session at the French permanent mission. According to a report released by the secretary-general in June 2019, "Measures [were] under way with the

¹⁹ MINUSCA, "Attack on the Displaced Persons' Camp in Alindao."

²⁰ Interview with UN official, January 2019.

²¹ Evan Cinq-Mars, "Special Investigations into Peacekeeping Performance in Protecting Civilians: Enhancing Transparency and Accountability," *IPI Global Observatory*, September 19, 2019.

²² Interview with UN official, January 2019.

troop-contributing country concerned to improve performance and enhance the protection capacity of MINUSCA in the area.”²³

The OPSP had recommended the repatriation of the Mauritanian unit. A Mauritanian delegation subsequently visited Alindao, and soldiers were eventually repatriated. Although some member states “were not ready to blame” Mauritania, as the responsibility was shared with other mission components, this repatriation represented a significant commitment by the Secretariat to ensure accountability—even if the repatriation happened just before the troops were scheduled to rotate out of the country.²⁴

In response to the POC failure and subsequent investigations, the mission deployed a task force of 200 Rwandan troops and a dedicated community liaison assistant and changed the troop rotation scheme.²⁵ Before they were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the mission also regularly deployed civilian surge teams to cover all temporary operating bases to improve analysis, early warning, and outreach.²⁶ The Secretariat and the mission also put in place processes to ensure that the recommendations from different investigations and inquiries would be implemented, including monthly video calls with UN headquarters to follow up on OPSP’s recommendations and a quarterly factsheet on progress made.

However, UN officials interviewed for this report noted that the root causes of the incident had not been addressed in a context of limited political progress. Moreover, additional resources were allocated to Alindao to the detriment of other locations that might experience similar POC crises in the future.

²³ UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2019/498, June 17, 2019.

²⁴ Phone interview with senior UN official, February 2020.

²⁵ According to the secretary-general’s February 2017 report, “Community liaison assistants were joined by civilian surge teams tasked with promoting intercommunal dialogue and establishing local ceasefires and conflict prevention mechanisms” in areas of high risk to civilians, including Alindao. UN Doc. S/2019/147.

²⁶ UN Doc. S/2019/498. The development of civilian surge teams with dedicated staff nominated to rotate between hotspots according to an established calendar was also a response to incidents in Batangafo in October and November 2018.