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When They Overstay Their Welcome: UN Peacekeepers in Africa

Denis M. Tull

United Nations (UN) peace operations are once again at a crossroads, partly due to overstretched capacities. Presently, there are indications that UN peace operations face a new and perhaps less expected challenge. Post-conflict peacebuilding faces increasing resistance by the host countries that the UN is seeking to assist. In recent years, the governments of Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have pushed through the reduction of peacekeeping personnel or forced the wholesale withdrawal of peace operations – despite the concerns of the UN. The case of Chad is similar. The peacekeepers there have a very restricted mandate, but at the request of the Chadian government, the mission will be terminated in late 2010.

It remains to be seen whether the examples of Burundi, DR Congo and Chad signal a trend that will be emulated by the governments of other countries where there have been interventions. But they highlight a problem: What should and can the UN do if the assistance they offer in support of peace consolidation is rejected by their putative national ‘partners’, especially when the countries in question continue to face serious post-conflict challenges? Not everybody will perceive this as a dilemma – on the contrary. Some will welcome this development as it promises to relieve pressure on the overstretched UN peacekeeping capacities. But this may be a short-sighted view. Reducing or withdrawing peacekeepers is not a responsible move if it is divorced from the situation on the ground

and if, for example, withdrawal results in a security vacuum.

The premise of international intervention

The rejection of continued UN intervention puts into question the international peacebuilding consensus, which assumes that the formal end of civil war is an insufficient condition for lasting peace. Since countries emerging from violent conflict carry a high risk of sliding back towards violence, the UN has significantly expanded its intervention strategies over the past decade. It pledges to address the so-called root causes of violent conflict. Continued intervention and attendant measures are deemed necessary to shore up hard-won, but still fragile,

peace processes. Standard measures comprise security sector reform (SSR), the demobilization and reintegration of combatants, and the reconstruction of parliaments and administrative structures. Additional goals include the promotion of good governance and the separation of powers as well as the fight against corruption. More generally, political and economic liberalisation are considered core elements of peacebuilding.

Given this ambitious and necessarily long-term agenda, it is now common for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to renew the mandates of UN peace operations after the formal end of hostilities. Mandates are tailored to address pervasive challenges to post-conflict recovery. Early withdrawal is considered as potentially risky. This view gained increased recognition when East Timor plunged into renewed violent turmoil in 2006. Four years before, the UN had withdrawn its mission from the country at the request of national authorities.

Long-term peacebuilding requires that the alleged beneficiaries, i.e., the governments of the countries of intervention, welcome the continued presence and support of the UN. Much as UN peacekeeping missions are only deployed if the principal warring factions give their consent, peacebuilding necessitates that the national government agrees, or at the very least tolerates, the presence and activities of outsiders. Alas, in both Burundi and DR Congo, this has not been the case. Their respective governments have (at least implicitly) withdrawn their consent. This leads to a seemingly peculiar situation. In the past, human rights groups, humanitarian organisations and UN officials were frequently concerned that the UNSC might prematurely decide upon the drawdown of a mission. However, in Burundi, DR Congo and Chad, the national governments of the host states themselves pushed for an early end of UN peace operations. And they did so in spite of ongoing insecurity and humanitarian crises.

Burundi, DR Congo, Chad

In *Burundi*, post-conflict elections had been held in the country in 2005, which brought former rebel leader Pierre Nkurunziza to power. Shortly thereafter, Nkurunziza approached the UNSC to request the drawdown of the 6,000-strong UN Operation in Burundi (ONUB). Despite serious concerns about the pervasive fragility of the situation, the UNSC conceded and ONUB completed its departure in late 2006 when it was replaced by the United Nations Integrated Office in Burundi (BINUB). BINUB's tasks include standard peacebuilding tasks, but its mandate is considerably weaker than ONUB's and it has only 120 civilian personnel, suggesting that the political influence of BINUB is relatively modest.

The case of the *DR Congo* is similar. In 2009, President Kabila, who had been elected three years earlier, informed the UN that he expected MONUC's (United Nations Mission in DR Congo) drawdown to begin ahead of DR Congo's 50th anniversary of independence in mid-2010. He also said that the withdrawal should be completed before the national elections scheduled for 2011. Kabila's demand caused considerable irritation, not least in light of the ongoing fighting in parts of the DR Congo as well as many unsolved problems. Negotiations with Kabila led the UNSC to decide to withdraw 2,000 blue helmets by mid-2010. To reach that compromise, MONUC was given a new name, MONUSCO (United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo), beginning on July 1. This is to signal a symbolic rather than a substantive turning point since the mandate of MONUSCO shows a strong element of continuity to its predecessor. The cautious approach of the UNSC was certainly justified. There are still almost 2 million internally displaced people in the DR Congo. The situation in the Kivu provinces remains extremely fragile and the Congolese security forces, whose members are responsible for numerous human rights abuses, would be unable to fill the void that a substantial reduction

of MONUC forces would create. In late May 2010, Johnnie Carson, assistant secretary for African Affairs in the US State Department, described MONUC as “the only bulwark between the current situation and absolute chaos.”

The government of *Chad* under President Idriss Déby embarked on a plainly confrontational course of action. In late 2009, Déby ruled out a renewal of the mandate of the UN mission MINURCAT (United Nations Mission in Central African Republic and Chad). The mission, with a strength of 4,300 personnel, was only deployed in 2009 to replace the European Union military operation EUFOR Chad/CAR. While UN officials worry about the situation in Chad and see grounds for MINURCAT to stay, Déby called the mission “useless”. Recalling that Chad was a sovereign country, he insisted on the withdrawal of MINURCAT. Attempts by the UN to change Déby’s mind met stiff resistance and the UNSC decided to pull out the mission by the end of 2010. The case of Chad is different to Burundi and DR Congo to the extent that the UN mission does not undertake comprehensive peacebuilding. It is tasked to protect the camps of Sudanese refugees from Darfur that are located in eastern Chad.

The rationale of the host governments

There is little doubt that the governments of Burundi, DR Congo and Chad came to consider the UN missions in their respective countries as a nuisance. From their points of view, the peace operations had outlived their military usefulness, although this needs to be qualified. The Chadian government was recalcitrant to accommodate a foreign mission to begin with. In the DR Congo, Kabila’s request was by and large a bluff for the benefit of domestic political consumption ahead of independence day. To be sure, Kabila has reason to think that the overall situation of his government has improved since 2009, thanks to warming relations with neighbouring Rwanda and

the (at least provisional) neutralisation of the biggest insurgency group in North Kivu. Even so, renewed threats to the security of the regime could easily resurface. In all likelihood, Kabila did not expect the UNSC to agree to the premature and complete drawdown of MONUC.

How can the attitudes of the three governments be explained against the background of the precarious situations in their countries? Notwithstanding some notable differences in terms of country context and mission mandates, the decisions to ‘un-invite’ the UN missions were driven by an essentially political rationale. From the points of view of Nkurunziza, Kabila and Déby, continued and sizeable UN involvement limited their political autonomy. First, missions are almost by necessity politically intrusive, especially when they are equipped with a peacebuilding mandate. Their tasks require and legitimise some degree of interference in the political affairs of the host state, even though the countries mentioned here are a far cry from being subject to international administration. The missions in Burundi and DR Congo were tasked to promote SSR, democracy, human rights and the rule of law; and thus reforms that are not in the interests of their host governments. The assumption that intervenors and national governments share similar objectives is spurious. Converging preferences may be desirable, and surely they are a necessity for successful political reforms and peacebuilding. But with perhaps the notable exception of Liberia, external and domestic actors do not see eye to eye in terms of their goals and preferences.

A second explanation concerns the indirect consequences a long-term UN peacekeeping presence. Sizeable numbers of foreign peacekeepers are a visible signpost of ongoing fragility, which legitimises political interference. A UN mission creates significant international attention for the country and is a clear signal that it is under close scrutiny. Blue helmets are in a position to observe developments on the

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ground and to communicate their findings to the outside world. This is contrary to the interests of national governments that, despite their electoral legitimacy, show little inclination to promote democracy and political reforms. For these governments, the departure or reduction of peacekeeping forces is a way to rid themselves of a troublesome actor that seeks to supervise rather than to support them. They are a liability to the consolidation of regime security and the strategies of power holders who often do not follow the principles and values of the liberal peace that the UN bureaucracy and Western states claim to advance.

In addition to the negative short-term consequences that a reduction in a UN engagement can have, the hostile attitudes of the governments towards the UN draw attention to a fundamental problem of peace operations, but especially its variety of comprehensive peacebuilding. The assistance that outsiders do offer is not always welcome. The will of local authorities to embark on a joint and cooperative approach with their self-declared backers cannot be taken for granted. If this is the case, a national government will either kick out the peacekeepers (e.g., as in Chad) or it will implicitly withdraw its consent of the peacekeeping presence (e.g., as in Burundi, DR Congo). The consequence in both instances is that the UN will lack the political requisite to support peacebuilding. When the national authorities of the host state deny cooperation with the UN – or even step up active resistance – externally driven peacebuilding is bound to fail, even if it is formally implemented.

Conclusion

The examples presented here indicate that consent to an ongoing UN presence is not always given by the recipient state. Quite possibly, the UN will need to adjust itself to an increasing number of similar circumstances in the future. The rejection of external assistance (or interference, as per-

ceived by host governments) fatally undermines liberal peacebuilding inasmuch as it rests on the implicit assumption that its objectives are welcome everywhere. This raises pertinent questions about the political circumstances under which the consolidation of fragile peace processes can be promoted by outsiders. An easy solution is hard to identify. One possible option would be akin to enforced peacebuilding: intrusive policies by external actors could be legitimised through the establishment of transitional international administrations to see peacebuilding through. But this is unlikely to gain widespread international support, if only because of the huge resources this would require to pacify relatively marginal regions, especially if they are located in Africa. A possible alternative consists of two components. First, intervenors need to pay more attention to the interests and preferences of local authorities and, as a consequence, formulate and negotiate more realistic objectives. Second, and more importantly, there is a case to be made that peacebuilding should be liberated from its excessive state-centrism, i.e., its narrow focus on reconstructing state institutions. It is precisely this state-centric approach that forces intervenors into uneasy relationships with rulers who are reluctant to cooperate. The UN should broaden its intervention by reaching out more often to actors from civil and political society. In the long run, after all, they have to support the state that is to be reconstructed. They can exercise important functions in controlling government elites. Their desire for accountable and democratic governance and the rule of law is more in tune with the preferences of intervenors than is the case with government elites, who often pursue their personalistic interests under the guise of state sovereignty.