

An Experience in Military Leadership as a Sector Commander in UN Mission in South Sudan

*K.S. Brar**

South Sudan gained its independence on 9 July 2011, after an overwhelming referendum held in January 2011 and became the youngest country of the world. Although this historic event brought an end to Africa's longest civil war, the celebrations were short-lived, as the power struggle between Mr Salva Kiir Mayardit, the President (belonging to the majority Dinka tribe) and Dr Riek Machar, the First Vice President (from the second-most populous Nuer tribe) started the cycle of violence which even continues to this day, with some other causative factors not restricted only to this confrontation.

It was a singular professionally enriching military experience to command Sector East (SEAST) UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), comprising forces from all the countries from December 2016 to December 2017, in one of the most challenging missions of the UN during that period. In addition, there was a dual and diverse charter as National Senior of the Indian Contingent, which was the largest in South Sudan.

At the operational SEAST level, a number of successful operational actions were launched, which aided fulfillment of the onerous mandate. Numerous Dynamic Air Patrols (DAP) both in government and rebel-controlled territories in conflict areas and engagements with parties to the conflict, assisted in mediation/defusing conflicts including ethnic

* Lieutenant General K.S. Brar, *DG Armoured Corps, former Sector Cdr of a Brigade in South Sudan.*



conflicts to a large extent. Going to the ground in conflict zones provided much greater insights on the causative factors and approaches to be adopted. This greatly assisted the mission leadership in defining their strategies for the mission.

GENESIS OF THE CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN

In December 2013, large-scale fighting broke out in the country as President Salva Kiir Mayardit accused the First Vice President Riek Machar of an attempt of a coup d'état. These events also led to a split in Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the formation of the SPLA in Opposition (SPLA-IO) under Riek Machar.

In April 2016, after numerous efforts and pressure from the international community, the SPLA-IO chief Riek Machar reached capital city Juba to negotiate peace. However, rifts re-emerged and the inevitable happened on 8 July 2016, when clashes broke out between SPLA and SPLA-IO forces in Juba. Because of the advantage of numbers and equipment, SPLA soon overcame the SPLA-IO forces and Riek Machar fled to the neighbouring DRC.

The incidents in Juba raised numerous questions over the effectiveness of UN peacekeepers due to their failure to protect civilians particularly the NGO staff at the Terrain Hotel, where Western NGO workers were assaulted and sexually abused. The Chinese Battalion was accused of abandoning its post and also had two fatal casualties. As a fallout, on 23 August 2016, the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon set up an independent special investigation led by Maj Gen (Retd) Patrick Cammaert. The investigation blamed UNMISS for not responding effectively to the violence due to lack of leadership, un-preparedness and un-professionalism, which eventually led to the removal of Lt Gen Johnson Mogao Kimani Ondicki, Force Commander, UNMISS.

During this period, taking over as the Sector Commander was a challenge when the efficacy of UN military force itself was in question.

CHALLENGES TO THE EXECUTION OF THE MANDATE

Mandate

The mandate of the UNMISS was—protection of civilians, assistance in humanitarian support and investigation of HR violations. Though appearing simplistic, there were humongous complexities to ensure this with a meagre force of only two battalion groups and other resources in

a large area of responsibility spanning 600 x 500 km area. These have been discussed next.

Cycle of Violence

The degree of violence being unprecedented was largely attributed to the following:

1. Fighting between SPLA/Govt of South Sudan (GoSS) forces and the SPLA-IO forces.
2. Traditional inter-tribal rivalries, that is, Dinka-Murle ethnic clashes in SEAST.
3. Violence perpetuated due to cattle raids.
4. The ethnic issues related to abduction of children and age-set clashes.
5. Criminal activities and gun culture due to lack of governance.
6. All armed groups irrespective of their affiliations were carrying out atrocities against other tribes to include human rights violations and sexual/child abuse.
7. Power struggle within each group and corruption (charges) and defections/splintering amongst groups and coming of 'new factions' adding and increasing the volatility and violence.

Impact of the Cycle of Violence

The continuous 'violence cycle' had its evident debilitating results, seen in displacement of population leading to suffering especially among women and children, food shortages/famine and refugees. As per the World Food Programme (WFP), more than one million people faced famine and more than half of the country's population (5–6 million) faced food shortage. There are around two million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and nearly two million refugees in neighbouring countries primarily Uganda, Kenya and even DRC. The warring factions denying UNMISS/UN Humanitarian Agencies/NGOs access to affected areas aggravated the humanitarian issues. Economic/commercial activity was non-existent, with negligible agriculture or manufacturing activity. Oil and gas is in abundance but all oil fields had closed operations or were non-functional due to the conflict except for an oil bloc in the north of the country being operated by a Chinese company. There is no infrastructure, no roads/rail. Tracks are the only means of communication and these are also passable only in dry season. There are just a couple of tarmac airfields in capital Juba and Malakal. Air move to locations with graveled airstrips/helipads (mostly in dry season) is done primarily by the UN and

in limited measure by GoSS, which has few aircraft which they utilise to support the logistics for ongoing fighting. GoSS also had four-five Mi-24 AHs, which they utilised quite extensively during the fighting. Salaries to government staff were not being paid regularly, adding to the increase in lawlessness and criminal activities/ looting.

SEAST COMMAND

Commanding the Sector East, UNMISS was a challenging task. The northern part of the Sector was a SPLA-IO (Riek Machar-RM) bastion and witnessed most of the fighting between the government forces and SPLA-IO (RM). The sector also has the bloodiest inter-tribal clashes in the country, that is, between the Dinka and Murle tribes.

Sector command included the command/functioning of Sector HQ (35 staff officers from various countries), Military Liaison Officers (approx. 25 from various countries), two Infantry Battalion Groups (India and Ethiopia), Cambodian Military Police, Engineering Company from South Korea, Enablers—Sri Lanka Aviation and Sri Lanka Military Hospital. Coordination of mandate/other tasks were essential with Nepal Armed Police Unit, UNPOL and UNDSS and a high degree of understanding was required with the political pillar especially human rights, child protection, civil affairs, etc., for execution of the mandate.

Sector Command encompassed the following tasks:

1. Coordination with all other stakeholders/ agencies, that is, AFPs/ humanitarian agencies, such as OCHA, UNHCR, WFP, WHO, IOM, UNICEF, etc., and NGOs, particularly ICRC for the execution of the mandate.
2. Ensuring protection tasks of mandate and its rigorous implementation—in particular UN bases/assets, POCs, humanitarian agencies/ NGOs, civilians, etc.
3. Enhancing outreach by Dynamic Air Patrols (DAPs), Long Duration Patrols (LDPs), Short Duration Patrols (SDPs) to monitor/assess all conflict zones and ensuring assistance to humanitarian agencies for providing humanitarian support including freedom of movement, if required with force.
4. Putting in efforts to reduce/defuse ethnic tensions and clashes especially Dinka-Murle clashes.
5. Ensuring proper conduct of military operations in Sector East as per norms/regulations of UN including adherence to local customs and traditions and respecting the sensitivity of locals.

6. Force protection and coordination of move of Operation Lifeline. Providing Force Protection for various operational tasks— convoys, airports, etc. Ensuring security to main supply routes/ other roads especially Bor-Juba Road to facilitate UN and civil traffic move.
7. Regular interaction with local authorities and conduct of Key Leadership Engagement (KLE) for better conduct of military operations for fulfilling the mandate.
8. Coordination with neighbouring sectors/ other agencies for conduct of operations.
9. Preparing a proper contingency plan to be prepared for all contingencies. Conducting periodic Table Top and Field Exercises involving all stakeholders.
10. Ensuring training of all military including Sector HQ staff in conduct of their tasks and evaluation of all contingents.
11. Attending to all administrative and logistics requirements of Sector East Command.
12. Ensuring a high morale environment in performance of mandate/tasks. Ensuring proper discipline of military in Sector East especially sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) cases.

Operational Strategy

The above tasks had to be executed through planned operational strategy and its tactical implementation through planned actions. Operational strategy/actions conducted in execution of the mandate are mentioned below:

1. **Operational Strategy:** An ‘operational strategy’ was imperative which greatly assisted in execution of the mandate. Periodic assessments made on likely future predictions were generally correct, as a result, Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and Force Commander both relied on this and interacted regularly.
2. **Leading Patrols:** All UN deployment is in bases. Hence, it was important that patrolling was increased to assess the ground situation, obtain intelligence and also for the execution of the mandate. In order to motivate by personal example, I started leading patrols particularly Dynamic Air Patrols (DAPs) which assisted to a large extent in knowing the ground situation as well as developing liaison/coordination especially with senior hierarchy (‘generals’) of

the parties to the conflict. Subsequently, this liaison was 'useful' in many ways.

3. **Enhancement of Outreach:** The Sector enhanced its 'outreach'. Areas not accessed earlier or not visited for more than one year, especially in rebel territories, were visited. This enhanced 'outreach' had positive image building for UNMISS as well as ability to deduce correct security situation for delivery of aid.
4. **Night Operations:** A major weakness identified by Maj Gen (Retd) Patrick Cammaert Report was that there was no move at night. However, this issue was suitably addressed and the Sector started conducting routine Night Patrols and Long Duration and Dynamic Air Patrols with overnight stay for two-three days.
5. **Interventions in Conflict Situations:** Timely interventions by the Sector assisted in de-escalation of tensions, especially in ethnic conflicts.
6. **Coordination with Humanitarian Agencies:** Greater awareness of remote locations greatly assisted in giving a correct security assessment/threat on routes, thus facilitating delivery of humanitarian aid, which was mostly blocked in other sectors by various stakeholders.
7. **Freedom of Movement.** This was a major issue initially and on occasions, our own patrols had been halted by the pro-government militia including two instances where there was a standoff including cocking of weapons between the two parties. However, with more robust posturing, liaison and coordination with commanders of all factions to conflict and clear intention of neutrality, this issue was resolved. No hindrances to movement were faced after the initial two/ three incidents.
8. **Military Decision Making:** Accountability of any lapse in security falls on the military, rightly so and also evident after the removal of the Force Commander. However, this as per assessment comes about if the military leadership does not make its 'own decisions' and also does not make its position known, including visualising operational repercussions to instructions from Mission Leadership. In the Sector, this was done, which ensured no lapses on this count occurred. Mission leadership also had to change or synchronize their viewpoints to what was being recommended from the Sector and was based on the 'ground situation'.
9. **Variable Capacity of Staff Officers (SOs):** Many SOs fell short on professional standards and some were hampered due to lack of

fluency in English language. Additional efforts were required to raise their performance standards including incentives like extensions and citations, which were strictly based on their performance.

10. **Record of Events – Institutional Memory:** Due to regular turnover of key appointments and staff officers coupled with some inadequacies in documentation, there was a major void in terms of recording of events in the HQs. Record on earlier inquiries, operational actions suffering fatal casualties, information on forced abandonment of bases, etc., is essential and is required on many occasions. Current actions alongwith old records retrieved to the extent possible were catalogued on the Sector server for future reference.

Operations

Some of the major operational actions conducted in support of the mandate are mentioned below to give the essence of the situation and challenges faced by the peacekeepers:

- **Age Set Clashes in Pibor:** Post age set clashes on 21 and 22 March 2017 between Langos and Kurenes, in which the son of Major General Ismail Konyi, the Governor of Boma, and a few others were killed, a revenge attack by Kurenes was expected on 23 March 2017. In anticipation, instructions were issued to deploy ICVs (BMP) in area adjacent and Company Base was told to be on alert and coordinate with other agencies of UN at PIBOR (UNPOL, HR, Humanitarian) to receive civilians. At around 1235 hrs, approximately 800 civilians, mostly women and children sought shelter in the adjacent area. The robust action and seeing BMPs in 'ready to fire' positions defused the age set clash. This was highlighted in UNMISS news and as also on the feedback report by the UN Secretary-General to Security Council on positive actions done by UNMISS after the Malakal and Juba Crisis in 2016.
- **Extrication of MSF Staff at Pibor:** On the night of 12/13 July 2017, on receiving a distress call from aid workers in the MSF compound after a large number of unidentified armed men attacked the compound, extrication operations were ordered. Personnel of Company Base of INDBATT-2 moved quickly on BMP based QRT and reached the compound where the armed intruders were firing indiscriminately. On hearing about the situation, I ordered BMPs to fire in the air. The heavy volume of fire with tracers in night scared the armed assailants and they fled. A total of 13 aid workers were

extricated from the compound. Similar distress call was also received from OXFAM aid workers, which were also promptly answered. This spectacular operational action received widespread praise from all quarters including the Indian and foreign media.

- **Rescue of Ambushed Aid Workers:** On 24 August 2017, again a report was received of a looting incident of NGO MSF Team and Four persons (International & National Staff) and were stranded in the jungles with them not sure of their location. Again rescue operations were ordered. QRF comprising of three ICVs moved into the area and searched. After an hour of search, they found the MSF personnel in the surrounding bushes. They were immediately offered medical attention, as both the local staff had been beaten up badly. They were then brought back to the UN compound. This action by the company was complimented by SRSG, UNMISS.
- **Dinka-Murle Clashes (April/May 2017):** Violent Dinka-Murle clashes took place in May 2017 in the area between Bor and Pibor, wherein more than 6,000 youth had mobilised from both sides and reportedly Dinkas were provided heavy weapons by SPLA. During this period, security status of both Bor and Pibor were maintained at the highest level and were prepared for all contingencies. As a follow-up, proactive action to defuse the situation was taken at leadership level of SRSG and Governors. During Dinka–Murle clashes, robust posture was maintained at both Bor and Pibor. Especially Pibor, where the staff expressed concerns of evacuation as Dinkas were moving closer to Pibor. In Bor also, when Dinka youths were returning, they fired approximately 400 rounds close to SSBBor (100–200 meters). During this period, safety of SSBBor was ensured and patrols were sent out so that the direction of celebratory fire was not towards the UNMISS compound.
- **RPG Fire on SSBBor:** On 4 June 2017, in the evening an RPG air burst took place near the western berm wall inside the UN base, 75 metres from my HQ location. Immediate Stand-to was ordered and QRTs were activated, but control exercised did not allow the situation to escalate. Later, a detailed technical analysis was carried out to identify the location of fire, which forced the GoSS to take action.
- **Abduction and Release of Indian Oil Workers:** On 8 March 2017, two Indian workers who were employed with Dar Petroleum were abducted by SPLA/IO cadres in the Upper Nile State. The

Ambassador requested for assistance. A continued negotiation with the 'generals' of SPLA-iO was maintained and they were finally released after approximately three weeks.

- **Violence at Jalle:** On 17 July 2017, widespread violence was reported from the general area of Jalle, approx. 60 km from UN Base at Bor due to raids by Murle tribesmen. This resulted in the killings and abductions of children including capture of 8,500 cattle. Immediate move of patrols into the area defused the crisis. Subsequent assistance and security provided to move of a high-power delegation comprising UN and govt officials prevented the situation from escalating.
- **Security Related Operations:** As a matter of routine security was provided on the Bor-Juba Road, which had witnessed multiple ambushes, maintenance of Main Supply Route and for Operation Life Line (Barge) movement. On a number of occasions, escorts were provided to the National Staff/NGOs for move through ambush areas or for movement at night. Patrols were also launched on many occasions on humanitarians' distress call, saving IDPs from harassment, armed men, etc.

NATIONAL SENIOR IN MISSION

As the National Senior, ensuring high professional standards of the Indian Contingents (largest in the Mission) was the focus. It was ensured all Indian peacekeepers upheld the image of the IA by their professionalism. There was also always a need for constant operational guidance. Other than this main function, the charter involved the following:

1. *Administrative and Logistic Issues:* Cases for reimbursements from UN, disposal of old vehicles, equipment including ammunition, rotation of contingents and maintaining high serviceability state of operational equipment had to be ensured.
2. *Media Reports:* A collective effort was made to ensure that the performance/achievements of all Indian peacekeepers were highlighted in UNMISS media as well as in international and national media. However, it is felt that involvement of Indian media agencies in highlighting achievements of Indian Peacekeepers is not as much what foreign media organisations like *Reuters*, *Washington Post*, *BBC*, etc., do for their countries even when there is no real participation from these countries at the ground level.

3. *Increasing Cooperation with Indian Embassy:* Better synergy with Indian Embassy facilitated many aspects of diplomacy. For the celebrations of Republic Day/Independence Day at the Indian Embassy, support provided ensured a grand event in line with that of countries like USA and China. Also, it was for the first time that the UNMISS leadership (SRSG, Force Commander and DMS) attended the event, which boosted the country's standing amongst diplomats. The Embassy also started highlighting the good achievements of Indian Peacekeepers and other news through tweets by the Ministry of External Affairs and also through a fortnightly magazine and reports sent by the Indian Embassy. The embassy also facilitated the arrival of a Kathak Dance Troupe to South Sudan, as part of cultural exchange by the Ministry of External Affairs. This was appreciated by peacekeepers from all countries.

CONCLUSION

Leadership Lessons: Leadership lessons from the account given are self-evident. Militaries the world over respect professionalism and know it very clearly that if it exists, people respond accordingly. Leading by personal example, courage, decisive decision-making under stress, professional capability, fairness and integrity and foresight and planning were qualities which were essential for high performance. The mission also gave a good experience on negotiating at state level and coordination of relief resources, execution of developmental projects, medical and healthcare. With respect to Inter-Tribal wars, the various tribes also see through the intent(s) and only respond if genuine. Right communication and outreach with genuineness and sincerity resulted in mitigation of many conflict situations. The locals despite their outward appearance of being big (normal height was 6'3") and being part of extreme violent incidents are still victims of circumstances and seeking competent and sincere leadership which can bring peace and get them basic amenities such as food and shelter. This was woefully lacking largely due to high levels of corruption and power struggle amongst various political leaders and generals.

UN Mission in South Sudan is a challenging mission and requires a robust response by the UN peacekeepers, and in which the Indian Peacekeepers are performing exceptionally. However, resolution of the sufferings of the locals can only be obviated if there is a genuine effort from all especially the major stakeholders (permanent Security Council

members) to collectively address the issue rather than following their own national agendas.

South Sudan is geo-strategically located at the epicenter of Africa, sharing borders with seven countries. It is resource-rich (oil, gas, minerals) and in future holds promise for investment. Indian diaspora though limited in numbers, has a positive influence and has generated goodwill with people of South Sudan. A diplomatic–military cooperation engagement initiated now will stand India in good stead and provide grounds for greater engagement in future.

Snippets: Sector Commander UNMISS South Sudan 2017

Brig (Now Lt Gen) K.S. Brar

MISSION MILITARY LEADERSHIP



Standing Left to Right: Maj (China), Sector Commander South (Ethiopia), Sector Commander West (Ghana), Sector Commander North (China), Deputy Force Commander (Mongolia), Force Commander (Rwanda), Sector Commander East (India), Chief of Staff HQ (UK), Sector Commander Reserve Protection Force (Rwanda), Colonel CO Battalion (China)

RESCUE OPS

On 13 July 2017, INDBATT-2 QRF at Pibor extracted 14 x MSF workers at night who were under attack by armed persons in the MSF compound



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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Under hail of bullets, Indian peacekeepers rescue aid workers in South Sudan

TIMESOFINDIA.COM | Jul 16, 2017, 03:11 PM IST



NEW DELHI: Indian peacekeepers in South Sudan rescued more than a dozen humanitarian workers who came under heavy fire from unknown gunmen in a town in the African country on Thursday.

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UN peacekeepers rescue aid workers in S. Sudan

Xinhua, July 15, 2017 0 Comment(s) Print E-mail

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JUBA, July 14 (Xinhua) -- The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) said Friday that Indian peacekeepers have rescued more than a dozen humanitarian workers who came under heavy fire from unknown gunmen in the restive town of Pibor.

MONITORING OF CONFLICT BETWEEN GOVERNMENT FORCES AND REBEL FORCES



Attack Hptr Firing on SPLA-IO Positions



Stray Bullets



Damage to BMP Sight

DYNAMIC AIR PATROLS: GOVERNMENT FORCES AND REBELS



Dynamic Patrol in SPLA-IO Area – ‘Ayod’



NEGOTIATIONS: VARIOUS TRIBES



TERRAIN CONDITIONS



MEDIA REPORTS



UNMISS

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ARTICLES

UNMISS Indian Battalion assists IDPs in Pibor



UNMISS Indian battalion medical team in Pibor providing treatment for an injured person seeking shelter at the Mission's base following fighting in the area. Click here for this and more pictures. Photo: UNMISS / UN Military

UN | Local Time 15:12-06 Dec | ALL UN MISSIONS

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UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN SOUTH SUDAN



Outgoing UNMISS commander appeals to South Sudanese to resolve conflicts peacefully

8 Dec 2017 | **OUTGOING UNMISS COMMANDER APPEALS TO SOUTH SUDANESE TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS PEACEFULLY**

MACH SAMUEL

The outgoing commander of the UN Mission's peacekeeping forces in the Jonglei region is appealing to the people and authorities of South Sudan to end the violence and build sustainable peace.

Jonglei, in the Upper Nile region, has been the site of a number of violent clashes related to cattle raiding, child abduction, and inter-communal revenge killing since the civil war broke out in South Sudan in 2013.

Brigadier General Karanbir Singh Brar, who has led troops in the area, known as the eastern sector, says that the peacekeeping presence, particularly regular patrols, has made a difference in protecting civilians and building peace but there is much more to be done.

7/8/2017

Indian peacekeepers in South Sudan praised by top UN official - The Hindu

THE HINDU

INTERNATIONAL

Indian peacekeepers in South Sudan praised by top UN official

PTI

UNITED NATIONS: JULY 08, 2017 10:57 IST

UPDATED: JULY 08, 2017 10:57 IST

Indian peacekeepers stationed in a South Sudanese town have been praised for providing lifesaving medical assistance to a woman who collapsed near a UN base.

An 18-year-old internally displaced woman who lives in the Protection of Civilian site at Melut was returning from a nearby market when she collapsed and fell unconscious.

The peacekeepers at the sentry gate immediately rushed to bring her into the base, a report on the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) website said.

It added that an ambulance to transport the severely ill woman to a local hospital was unavailable at the time so the Indian peacekeeping medical team provided her with immediate treatment at the hospital within the base.

The woman is now recovering well and has been moved to another hospital for further care.

UNMISS head David Shearer praised the Indian battalion for its quick response in helping the woman and for the "quality of care they were able to provide in such a remote and dangerous environment," the report added.

India, which is among the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping missions, has a total of 7,665 troops, police and military experts stationed in the South Sudanese mission.

Printable version | Jul 8, 2017 7:18:20 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indian-peacekeepers-in-south-sudan-praised-by-top-un-official/article19239295.ece>

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