

# India and UN Peacekeeping in Africa

## An Assessment

*Ruchita Beri\**

Over the last seven decades, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) have helped several countries across the world to move away from the path of conflict. Africa has been a significant region for deployment of the United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, often known as ‘the blue helmets’. Out of the 12 ongoing UNPKOs, six are located in Africa.<sup>1</sup> They include Western Sahara (MINURSO), Mali (MINUSMA), Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), Central African Republic (MINUSCA), South Sudan (UNMISS) and Abyei (UNISFA), a disputed border area between Sudan and South Sudan.<sup>2</sup>

Some trends can be seen regarding the UNPKOs in Africa. First, a large number of peacekeepers have been deployed by the UN in the region. At present, over 60,000 uniformed UN peacekeepers are present in the African continent.<sup>3</sup> Second, while countries external to Africa, such as Bangladesh, Nepal and India, continue to be the top three leading UN Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs), there has been an increase in involvement of African countries in this sphere. For example, Rwanda is the largest TCC from Africa. Third, there is a rise in robust UN peacekeeping operations with Chapter VII mandates in Africa. The MONUSCO was one of the first UNPKOs to receive this mandate, to use all necessary means to protect the civilians. However, the mission’s failure to provide protection to civilians and prevent large-scale attacks

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\* Ms Ruchita Beri, *Senior Research Associate & Coordinator, Africa, LAC & UN Centre, MP-IDSA.*



led to the formation of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) within MONUSCO in 2013. This force was tasked to conduct offensive military operations against the rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Fourth, it appears that the record of the UN blue helmets in Africa has been mixed. This may be due to the complex conflict situation in the region, geopolitics and the capacity and resources available to the peacekeeping mission.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the failure of the UN peacekeepers to protect civilians in Somalia and Rwanda has led to the African Union developing a parallel regional mechanism for peacekeeping in the spirit of finding 'African solutions for African problems'. These operations, whether in Somalia, Mali or Central Africa Republic have been supported by the UN and other external actors like the European Union, France, US, UK and to a lesser extent by India.

With the above backdrop, this article seeks to examine the role of India in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa. India has been deeply involved in UN peacekeeping and is amongst the top three troop contributing countries, with over 5,579 personnel deployed in active peacekeeping missions.<sup>5</sup> As the majority of these deployments are in Africa, it can be argued that UN peacekeeping is an important part of India's defence engagement with the region.<sup>6</sup> In Africa, India has been involved in a number of peacekeeping operations. This began in 1960 with Congo, the first major UNPKO on the continent, followed by participation in the UN peacekeeping missions in Namibia, Mozambique, Somalia, Rwanda, Angola, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Abeyi, Western Sahara and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Indian peacekeepers have garnered praise from UN officials for their role in peacekeeping in Africa. One of the best compliments was from Gen Franklin Van Kappen, Military Advisor to the UN Secretary-General, regarding Indian contribution to the UN Mission in Angola. He said 'I wish all six battalions in Angola could be from India'.<sup>7</sup> India's contribution to UN peacekeeping in Africa is exemplary for providing humanitarian support, promoting gender equality, reflecting solidarity with African countries and enhancing bilateral cooperation with the region.

#### PROVIDING HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT

Indian UN peacekeepers' humanitarian role has been recognised widely. The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix has remarked,

UN peacekeeping operates in increasingly complex environments and we are grateful for steadfast partners like India, who have risen to new challenges and continue to participate meaningfully in our efforts to protect vulnerable civilians.<sup>8</sup>

Indian peacekeepers have won praise for going beyond the call of duty to provide medical and engineering service to local communities to deal with disease, disaster and also to enhance their infrastructure.

In 2020, Indian peacekeepers in South Sudan won appreciation for providing veterinary services to the local communities in the region they were stationed. Not only did they treat thousands of animals, they also enhanced the capacities of the local animal health sector by training the local youth.<sup>9</sup> The Indian peacekeeping brigade at the Democratic Republic of Congo played an exceptional role during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the Indian Field Hospital in Goma under the aegis of MONUSCO, Indian doctors on peacekeeping duty treat not only the UN casualties, but also the local population.<sup>10</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, the hospital was in the forefront of the fight to contain the deadly contagion in the region. It acted as a regional Covid-19 referral centre for all cases of the infection.

Indian army engineers serving with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), have been commended for improving the lives of the local people by assisting in building roads and other infrastructure in the country. At the time of independence, South Sudan had a huge infrastructure deficit. The condition of roads was deplorable. The improved road connectivity will serve as an engine of growth for the country.<sup>11</sup>

Indian peacekeepers have also helped the local population during natural disasters. In 2020, floods had destroyed the road connecting two towns, Bunj and Malut in the Upper Nile state of South Sudan. Engineers and troops, part of the Indian contingent at the UNMISS, worked day and night in adverse weather conditions to repair this important roadway. This helped in the delivery of humanitarian aid to the communities living in these cities.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly in 2021, Indian peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo played a vital role in evacuation of civilians from the Goma city after a volcano erupted there.<sup>13</sup> These peacekeepers were part of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) headquartered at Goma, close to the Mount Nyirangongo, an active volcano. The eruption raised the

anxiety of the local people. The support by the Indian contingent helped in timely evacuation of civilians from the city and also in protecting UN assets.

#### MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN UN PEACEKEEPING

In 2000, UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 led to the creation of the United Nations Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This resolution recognised the impact of conflict on women and recognised their role in conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations. This resolution projected women as an important part of the conflict resolution and not just as an aggrieved party or a victim. The resolution encourages greater female presence in UN peacekeeping operations as military observers and civilian police. After SCR 1325, the Security Council adopted nine more resolutions on the WPS agenda. They were focused on two main issues. First, such as the UN SCR 1325 were related to women's participation in peacekeeping and peacebuilding: 1889 (2009), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015) and 2493 (2019). Second, to address the conflict-related sexual violence: 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013) and 2467 (2019).<sup>14</sup> These resolutions have helped in bringing forth a gendered perspective of peace and security by the United Nations.

Since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, India has taken a lead in mainstreaming gender in UN peacekeeping operations. This is particularly true with regard to India's involvement in UNPKOs in the African continent. It deployed an all-women police battalion for the United Nation Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) from 2007 to 2016. This effort is commendable, as this was the first time an all-women unit was deployed in the UN peacekeeping history. It garnered much praise in Liberia for the stellar role it played in enhancing the country's security and also serving as a role model for Liberian women. In the words of the former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, 'Our security service now has 17 per cent women. We owe all that to you, because it was not even one per cent a few years ago'.<sup>15</sup>

India has also deployed women peacekeepers for the United Nations peacekeeping missions in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2019, India deployed 22 women drawn from the *Sashastra Seema Bal* (SSB), a Central Armed Police Force, as a first Indian Female Engagement Team (FET) with the United Nations Organisation Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo

(MONUSCO).<sup>16</sup> The concept of deployment of FET can be traced back to the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, where FETs were deployed to engage with local women.<sup>17</sup> The first FETs were deployed by the UN in 2015 in MONUSCO.<sup>18</sup>

The UN Mission in the DRC is recognised as one of the most challenging UNPKOs in the world. The FET has been deployed in eastern Congo, which has witnessed conflict amongst multiple armed groups, the most prominent being the 23 March Movement (M23), primarily for the control of the country's vast mineral deposits. Within this unstable security environment, the FET's duties include patrolling, providing escort missions and riot control. The team also engages with women in the country to understand and report their problems to local authorities. According to Capt Preeti Sharma, Commander of Indian FET, the presence of the team has inspired Congolese women to join the police force.<sup>19</sup> Further, Indian officials reiterate that deployment of FET in MONUSCO also fits well with the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres's initiative to enhance participation of women in UN peacekeeping.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Indian woman peacekeepers' role in South Sudan has been duly acknowledged by the UN. UN Secretary General Guterres conferred the 'United Nations Military Gender Advocate of the year 2019' award to Major Suman Gawani of India for her contributions as a military observer with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>21</sup> She was the focal point for all gender-related issues for the military observers within the mission. Her proactive role in integrating a gendered perspective in the mission's activities was much appreciated. She was also applauded for her work on Conflict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) in the country. As a trained CRSV specialist, she was involved in training the South Sudanese armed forces on dealing with issues such as rape, sexual slavery, and other kinds of sexual violence against women or men that is directly or indirectly linked to conflict.

Apart from enhancing participation of women peacekeepers in UN missions, and providing pre-deployment training to peacekeepers from troop-contributing countries, India provides training to female military officers from around the world through a specialised course on peacekeeping that also covers training on gender-sensitive issues, particularly CRSV, at its Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK) at New Delhi.

#### ENHANCING COOPERATION WITH AFRICAN COUNTRIES

India's participation in UN peacekeeping operations is indicative of its solidarity with the African countries and their efforts towards securing the region. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has emphasised this viewpoint. He says that the 'strong and deep solidarity between India and Africa ... is expressed through our peacekeeping presence' on the continent.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, strengthening relations with the African countries at bilateral or multilateral level is one of the motivating factors for India's UN peacekeeping in Africa. Developing closer relations with Africa is currently a 'top priority' for the Indian government. This was reiterated by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi while announcing the '10 Guiding Principles of India's engagement with Africa' during an address to the Ugandan parliament in 2018.<sup>23</sup>

So does India's involvement in UN peacekeeping in Africa, help in improving the relations with the countries in the region? There is no doubt that Indian peacekeepers have garnered much praise for the commendable work in the several countries that they have served in, including Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Their exceptional service has helped in improving relations with these countries.

The Indian UN peacekeepers' role in Sierra Leone during their deployment for United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) is warmly remembered in the country till date. During a meeting with India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar, Sierra Leone's Foreign Minister Prof. David John Francis shared his high regard for the Indian peacekeepers deployed in the country over two decades ago. There is no doubt that presence of Indian peacekeepers and commendable humanitarian efforts served as an impetus for improving economic ties between the two countries.

The civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2006) had led to the loss of thousands of lives and displaced millions of people. The country was in a bad shape during this period with almost 60 per cent people living in extreme poverty.<sup>24</sup> Most of these people did not even have the means to purchase food. Indian peacekeepers offered food and medical support to them during their stay in the country. Though humanitarian assistance was not their mandate, their support to the local community earned them regard within the country. So, the Indian peacekeepers laid the foundation of a growing cooperation between India and Sierra Leone.

The trade figures also depict the transformation in trade between the two countries. In 1998–99, the value of the total trade between the two countries was around US\$ 2 million. This went up to approximately US\$ 18 million in 2001–02 (a year after the exit of Indian peacekeepers) and is around US\$ 195 million in 2021–22.<sup>25</sup> While there may have been other reasons also for the increase in trade, such as EXIM Bank 'Focus Africa' policy launched in 2002 that encouraged exports to Africa, one has to say that the role played by Indian peacekeepers paved the way in bringing the two countries together.

Similarly, the deployment of 125 women peacekeepers of Indian formed police unit in Liberia from 2007 to 2016 as part of the UNMIL, helped in generating immense goodwill for India in the country. The Indian peacekeepers' contribution for inspiring the security service was duly acknowledged by the country's leadership. During the farewell ceremony, President Sirleaf depicted their special place, by calling the Indian police unit 'family' and said that she would 'have liked that the Indian Formed Police Unit (FPU) would continue its stay in the country for the time being'.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that the exceptional contribution of the Indian peacekeepers provided stimulus for the visit of India's External Affairs Minister to Liberia after a gap of 38 years along with a delegation from Confederation of Indian Industry and subsequent high-level visits from Liberia to India.<sup>27</sup> An indication of flourishing relations between the two came in 2013, when President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was bestowed with the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development for her good governance and efforts towards return of peace and democracy and development in Liberia. President Sirleaf also participated in the third India–Africa Forum Summit held at New Delhi in 2015.

Indian peacekeepers' presence in the DRC since 2003 has also helped in improving economic relations with the country. Congo has abundant mineral resources, particularly, copper, coltan and tin are some of the rare minerals mined there. While China is the dominant external actor, India too has managed to forge an economic partnership with the country. The role of Indian peacekeepers in improving the relations between the two can be gauged by the favourable comments made by the Congolese Foreign Minister Alexis Thambwe Mwamba at the end of a bilateral visit to India in 2009. He said 'Indian contingent in MONUC, which has not only engaged in peace-keeping but also carried out significant humanitarian work for the Congolese people'.<sup>28</sup> During this visit, the two

sides agreed to strengthen economic relations particularly in agriculture, mining and infrastructure. The only discordant note in this partnership is regarding the news reports of allegations of sexual misconduct by Indian peacekeepers in DRC in 2008.<sup>29</sup> While Indian officials denied the reports at that time, India needs to take this criticism regarding the misconduct of Indian peacekeepers seriously. The 'zero-tolerance' policy of Indian government for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) related issues is a step in the right direction. It is clear that UN peacekeepers are perceived as Ambassadors of India in the host country. A clean image would go a long way in promoting bilateral relations.

In conclusion, it can be said that India's participation in UNPKOs in Africa has been exemplary. It has been one of the largest contributors of peacekeepers to the continent. India's role in providing humanitarian support during the UN missions in Africa is also much appreciated. Similarly, India's efforts towards promoting the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda through pioneering the participation of woman peacekeepers in the region reflects the deep support for gender equality in the security sphere. Finally, the presence of Indian peacekeepers has paved the way for deeper relations with the host countries. It is hoped that India's partnership with the United Nations in peacekeeping helps in providing sustained peace to the Africa countries.

#### NOTES

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