



# The Impact of COVID-19 on Peace Operations

April 2, 2020 by Cedric de Coning

A South African peacekeeper part of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) takes measures to ensure a safe environment during the coronavirus pandemic. (MONUSCO/Michael Ali/Flickr)

A few weeks ago, peace operations across the world began swiftly adapting to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Missions have been forced to take unprecedented steps to cope with the coronavirus pandemic. These efforts may be just the beginning, and much more significant reductions and changes in the way these operations function may be needed over the coming months.

Today, more than 50 missions are all in full crisis management mode and are adapting to a radical new situation while ensuring the safety of approximately 160,000 civilian, police, and military peacekeepers. Most of the countries where these missions are deployed have closed their borders and have imposed social distancing measures. Countries like South Sudan have asked the United Nations not to rotate new troops into their countries, especially from countries that are seen as high risk like China, Italy, South Korea, and Spain.

In response to the pandemic, peace operations are assessing which functions and operational activities are critical and need to continue as normal or be adapted, which are important but not critical, and which can be paused until the crisis is over. Essential functions across missions include patrols and activities related to protection of civilians, convoy escorts and other forms of support to humanitarian assistance, force protection, protecting key infrastructure, and support to host state institutions and local authorities. Some missions have suspended their quick-impact project plans and are now reallocating these funds to support the efforts of local and national institutions to contain the spread of COVID-19. Limiting operations to the essentials will help to prevent and contain the virus, but in the medium to long term the ability of missions to achieve their mandated benchmarks and objectives will be impacted.

Peace operations have also introduced their own social distancing policies, both to avoid spreading the disease to local communities and to protect staff. After the 2010 cholera outbreak in Haiti, UN missions are acutely aware of the danger they may pose to host populations. For example, in the AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM), all movement of personnel has been limited to that which is essential, all rotations and new deployments have been suspended, and civilian staff outside Somalia are working from home and non-critical staff were moved out of Mogadishu.

In the AMISOM headquarters in Mogadishu, essential staff work in decongested offices and from their rooms. The dining facilities now only serve takeaway food. There are limitations on the size and number of meetings that cannot be done remotely. The staff that arrived in the mission before travel was suspended, or who are otherwise suspected of having COVID-19 are isolated until medically cleared. For the moment that includes the head of mission who recently returned.

Most UN missions have adopted similar measures. In the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL), a whole battalion that recently rotated into the country is under 14-day quarantine. In the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA), staff have been further identified not only as non-essential or critical, but also location-based versus non-location based to adapt to COVID-19 restrictions.

Most national and international staff in all peace operations either work from home or their accommodations. In some locations, working from home may mean no or poor internet connection and frequent electricity cuts. In many missions, non-essential staff or those with medical conditions were given the option to leave, but by now most borders have closed and staff are locked in place. This means that staff can no longer go on leave, including for medical reasons.

Missions are contingency planning for the possibility of large-scale evacuation, should the situation require it, but in this global emergency, the question is where can mission staff be evacuated to? Where will it be safer and who would be willing to accept several hundred or thousand evacuees? A mission like the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has approximately 3,000 civilian staff, 1,000 police officers, and 13,500 troops.

From a UN mission support perspective, both the UN's global service center in Brindisi, Italy and the regional service center in Entebbe, Uganda have been affected by travel bans, border closures, and social distancing policies that have most staff working from home. However, essential support is still being provided and while cargo flights are not affected by the travel bans, some global supply chains have been disrupted.

In terms of medical services and hospitals, the larger peace operations have their own, but these facilities are limited and were not designed for a public health emergency. Very few missions have test kits, sufficient protective equipment, or ventilators of their own at this stage. These limited facilities will be quickly overwhelmed if staff start to fall ill. Emergency medical evacuations can still be arranged, but the countries the UN and others would normally evacuate people to have now also closed their borders.

UN headquarters in New York has also introduced social distancing measures, and apart from a few essential staff the rest are all working from home. New York is much more severely affected by the coronavirus than any of the UN's peace operations, at this stage. The UN Security Council has resorted to meeting remotely and voting in writing when needed. In most cases where mandate renewals are due, they are being technically rolled-over until the next renewal date. Similar steps have been taken by the AU, European Union, and OSCE.

Peace operations are, of course, no strangers to crisis management, and there are staff that have experience managing public health emergencies, including especially the 2014–2016 Ebola virus outbreak in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the 2018–2019 Ebola virus outbreak in the DRC. Still, the pace at which peace operations have had to make significant changes to the way they work over the last two weeks has been unprecedented.

The sacrifices civilian, police, and military peacekeepers have to make should also be recognized. For example, some units may have already been deployed for almost a year, and staying in the mission longer means that they cannot be reunited with their families for several more months. Missions have to make difficult choices to balance their duty of care to staff and their obligations to implement their mandates. The global reach of the pandemic, which means that all the missions have to manage this crisis simultaneously, is also placing enormous strain on headquarters. However, the recent UN reforms, especially the delegation of authority to heads of mission, have enabled UN missions to make these kinds of adaptations much more rapidly than would have been the case in the past.

At this stage, most of the countries where peace operations are deployed are on the periphery of the pandemic. However, this is likely to change as the virus continues to spread, and peace operations will most likely have to make further changes to the way they work, both to protect their staff and to be able to continue carrying out critical functions.

The outlook for the near future requires missions to consider many complex, interlinked dynamics. In the context of the impending global recession, peace operation budgets will shrink. Troop- and police-contributing countries may prioritize domestic operations. Host populations may become more hostile to foreigners. Some host governments may use COVID-19 as a pretext to limit a mission's freedom of movement. Missions will not be able to support, supply, and care for the same number of staff that was possible before COVID-19. Mandates will need to be adapted to the new reality, with new risks and new needs. No doubt, headquarter staff and missions are now starting to plan for these eventualities.

Cedric de Coning is a senior research fellow with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), senior advisor for ACCORD, and the coordinator of the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON). He tweets at @CedricdeConing.

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