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‘It is clear that Congolese people are against MONUSCO’

The controversial MONUSCO mandate has been extended. While welcomed by the international community, the mission has failed to build local legitimacy

The recent renewal of the MONUSCO mandate does not come as good news for the Congo. ‘For me, personally, this is bad news and it hurts me a lot’ says Fabrice Kighoma, a Congolese activist located in Goma in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), after the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decided to once more extend the mandate of its peace operation on 20December 2022. Internationally, this decision was warmly welcomed. Yet, in the Congo itself, many people felt disappointed by the decision-makers in New York.

The *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (MONUSCO), formerly known as MONUC, has been operating in the DRC since 1999. Starting as a rather passive observer mission, it has evolved into one of the most expensive, most militarised and perhaps most controversial UN peace operations to date. Its main objective is to protect Congolese civilians against armed groups and support government efforts to stabilise the East of the DRC. Yet, from early on, MONUSCO’s history in the region has been one filled with challenges, protest and resistance.

Protests that turn to violence

In 2004, Laurent Nkunda took control over Bukavu in South Kivu. His army committed numerous war crimes, including killing and raping civilians. In response, thousands of students organised mass protests in front of MONUC’s office in Kinshasa. They criticised the mission for failing to prevent these atrocities. While MONUC’s initial mandate focused on the implementation of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement to end the Second Congo War, MONUSCO has adopted a more comprehensive and robust approach. The active protection of civilians is now the operation’s number one priority. Nevertheless, killings continued and so did the protests.

The tragic events in Beni in November 2019 are perhaps most memorable; After attacks by the rebel group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), demonstrations against MONUSCO's alleged passivity turned violent. Many protesters lost their lives, claimed to have been killed by local police forces but also by MONUSCO soldiers.

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The most recent wave of protests in July and August 2022 made international headlines. After Bintou Keita, head of MONUSCO, had stated that the mission might reach its operational limits with regards to combatting the M23 rebels, the Congolese Senate President Modeste Bahati Lukwebo gave a speech urging for MONUSCO to 'pack its bags' and leave the country. One day later, pictures of young men from Butembo burning MONUSCO's flag circulated on social media. And they were not alone. Against the backdrop of the ongoing offensive by M23 and the continued violence by other armed groups, people took their anger to the streets – not only in Goma but also in Sake, Butembo, Beni and Rutshuru.

And, once more, with protest came violence. Though civil society groups had called for peaceful protest marches, some people started looting MONUSCO's facilities and offices in Goma. The staff had to evacuate. Protesters were killed – allegedly shot by state forces and MONUSCO soldiers. The situation escalated further. In the border town Kasindi, where MONUSCO soldiers opened fire after trying to re-enter Congo, killing at least two people. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for an immediate investigation. The soldiers now face national judicial investigation in their home country. In Congo, however, this incident culminated in renewed protests against the 'barbarism orchestrated by the blue helmets of MONUSCO'. At least five peacekeepers got killed and numerous protesters were killed or injured.

Bad reputation

These examples demonstrate how tense the relationship between the Congolese people and their supposed protectors has become. While for some Congolese in rural areas, MONUSCO does in fact represent the only protection from armed groups, others throw stones at MONUSCO soldiers when they enter their village. In May 2022 in a town called Mambasa (Ituri territory), the operation was met with a high level of resistance, which forced the soldiers to withdraw after only a few days.

MONUSCO officially supports any peaceful protest as a democratic right. At the same time, officials have criticised open hostilities as counterproductive. During a press conference following the July and August events, the Deputy Head of MONUSCO, Khassim Diagne, stressed that the vast majority of the Congolese people in fact want the mission there. Diagne believes that there is a distinction to be made between peaceful protesters with a political vision and criminals who start looting and vandalising. In general, he argues that MONUSCO has to improve its communication, as many Congolese were unable to understand the mandate and its limitations.

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This argument, however, is seen by many Congolese as yet another insult. Certainly, misinformation and, in some cases, even fake news about MONUSCO have worsened the reputation of the peacekeepers. Yet, what might be even more damaging are the many stories of people being killed just outside of MONUSCO bases. During my research in Goma, I heard many testimonies of Congolese who lost their friends, relatives or neighbours just hundreds of meters away from the blue helmets. In his article *I Mourn for Angelina*, Congolese scholar Alex Ntung describes how he desperately called on MONUSCO officials to protect his relatives in a village where, allegedly, the Congolese army itself committed mass atrocities. He was apparently told by MONUSCO military troop leaders not to worry, because 'in Africa people help one another' and that his family would surely be able to get assistance from local authorities. Though this is a very specific case, in many ways it is representative of the tragic examples that help us understand why some Congolese have lost faith in MONUSCO. In fact, according to a poll taken in the different provinces in which MONUSCO is active, at most 19 per cent in Mambasa and only one per cent in Walikale believe that the mission is able to protect them. I heard time and again *watu wamechoka* – the people are tired. They long for a way out of the crisis.

Eventually, MONUSCO's mandate got extended another year. Shortly after, the United States Mission to the United Nations, as the biggest

single-country financial supporter of MONUSCO, stressed that clearly MONUSCO 'cannot remain in the DRC forever'. Yet, according to them, a future drawdown needs to be carefully planned to 'avoid exposing vulnerable populations to further harm'. At the same time, the UNSC eased the weapon embargo on the DRC – for many Congolese yet another lukewarm compromise drawn up in New York.

The need for substantial change

Perhaps, MONUSCO's mandate renewal does not come as a surprise, but it still is a disappointment for some. For others, who are in fact relying on MONUSCO's protection, it might be a relief. While the Congolese government officially agrees to MONUSCO's presence in Congo, Steward Muhindo, an activist and researcher in Goma, clarifies that, for him, this view does not represent the will of the people themselves: 'I think this decision is undemocratic. It is clear that Congolese people are against MONUSCO. When they update the mandate of MONUSCO, they do not ask what the people think. I don't see any mechanism to try to understand why the civil society is against MONUSCO. The UN must try to consider the people and not only the leaders.'

It is important to acknowledge that while the international community may welcome the ongoing UN presence in the region, the mission has failed to build local legitimacy.

So how do we move on from here? Sadly, many Congolese believe that without any substantial changes, the circle of violence will repeat itself. According to Muhindo, 'the security will continue to be what it is now and MONUSCO will continue to not do anything.' The Congolese people have voiced their discontent with MONUSCO's current operations, often with tragic outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that while the international community may welcome the ongoing UN presence in the region, the mission has failed to build local legitimacy. The ongoing protests show quite powerfully that the government's approval is not enough anymore. As Anjali Dayal, Assistant Professor at Fordham University, states: 'building consent at multiple levels is key for the enduring success of UN peace operations, and key to finding lasting political solutions to conflicts.' In the election year 2023, MONUSCO as well as the Congolese government have the chance – and the duty – to listen and show that they are able

to learn and make a change, with positive potential for regional security and prosperity.



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