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United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)

Conflict history

Today's conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC — formerly Zaire) stems from the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, which precipitated a reification of ethnic divisions throughout the Great Lakes region and an influx of arms and ex-combatants into the Eastern

DRC. The Congolese government, then led by Mobutu Sese Seko, could not contain propagating armed groups mainly composed of Hutu genocide perpetrators. Mobutu's inability to quell the violence prompted Rwanda to invade the DRC in 1996 in what became the First Congo War.¹ Other actors with an interest in



In 2017, Bangladesh, one of the largest contributors to UN Peacekeeping, deployed women pilots for the first time when they sent Flight Lieutenants Nayma Haque and Tamanna-E-Lutfi to serve with the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Here, the two officers stand in front of their helicopter. / Photo by: UN Photo/MONUSCO Force

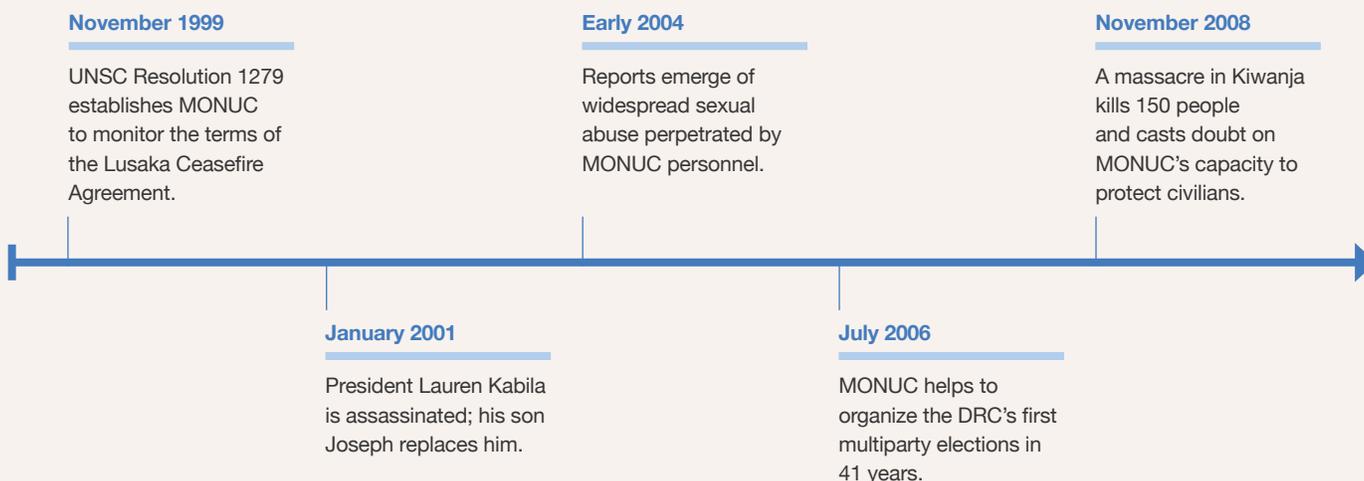
the country's rich natural resources and political leadership, including Angola, Uganda, and Zambia, joined the war. Their support bolstered majority-Tutsi rebel forces led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who overthrew Mobutu and brought an end to the war in 1997.²

Following the cessation of fighting, foreign actors, especially Rwandan forces, proved unwilling to withdraw. In the East, ethnicity-based conflicts ignited by the 1994 genocide persisted, worsening existing instability. After Kabila attempted to limit Tutsi representation in the national government, the Rwandan and Ugandan militaries invaded with aid from rebel groups composed of Congolese Tutsis.³ Kabila's government, supported by Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Angola, repelled rebels' attempts to seize control of Kinshasa.⁴

In 1999, after a year of fighting, the government signed a ceasefire agreement in Lusaka, Zambia. Shortly after that in November 1999, the UN Security Council deployed a peacekeeping force, MONUC, composed of 500 military observers to monitor the agreement.⁵ Still, violence persisted, and four months later, the Security Council expanded MONUC and deployed over 5,000 troops, who failed to stanch the flow of violent incidents.⁶

The International Rescue Committee has estimated that the Second Congo War cost some 5.4 million lives, primarily through disease and starvation, making it the deadliest war since World War II.⁷ The widespread perpetration of rape was a defining feature of both the First and Second Congo Wars, and continues to characterize violence in the country.⁸

Figure 1: MONUC Chronology



In 2002, the DRC and Uganda signed the Luanda peace agreement establishing a transitional government headed by Laurent Kabila's son, Joseph. Ugandan troops' withdrawal from the country in May 2003 marked the end of the Second Congo War.⁹ However, widespread poverty, inter-communal tensions, arms proliferation, competition over natural resources, and continuous foreign interference left the country vulnerable to continued violence.

This instability culminated in the emergence of the March 23 Movement (M23), a Rwandan-funded armed group. M23 initiated a rebellion against the Congolese state in 2012 for the government's failure to abide by the terms of a peace agreement with another North Kivu rebel group, the CNDP.¹⁰ Though the conflict lasted just one year, it displaced some 140,000 civilians. In the southern Kasai region, conflict broke out in 2016 after the killing of a local chief, leading to widespread displacement and cycles of retributive militia violence.¹¹ Both crises prompted substantial deployments of peacekeepers. Today, conflict is concentrated in the DRC's Eastern provinces.

Mission background

The modern-day UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo evolved from the UN Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC). UN Security Council Resolution 1279 established MONUC in 1999 to monitor the implementation of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, designed to quell violence between rebel and pro-government factions during the Second Congo War.

Initially composed of just 500 military observers, the mission soon expanded to include over 5,000 troops with a robust Chapter VII mandate to monitor and implement the Lusaka Agreement and protect civilians.¹² Later resolutions continued to expand the mission's forces and mandate. Resolution 1565 (2004) authorized an additional 5,900 military personnel and 341 police, tasking the mission with deterring violence in critical areas of potential vulnerability, protecting members of the transitional government, and providing "advice and assistance" to government authorities.

As of 2007, the mission's primary task has been to protect civilians, a first in the UN peacekeeping system.¹³

Though MONUC's early period has been deemed the mission's most effective,¹⁴ critics have dismissed MONUC as acting as "the Government's iron hand in a Charter glove."¹⁵ MONUC's close cooperation with the central government and its later involvement in the 2008 presidential elections and disarmament efforts alienated the mission from armed groups, limiting its potential to negotiate a peace.¹⁶

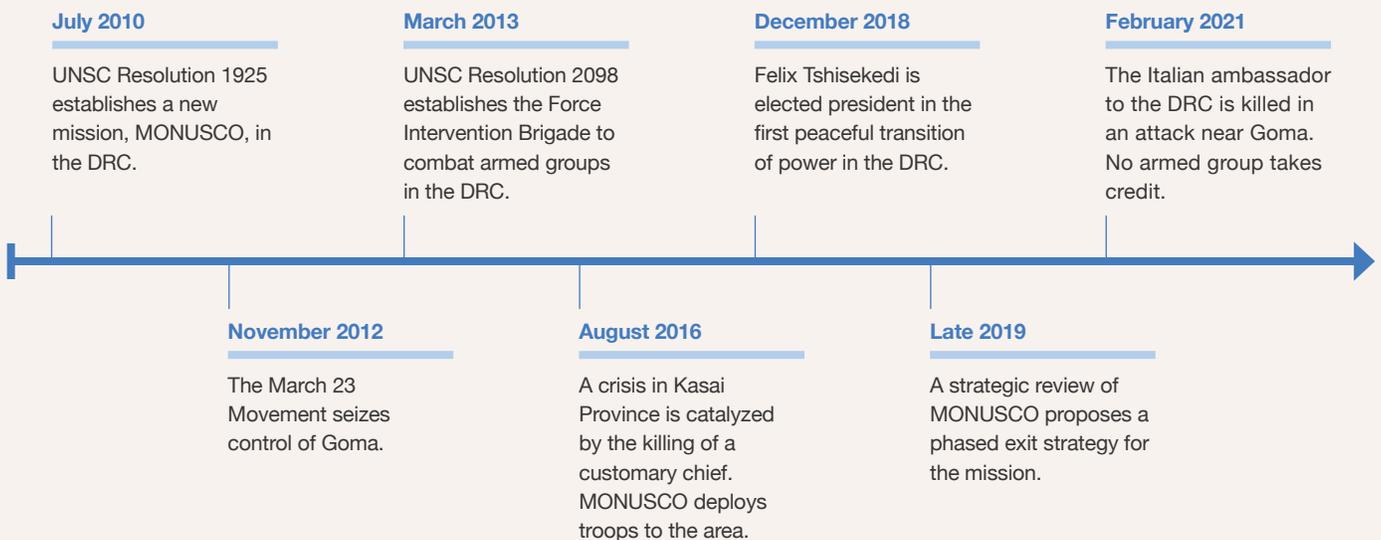
As rebel violence persisted and government pressure to reduce the mission's scale intensified,¹⁷ the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1925, establishing the UN Stabilization Mission in the Congo (MONUSCO) in MONUC's place. The transition entailed a modest reduction in mission size. Some have argued that MONUC needed to be 'rebranded' because of its loss of credibility from its failure to protect civilians and widespread sexual exploitation and abuse allegations.¹⁸ Despite its smaller size, MONUSCO was still endowed with the mandate to use "all means necessary" to carry out its responsibilities, including protecting civilians and human-

itarian personnel, supporting the government in its peace and stabilization efforts in volatile regions, and strengthening government institutions.¹⁹

In 2012, the March 23 Movement's (M23) invasion and occupation of Goma, North Kivu, exposed MONUSCO's struggles to keep the peace in the East.²⁰ In response, the Security Council took the unprecedented step in 2013 of establishing the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB).²¹ The FIB consists of three infantry battalions, one artillery company, and one Special Force and Reconnaissance company. The brigade is composed of personnel from South Africa, Malawi, and Tanzania. Its primary task is to "neutralize and disarm" Congolese rebels and foreign armed groups active in the East.²²

Through a series of joint operations with the FIB, the DRC government defeated the M23 group in late 2013.²³ Despite the FIB's initial success, it has struggled to neutralize more recent armed groups. Since January 2014, FIB troops have been deployed in North Kivu to combat the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) to

Figure 2: MONUSCO Chronology





MONUSCO peacekeeper expresses her support for the fight against violence against women. / Photo by: MONUSCO / Myriam Asmani

little avail.²⁴ Critics of the FIB take issue with its robust mandate, which compromises the neutrality of MONUSCO, and have argued that it intensifies threats to civilians and monopolizes key resources while failing to achieve its mandated tasks.²⁵ Additionally, the FIB and MONUSCO's cooperation with the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), which was responsible for an estimated 64 percent of human rights abuses in 2016,²⁶ may damage the mission's image amongst residents and could make the UN complicit in extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and illicit resource exploitation.

Since the establishment of the FIB, MONUSCO has contended with a series of security and humanitarian crises. A surge of violence in the Kasais in mid-2016, accompanied by a heavy-handed military response,

prompted the mission to send military reinforcements and human rights observers where it had formerly had little presence.²⁷ Despite MONUSCO's heavy footprint in the East, armed groups, often with the complicity or support of FARDC soldiers,²⁸ continue to terrorize civilians and catalyze displacement. Since 2017, Mai-Mais and other militias have led assaults in Uvira (South Kivu), Beni (North Kivu), and throughout Ituri Province. In addition to combating these militarized threats, MONUSCO has performed relief work in the wake of numerous Ebola and measles outbreaks, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews with mission personnel, local beneficiaries, and civil society representatives revealed that the FIB is generally considered more effective at protecting civilians than traditional peacekeepers. The

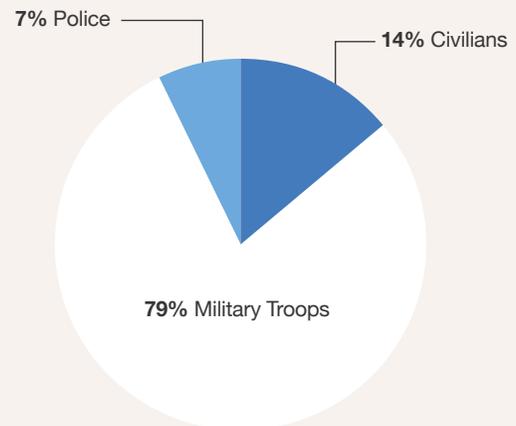
FIB's soldiers are reportedly quicker to respond to security threats and use force more readily, in part because of its shorter chain of command. Because the FIB is composed of African troops, they can be indistinguishable from local communities, an advantage when confronting armed groups. However, one respondent reported that FIB troops perpetrate sexual exploitation and abuse at higher rates. Reported allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse support these claims. Since 2015, FIB soldiers are responsible for 50% of allegations of sexual abuse and more than 64% of allegations of sexual exploitation.²⁹

In contrast to the volatile east, the relative stability of the Western DRC coupled with improving conditions in the Kasai provinces prompted the Security Council to endorse a measured drawdown of the mission in December 2019.³⁰ Under the plan, MONUSCO troops will withdraw from the Kasais by June 2021 and from Tanganyika by June 2022. They will consolidate mission strength in the East, where continued violence has made the prospect of a drawdown inadvisable.

Small, mobile, identity-based militias propagate violence in the East, notably in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Some militias finance their activities through the illicit exploitation of natural resources. They are often composed of no more than 200 fighters motivated by grievances such as unequal land and resource allocation, minimal representation in the national government, material deprivation, and ethnic rivalries.³¹

Some of the most high-profile armed groups operating in the region include the Ugandan Islamist organization, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). Several small *mai-mai* militias, or community-based self-defense groups, operate throughout the country.³² These groups often define themselves in opposition to refugee, migrant, or ethnic Rwandan populations. Between June 2017 and June 2019, armed groups killed an estimated 1,900 civilians in North and South Kivu, while more than 300,000 people have been displaced by fighting in Ituri since June 2019.³³ The recent death

Figure 3: MONUSCO Personnel Composition (November 2020)



Source: [UN Peacekeeping Open Data Portal](#)

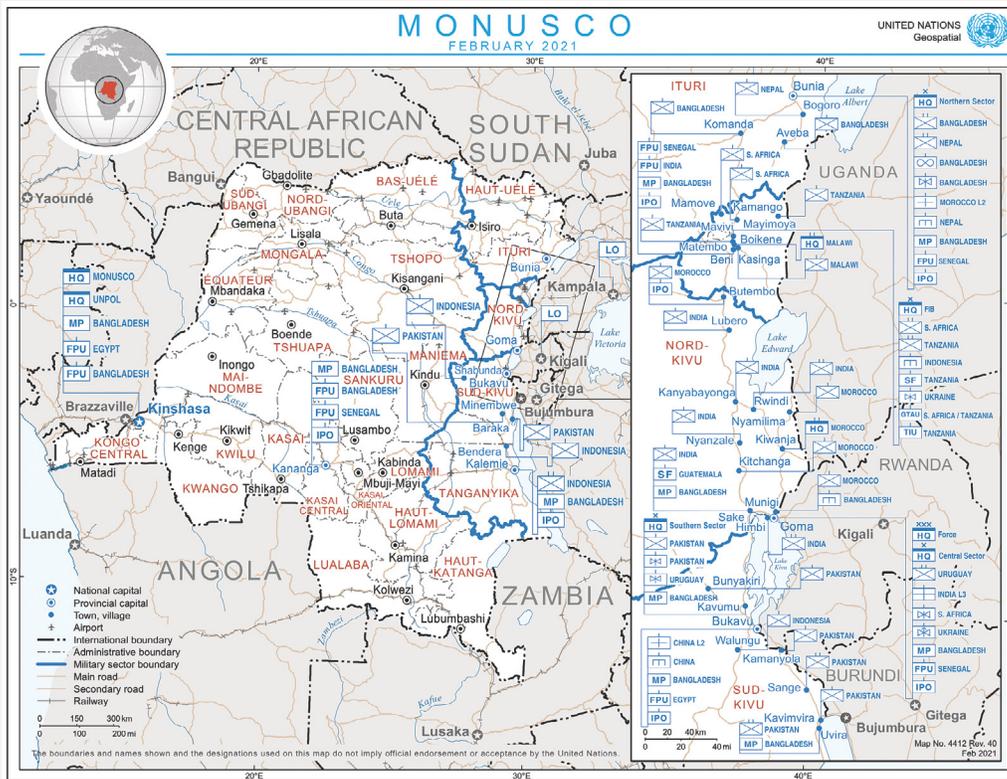
of the Italian ambassador to the DRC in an attack on a humanitarian convoy near Goma underscores the insecurity in the region.³⁴

Composition

As of November 2020, MONUSCO consists of 16,537 personnel. Since the mission's establishment 206 peacekeepers have died or been killed in action. MONUSCO is one of the most expensive missions in the history of UN peacekeeping, with an annual budget of \$1.1 billion.

Its mandated tasks include, inter alia, to protect civilians and humanitarian personnel and to assist the DRC government in preventing violence and stabilizing conflict. Though the mission is headquartered in Kinshasa, it has a heavy footprint in three provinces in the country's volatile East: North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri Province. Since the peaceful transfer of power from former president Joseph Kabila to current president Felix Tshisekedi in 2018, MONUSCO has closed nine field offices as part of a multi-year drawdown strategy.

Figure 4: MONUSCO Deployment (February 2021)



Source: UN Geospatial Network

Beyond the FIB, MONUSCO’s military contingents conduct patrols to prevent violence, respond to outbreaks of violence, and train and conduct joint operations with the Congolese national military (FARDC). They support the government’s disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes, implement quick impact projects in local communities, and secure and protect IDP camps, among other tasks. Contingent troops represent the vast majority of MONUSCO’s total personnel. However, despite their numbers, studies have shown that MONUSCO’s military troops often lack the resources, training, leadership, or capacities to fulfill their duties and may even prove unwilling to execute the mandate.³⁵

MONUSCO police, including both Formed Police Units and individual police officers, are also responsible for protecting civilians and building the capacities of the Congolese National Police (PNC), and reinforcing government authority in Eastern DRC. Police conduct daily visits with PNC units, perform patrols, monitor compliance with international human rights law, enforce the rule of law, investigate sexual and gender-based violence incidents, combat transnational crime and terrorism and perform task force and joint missions with local magistrates.³⁶

MONUSCO’s civilian personnel perform a wide range of roles designed to establish a protective

Table 5: Women's Representation in MONUSCO

Contributing Country	Number of Women	Women's Roles
Bangladesh	32	Troops
	82	Formed Police Units
	5	Staff Officers
Benin	1	Expert on Mission
	5	Individual Police
	1	Staff Officer
Bolivia	1	Expert on Mission
Burkina Faso	17	Individual Police
	1	Staff Officer
Cameroon	1	Individual Police
Canada	1	Individual Police
Chad	1	Individual Police
China	10	Troops
	1	Expert on Mission
Côte d'Ivoire	5	Formed Police Units
Egypt	28	Formed Police Units
	4	Staff Officers
Gambia	2	Staff Officers
Ghana	20	Troops
	5	Experts on Mission
	3	Staff Officers
Guatemala	13	Troops
	1	Experts on Mission
Guinea	4	Individual Police
India	31	Troops
India	3	Experts on Mission
	6	Formed Police Unit
Indonesia	43	Troops
	1	Experts on Mission
	4	Individual Police
	2	Staff Officer
Ireland	2	Staff Officer
Jordan	2	Experts on Mission
	2	Staff Officer
Kenya	1	Expert on Mission
	1	Individual Police
Madagascar	1	Individual Police
Malawi	35	Troops
	2	Experts on Mission

Contributing Country	Number of Women	Women's Roles
Mali	1	Expert on Mission
Morocco	24	Troops
	3	Experts on Mission
	2	Staff Officer
Nepal	28	Troops
	3	Experts on Mission
	3	Individual Police
	1	Staff Officer
Niger	17	Individual Police
Nigeria	2	Experts on Mission
	2	Individual Police
	1	Staff Officer
Pakistan	32	Troops
	8	Staff Officer
Peru	1	Expert on Mission
Romania	3	Individual Police
	3	Staff Officer
Russia	40	Formed Police Units
Senegal	40	Formed Police Units
	7	Individual Police
Sierra Leone	2	Staff Officer
South Africa	158	Troops
	1	Expert on Mission
	7	Staff Officer
Sweden	3	Individual Police
Togo	7	Individual Police
Tunisia	3	Individual Police
Ukraine	1	Troop
	2	Experts on Mission
UK	1	Staff Officer
Tanzania	55	Troops
	1	Expert on Mission
	2	Individual Police
United States	1	Staff Officer
Uruguay	70	Troops
	1	Expert on Mission
	2	Staff Officer
Zambia	1	Expert on Mission
	1	Staff Officer

environment and restore and extend state authority throughout the country. The mission’s Civil Affairs section has piloted landmark tools, including Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) and Joint Protection Teams (JPTs), which have reinforced MONUSCO’s ability to consult with local civilians and remain informed of major security risks. Civilian personnel build the capacities of local government and civil society organizations to prevent violence and facilitate transparent government processes.³⁷

Women, Peace and Security

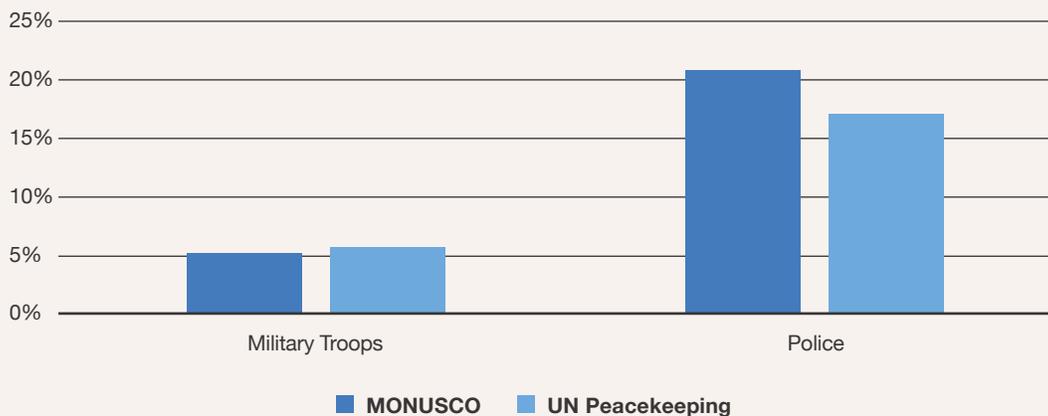
Women in the DRC face many vulnerabilities. The DRC is ranked 161 of 167 countries in the 2019 Georgetown Global Women, Peace and Security Index, a seven-place drop from the year prior.³⁸ Both intimate partner violence (IPV) and conflict-related sexual violence pose substantial threats to Congolese women’s health and well-being. These indices are worsening in the country’s most conflict-affected areas. Armed actors often also target boys and men with sexual violence.³⁹

Congolese women face high rates of IPV: over half of women have experienced physical and/or sexual vio-

lence from intimate partners in their lifetime.⁴⁰ Despite the pervasiveness of violence against women, a culture of impunity prevents women from accessing justice and reparations.⁴¹ Violence and political instability, in turn, give rise to complex humanitarian disasters, including high levels of poverty, widespread displacement, public health crises, and massive food insecurity, all of which disproportionately affect women. An estimated 61.2 percent of Congolese women live under the poverty line, compared to 51.3 percent of men.⁴² Similarly, women and children make up 78.7 percent of the DRC’s refugee population.⁴³ These challenges make women more vulnerable to infectious disease outbreaks and food insecurity, both of which have multiplied in recent years.

In 2020, MONUSCO documented 1,053 cases of conflict-related sexual violence.⁴⁴ The majority were attributed to non-state armed groups. State forces, military, and police accounted for about a third of verified cases. MONUSCO only reports cases that the mission has been able to verify and document, which requires an investigation and triangulation of data. The mission does not have the resources to verify and document all allegations it receives and is only able to conduct few investigations, meaning these figures

Figure 6: Proportion of Female Troops and Police



Source: [UN Peacekeeping Open Data Portal](#)

only show the very tip of the iceberg. The actual number of cases is estimated to be much higher.

MONUSCO (and its predecessor MONUC) personnel have faced numerous allegations of sexual assault and abuse against Congolese civilians. At least 31 instances of sexual assault and abuse have been reported to the UN since 2015, mostly perpetrated by military personnel.⁴⁵

As of August 2020, one-quarter of MONUSCO's civilian personnel were women.⁴⁶ Additionally, MONUSCO head Bintou Keita of Guinea, and two of MONUSCO's nine heads of office — Ms. Cecilia Piazza (Beni) and Ms. Sophie Stecher (Kananga) — are women.⁴⁷ Table 5 provides a breakdown of women personnel by contributing country and role.

Drawdowns in MONUSCO deployment numbers have raised concerns about the mission's capacity to protect Congolese civilians from violent threats. The mission's current approach to its Protection of Civilians (POC) mandate, referred to as "Protection by Projection," involves increased peacekeeper mobility and a "proactive posture" to permit rapid deployments to high-risk areas.⁴⁸ While this sounds promising in theory, in reality it is not a suitable strategy. The mission does not have the resources to effectively respond, especially due to a lack of air assets and environmental factors that impact mobility depending on the seasons. This means that in many cases deployments are delayed, which means that the mission in many cases responds to incidents rather than preventing them.

MONUSCO has also focused on expanding and strengthening its early warning system to improve situational awareness. However, we find no evidence that MONUSCO designed the new POC strategy with a gender lens. Reviews and summaries of the strategy make no mention of gender, nor do they acknowledge women's unique protection needs.⁴⁹ The Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE), designed to capture structured data on conflict events and mission activities, also fails to integrate gender systematically.

For example, the system does not require those who are inputting data to record the gender of mission or local actors involved in an activity. These shortcomings may hinder the mission's capacity to predict and respond to protection threats.

Interviews with local stakeholders underscored that communities' first priority is enhanced protection, especially from armed groups. However, respondents split their priorities along gendered lines. Women are more likely to prioritize childcare, medical assistance, education, and literacy programs, while men were more likely to emphasize job opportunities.

Stakeholders spoke positively of MONUSCO's uniformed women's impact on the mission's effectiveness. Local women feel more comfortable opening up to uniformed women personnel, which is especially important as a stakeholder estimated that 70 percent of alerts come from women. Local civil society actors further highlighted that uniformed women in MONUSCO are perceived as:

- Better communicators, and therefore are better able to consult with local women *and* men;
- Adding a new and informative perspective to decision-making;
- Improving the reputation of the mission;
- Refraining from sexual abuse and exploitation, unlike men personnel;
- More likely to try and combat sexual abuse and exploitation;
- More active in organizing events, engaging women, leading projects related to women's issues, and protecting women.

However, some stakeholders qualified the claim that women personnel are more effective or capable. They reported that:



Bunia, Ituri, DRC: In the framework of the fight against sexual violence, the Female Engagement Team of the Bangladeshi contingent on 04 December, 2020, visited Mudzipela Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) Camp to discuss the issue of violence during conflicts and to explore possible avenues for the rehabilitation of the women affected by displacement. The team reassured the women of MONUSCO's presence on their side. / Photo by: MONUSCO/Force

- Women are not inherently or universally better communicators; it is a matter of training;
- Women personnel lose their relative advantage with local women if they are not accompanied by a female community liaison assistant (CLA) or interpreter;
- Mixed engagement teams are superior to female engagement teams because they can successfully consult with a diverse array of local groups.

Challenges

MONUSCO operates in a highly complex, politically volatile, and geographically diffuse environment. The DRC is host to several humanitarian emergencies, including widespread poverty, acute food insecurity, a large displaced population, and infectious diseases. Renewed and expanding violence in the country's East has proven challenging to counteract and is often exacerbated

by state military forces and foreign actors. The central government's lack of capacity or political will to establish security complicates MONUSCO's role, as it must at once maintain cooperative relations with decision-makers while pressuring them to do more. Indeed, MONUSCO's mandated tasks have continually expanded, but resource allocations have not matched its growing list of responsibilities.⁵⁰ This gap is partly due to the international community's fatigue with funding a large mission in the ever-troubled DRC, where Security Council member states do not have a vested political interest.

Interviews with MONUSCO personnel and leaders uncovered the most significant challenges facing the mission. Among the most commonly-cited challenges were:

- Difficult terrain, geographic spread, and poor infrastructure;
- Language barriers with local communities;

- Cultural barriers with local communities;
- Political fragmentation and the plurality of actors;
- A general lack of trust from the local community, resulting in limited information sharing and, in some cases, active collusion against the mission;
- Locals' unreasonable expectations or misunderstanding of the mandate;
- A lack of necessary data, for example, on women's needs or civilian victimization;
- Extreme poverty amongst local populations;
- A lack of capacity amongst local civil society;
- A lack of within-mission support and follow-up, meaning many requests by local populations go unfulfilled;
- Paucity of women troops and police.

Effectiveness

After 20 years in the DRC, MONUSCO's impact on peace and stability remains contested. A 2019 assessment of the mission's effectiveness credits MONUSCO and MONUC with a number of positive strategic results, including preventing a recurrence of major violence, creating a permissive environment in which foreign and domestic actors could carry out economic activity, contributing to the functioning and creation of crucial infrastructure such as airports, roads, and telecommunications, and enhancing civic space and civil society.⁵¹

However, MONUSCO's performance on the protection of civilians is varied, and by some accounts, has diminished the state's role in preventing violence and protecting civilians.⁵² On a more fundamental level, the mission has generally failed to invest in the long-term political change necessary to build and sustain peace in light of its withdrawal.⁵³

Consultations with MONUSCO personnel and local actors sought to uncover how stakeholders conceive effectiveness in the DRC context, and whether or not they believe the mission is effective. Interviewees defined effectiveness in the following ways, from most to least common:

- Protection of civilians;
- Consultation with locals;
- Completion of assigned, concrete tasks;
- Creation of visible change on the ground;
- Provision of vocational training and capacity-building for locals.

Views on the effectiveness of the mission varied widely. The following are notable sentiments expressed by stakeholders:

- MONUSCO generally fails to protect civilians and respond quickly to alerts;
- Peacekeepers sexually abuse and/or exploit local women, boys, and girls;
- Peacekeepers are distant from and disrespectful towards local civilians;
- MONUSCO's quick-impact projects are very beneficial for the local community;
- The FIB is more responsive, less burdened with bureaucracy, and therefore more effective than the rest of MONUSCO;
- The mission's radio station—Radio Okapi—is very useful at relaying information about attacks;
- MONUSCO mandates do not reflect conditions on the ground.

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Cover photo: Medical assistance to local communities is one of many ways UN peacekeepers positively impact the lives of civilians and help to build trust. Here, South African military medics with the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) administer first aid to a child. / Photo by: UN Photo/Michael Ali



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