BULLETIN

The security of United Nations personnel in peace missions and operations

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Abstract

The personnel of international organizations and bodies are exposed to a variety of risks and threats, not only in existing conflict situations in collapsing states where peacekeeping missions and operations are carried out, but also due to a complex security environment dominated by new conceptual mutations and an alert pace of technological development. The trend of casualties among United Nations (UN) employees in recent years remains high, indicating that armed violence is still widespread in mission areas and peace operations. The process of mitigating risk is complex and based on the need for a permanent assessment of the security situation in an adaptive manner, as well as a permanent correlation of these risks with the level of available capabilities.

Keywords:

The total number of classic, traditional conflicts has decreased since the early 1990s, and the current emerging ones are occurring in regions with high-risk potential. The fragmentation of states, due to ineffective government control over territory and population, ethnic and religious divisions, and low levels of social services, contributes to the collapse of states, generating insecurity. The reconstruction of these states is not possible without the intervention of the international community through available tools such as peace missions and operations.

The study aims to systematically observe security developments within United Nations (UN) peace missions and operations, and their impact on the security of UN personnel. We will diagnose the structural deficiencies that affect these missions, considering the evolution of the security concept within the UN, as well as the range of threats and risks that those responsible for ensuring security must address. In this sense, the assessment of the level of security for UN personnel in peace missions and operations relies on the processing and interpretation of data collected from the organization's statistical documents, as well as on systematic observation and interpretation to issue conclusions for the study.

A crucial aspect of this issue is not that conflict situations have become more numerous or violent in recent years, but rather that personnel of international organizations, especially the United Nations, have become increasingly exposed to security risks in conflict areas. The increased risk exposure is closely linked to several factors, including the multitude of mandates that peace missions and operations need to fulfill, the diverse range of threats characterizing the actual security environment in the risk areas where such missions are conducted, and the competitive commitments for implementing various projects by funds, programs, agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in high-risk areas.

Moreover, the proliferation of weapons has had a significant impact on the political and security environments, leading to a direct impact on actual conflicts. Different groups operating in such environments can quickly arm themselves and create active armed groups. With minimal preparation, these groups can engage in conflict with other groups, militias or government forces. In this context, the United Nations becomes a direct target for groups that see its presence as contrary to their interests and objectives.
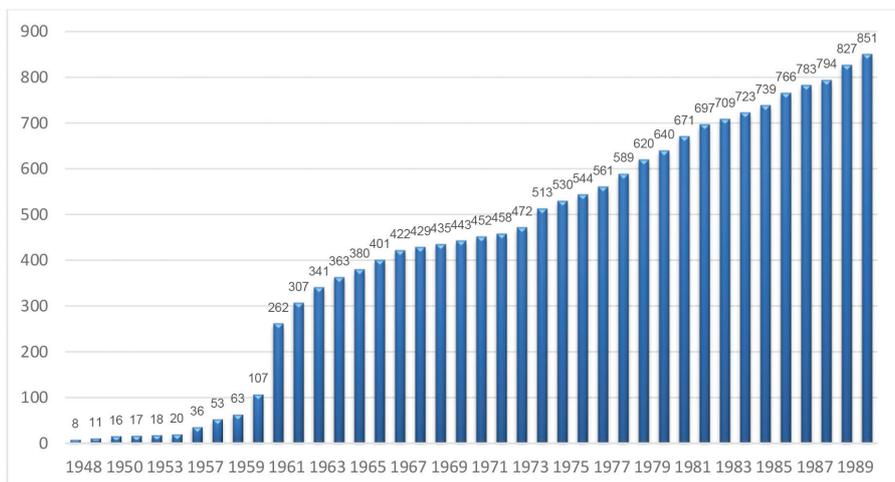
The impact of the evolution of peace operations and missions on the security of own personnel

The classic peacekeeping operations meant, among other things, in the vision of the first Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold, *"the prohibition of any initiative regarding the use of force, except for self-defense"* (United Nation 1958). The UN forces had, therefore, to be neutral, without positioning themselves on one side or the other of the parties in the conflict, this approach becoming a basic principle that lasted

until the end of the Cold War. However, as it can be seen from the figure below, the number of casualties among the personnel of peacekeeping missions and operations continued to increase until the year 1990, which required a stronger posture from the organization.

Figure 1. Casualties of UN personnel (peacekeeping missions) 1947-1990 (cumulative)
Source: author's calculations based on DPKO data, (UN Peacekeeping Department 2022b)

A programmatic document of the organization from the beginning of the 90s, *"Agenda for peace"*, assumed by the UN Secretary General at the time, Boutros Ghali, determined a change of vision in what the use of force means for the blue helmets. The concept of *peace enforcement units)* (United Nation 1992), appears with clearly defined circumstances in which they take place.

The end of the Cold War marked the emergence of new conflicts on the global stage and implicitly an increased number of UN missions. Thus, the number of UN employees in peacekeeping or political missions increased more than sevenfold between 1991 and 2022, reaching more than 75.000 (UN Peacekeeping Department 2021).

At the same time, there is a diversification of the mandates of these missions and peace operations, the tasks regarding the reconstruction and development of collapsed states being supplemented with actions of prevention, mediation, and conflict resolution. This has led to higher mobility of international organization staff, particularly in conflict zones, thus increasing the degree of risk and exposure. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of deaths of UN personnel because of violent actions. Thus, in 1993, 252 employees of peacekeeping missions lost their lives, compared to 59 victims the previous year (UN Peacekeeping Department 2021), this being, moreover, the highest number of deaths recorded in a year in UN peacekeeping missions.

The concept of "peace enforcement", which was addressed in the "Agenda for Peace" document, has been implemented. However, the graph above shows that the trend of personnel deaths in peace missions continues to rise due to the deterioration of the security situation in the areas where they operate. The subsequent global events,

such as outbreaks of conflict in countries like Angola, Rwanda, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia, as well as the atrocities committed, have made it clear that there is a need to reset these peace operations, as they are unable to cope with these types of conflicts.
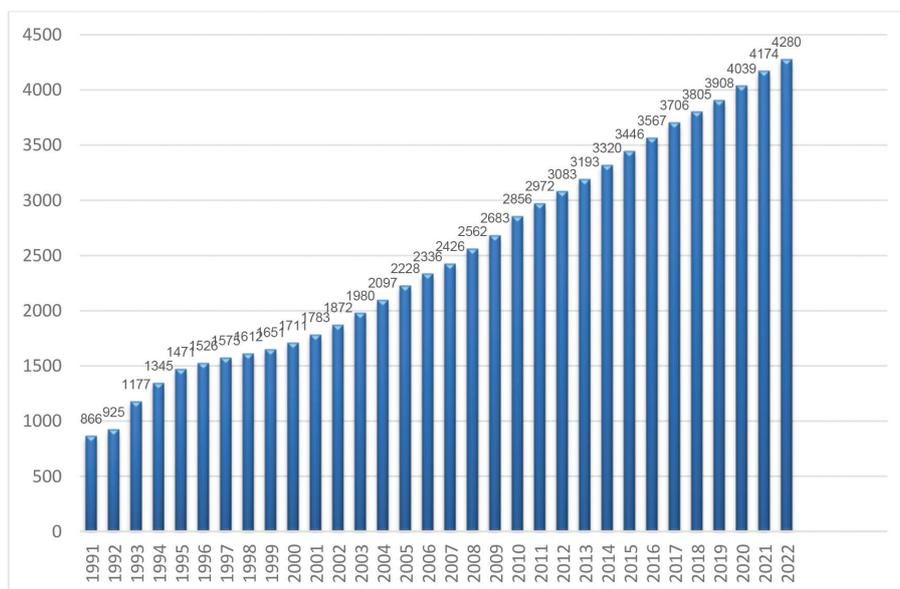

Figure 2. Casualties of UN personnel (peacekeeping missions) 1990-2022
Source: author's calculations based on DPKO data, (UN Peacekeeping Department 2022b)

In 1995 the General Secretary issued a supplement to the initial document (United Nation 1995), in which the approach to the use of force in peacekeeping operations was much more explicit. The importance of protecting civilians caught in a conflict between two or more belligerent parties increased significantly, and the use of force would be carried out under the auspices of Chapter 7 of the Charter to fulfill the mission received by the contingents. Thus, the peacekeeping forces no longer had a merely reactive role, but by taking the initiative, they adopted a proactive approach to the use of force.

In the 2000s, there was a change in approach regarding the security of civilian personnel in these peacekeeping missions and operations. The 2000s mark a change in approach regarding the security of civilian personnel existing in these peacekeeping missions and operations. If the security system of the 90s was coordinated through an Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD), appointed by the Secretary-General, in 2001, the General Assembly authorized the creation of a UN Security at the level of Assistant Secretary- General and in 2002, the number of security officers posts in the territories reached 300 (100 international employees and 200 local recruits) (United Nations Department of Safety and Security n.d.). In addition to UNSECOORD, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) had its own security structure in place for civilian personnel in peacekeeping operations.

We assess that the evolution of peace missions, especially after the end of the Cold War, the increasing number of troops contributing to the missions, the diversification
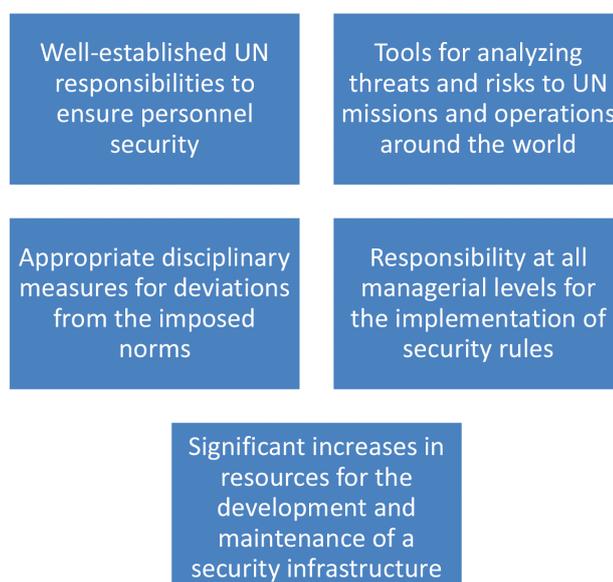
of mandates in the line of conflict prevention, mediation and resolution, have affected the security level of UN own personnel. At the same time, the changes related to the typology of conflicts and the emergence of new types of threats (hybrid, asymmetric) have shaped the operational environment specific to risk areas. The number of victims, increasing from year to year, has led to major changes in meaning for the concept of security in the UN framework.

Establishment of the Safety and Security Department (*DSS- Department of Safety and Security*) – a turning point regarding the concept of security within the organization

Despite growing concerns about the concept of security, the historic moment in the security of UN personnel was the suicide truck bomb attack on the UN headquarters at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad on 19 August 2003, which killed 22 of UN employees (including the Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq) and more than 150 people were injured. Just a few weeks after the August 19 explosion, the UN was once again the target of another attack at the Canal Hotel, resulting in 2 deaths and 19 injuries, including 2 UN staff.

Following the investigation of the attack, *the report of the Independent Committee on Safety and Security of UN personnel*, led by Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish president, known as the Ahtisaari committee, made the following assessment, defining for the future of the concept of security within the Organization:

> *"The UN could, theoretically speaking, be the target of attacks anywhere and at any time, from Baghdad to Kabul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Geneva or New York. There is no indication that the perpetrators of the Baghdad attack will refrain from attacking other UN targets around the world."*
> (United Nations 2003, 24)

Well-established UN responsibilities to ensure personnel security	Tools for analyzing threats and risks to UN missions and operations around the world
Appropriate disciplinary measures for deviations from the imposed norms	Responsibility at all managerial levels for the implementation of security rules

Significant increases in resources for the development and maintenance of a security infrastructure

The Ahtisaari Commission therefore called for a new revised security strategy for the UN, with five essential pillars (United Nations 2003, 26-28). As a result of this approach, in 2004, the UN Secretary General presented, during the 59th session of the General Assembly, the report A/59/365 of October 11, 2004, under the title *"Strengthened and unified security management system for the United Nations"* (United Nation 2004), which concluded the actual state of the security system of the United Nations Organization and proposed radical measures to strengthen this important part of the organization.

This led to the adoption of the Resolution by the General Assembly (A/RES/59/276, XI, 7-23 December 2004) by which the *Department of Safety and Security* was created, to effectively coordinate UN missions, from the security point of view, by ensuring a coherent, efficient and timely response to all threats to UN personnel. During a strategic-level review initiated in 2014-2015, DSS *(Department of Safety and Security)* seeks to adapt to the global security environment with new challenges and types of threats by better integrating existing security resources (United Nation 2015).

Thus, the security department initiated the integration project within the United Nations Secretariat (UNSSSIP - United Nations Safety and Security Secretariat Integration Project (UNDSS 2016) to integrate the security resources (personnel and capabilities) of the DPA *(Department of Political Affairs, since 2019 the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs)*, DPKO *(Department of Peacekeeping Operations, since 2019 the Department of Peace Operations)*, DFS *(Department of Field Support became from 2019 Department of Operational Support)* and DSS *(Department of Safety and Security)*, all under the management and responsibility of DSS.

DSS achieves, through the integration of safety and security personnel within the Secretariat, a greater efficiency in the provision of security services. Thus, within a comprehensive security strategy, all UN entities involved in a certain conflict zone implement common standards and strict security procedures. But what happens to the contributing troops of the member states that are deployed in peacekeeping missions with a role in ensuring the security of UN bases and personnel?
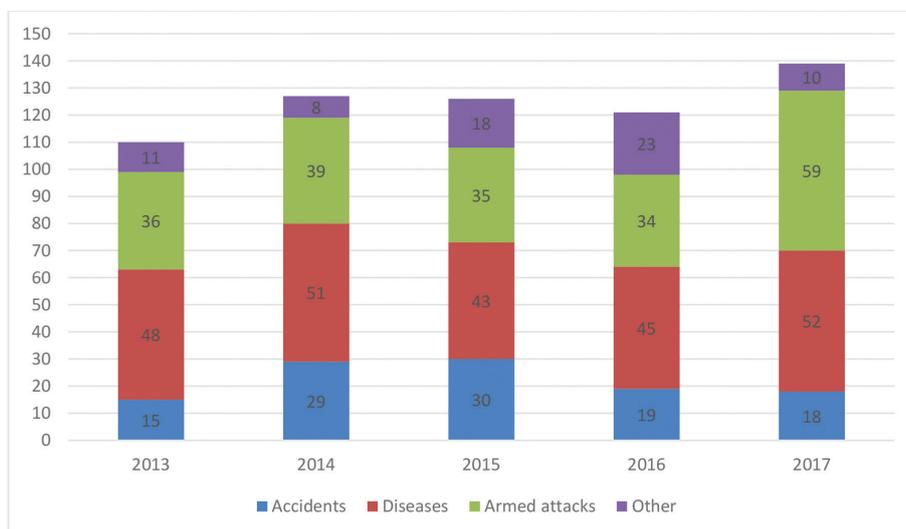
If the early years of peacekeeping missions entailed missions under Article VI of the UN Charter, as I have shown above, the range of asymmetric threats, characteristic of this beginning of the millennium, constitutes a major challenge. We can say that the UN flag and the blue helmet no longer provide *"protection"*, and a much more decisive approach is needed to counter these threats.

Out of the total number of casualties (4,266) among UN employees since 1948 to the present (UN Peacekeeping Department 2021), 1108 (UN Peacekeeping Department 2021) lost their lives due to armed attacks on UN personnel and bases or convoys. The military, police and security personnel who died in such missions constitute the highest percentage of the 4266 - 77% (from various causes – armed attacks, accidents,

diseases, others). The negative trend has unfortunately continued, even closer to the present day. 2013-2017 saw the highest number of deaths over a five-year period: 623, with an upward trend in armed attacks (203) (UN Peacekeeping Department 2022c).

Figura 3. **The number of casualties among UN personnel (peacekeeping missions) in the 5 (five) year period 2013-2017 with the most deaths in the history of the UN**
Source: author's calculations based on DPKO data (UN Peacekeeping Department 2022b)

This is because military and police contingents are most exposed to accidents, disease and armed attacks, often carrying out missions outside UN bases, in the community area, in high-risk conditions. The attackers have a diverse repertoire of ways to carry out attacks on UN personnel: attacks on locations with firearms, ambushes; installation of improvised explosive devices; the use of trap machines, etc. Most of the time, inadequate staffing, insufficient training specific to risk areas, non-compliant operational procedures during missions and the poor quality of information and data received during security assessments lead to delayed reactions or lack thereof.

Conclusions

Regarding the strengthening of the concept of security of UN personnel, a rethinking of the military-type response to armed attacks carried out on UN bases and personnel of the organization is necessary. Peace operations have both military and civilian personnel from countries with different levels of development, which implies a range of varied challenges for these types of missions.

The origin of peace mission personnel from economically less developed countries can influence the level of equipment of the military personnel as well as the low level of training and preparation in the field of multinational missions. The risks and threats must be seen in a broader framework because insecurity does not take into account the borders drawn on the map. Factions and rebel groups have a monopoly on violence and act across borders, with the aim of increasing influence in the region. Armed conflicts exist because there are weapons within the reach of these organized crime groups. Given that the proliferation of weapons is a distinct goal of these

non-state actors, the organization must identify and develop a well-defined strategy on the phenomenon of organized crime. These criminal groups do not only operate in one state but also export insecurity to neighboring states, perpetuating the spiral of violence at the regional level.

In conclusion, the set of hostile actions and the instability factors that determine the volatility of the security situation, endangering the life and integrity of personnel in the theaters of operations, constitutes an issue of major relevance. Identifying solutions to reduce the risk for these personnel is vital, given the need to implement the mandates of these peace missions and operations to achieve the goal of the international community, which is to promote peace and security around the globe.

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