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Strengthening the Continuity of Protection During and After UN Transitions and Mission Withdrawals

Summary of the Protection of Civilians Week Side Event

24 May 2024

1. Background

As part of the annual 2024 *United Nations Protection of Civilians week*, which takes place around the annual UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians, several leading protection partners and allies came together to organize a side event on *‘Strengthening the Continuity of Protection During and After UN Transitions and Mission Withdrawals’*. The event was held at the Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations and was co-organized by the Permanent Missions of Ireland, Bangladesh, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Brazil as well as by UNHCR, the Global Protection Cluster, OCHA, NRC, Save the Children, Nonviolent Peaceforce, CIVIC, NORCAP, OHCHR, UNMAS, DPO and WFP.

The Protection of Civilians in contexts of conflict remains a critical but challenging undertaking in crisis contexts globally. This includes the Protection of Civilians (PoC) as a central aspect of the mandate for multidimensional peacekeeping operations and a focus for a number of special political missions. While there remains difference in mandates and related efforts of these types of missions, they have often been a key mechanism through which particular protection actions are carried out. In 2021, UN Security Council Resolution 2594 aimed to address the urgent challenges surrounding peacebuilding and stabilization efforts, emphasizing the need to prevent a deterioration of the protection environment during peace operation transitions.

The challenging realities of mission withdrawals and the continuity of protection were further pushed to the forefront in 2023, with decisions made by the UN Security Council to terminate the mandates of the UN Missions in Mali and Sudan, at the request of host governments. As a result, both protection actors and affected communities have been grappling with a complex landscape in terms of potential increase in protection risks as well as changing supports, capacities and resources for addressing them.

This event sought to convene a diverse panel of leading experts to delve into implications for and approaches to supporting the continuity of protection during and after UN transitions and mission withdrawals – a concept highlighted by the Secretary-General in the UN Agenda for Protection, launched in Geneva in February 2024. Speakers with Member States, national and international NGOs and UN

agencies shed light on key considerations in relation to the protection implications of UN transitions and mission withdrawals, with a focus on emergent learnings in terms of approaches to protection risk mitigation and response, grounded in the complex realities across different contexts.

The overarching objectives of this event included:

- To raise awareness about the protection implications of recent UN transitions and mission withdrawals.
- To strengthen efforts to ensure the continuity of the protection of civilians during and after these transitions and withdrawals.

2. Summary of Discussion Points

The event's speakers emphasized the importance of having protection at the center at every stage of a mission's lifecycle—from its inception to ongoing implementation of the mission mandate to transition periods and withdrawals. They unpacked the protection risks communities face during transitions and after withdrawals and highlighted the primary responsibilities of national duty bearers. They also emphasizing the critical and supportive roles of local and international protection actors and allies in ensuring the continuity of protection throughout these processes.

Strengthening coordination and coherence between peace operations and other actors – including protection actors but also peace actors, local civil society and communities themselves, was noted as essential to leveraging all capacities in support of protection before and after transitions. Complementing traditional cooperation mechanisms with more localized and innovative approaches was noted as an area of promising practice and learning in transition environments. Speakers emphasized that since the mission's mandate cannot be replaced as such after a withdrawal, it is crucial to work, well in advance, on post-mission capacity building and system development with national actors and communities. Ultimately, all speakers touched on how planning for mission transition and withdrawals, and the related shifts in mechanisms that are supporting the protection of civilians, needs to be initiated from the outset and in close collaboration with national authorities, protection actors and affected communities themselves. The criticality of support for civilian-led and community-based protection efforts throughout and beyond the lifespan of mission was given particular emphasis, highlighting the foundational role the communities play in ensuring the continuity of protection amidst crisis.

As part of the event's opening remarks, **Mr. Keith McBean, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative with the Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations**, noted the important foundation UNSC Resolution 2594 (2021) has provided with respect to advancing a shared understanding of mission transitions and the criticality of the Protection of Civilians. This focus on PoC during transitions must be nationally-owned and inclusive, with the Ambassador emphasizing the primary responsibility of national authorities and the contributing role all segments of society can play. He welcomed the significant efforts made to realize protection in different mission and transition contexts to date and pointed to the importance of consolidating learnings and further operationalizing Resolution 2594. Such an event is set to bring together a range of important perspectives on how different actors, including from civil society, UN agencies and Member States, can work together to consolidate the gains made by peacekeeping actors and ensure protection of civilians remains at the core of transitions.

In keynote remarks, **Mr. Bruno Lemarquis, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG), Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in DRC**, provided an overview of the situation in the country, where MONUSCO is exiting amidst deteriorating conditions in the east and high political tensions between the DRC and Rwanda. The humanitarian situation is dire, reflecting one of the most severe, protracted, and neglected crises, and a large scale of internally displaced persons (IDPs) exceeding seven million. He highlighted that MONUSCO's disengagement, driven by a request from the DRC government, has been ongoing for years. A disengagement plan was signed in November 2023 and it aims to pave the way for a phased and responsible transition, supported by partners such as UN agencies, international NGOs, bilateral and regional partners, and civil society organizations. Key concerns during MONUSCO's withdrawal center around the security of civilians, including IDPs and other vulnerable populations, the presence multiple armed actors in eastern DRC, extensive violations of humanitarian and human rights laws, and the risk of increased armed group activities and child recruitment. The withdrawal will also impact the UN's capacity for human rights monitoring and protection.

The DSRSG noted the significant potential for civilian unarmed approaches to support continued PoC during and after the mission withdrawal, as MONUSCO has helped build the capacity of many community and local protection mechanisms (including, for instance, community alert networks). While the Congolese government has expressed willingness to support PoC, this also requires an ongoing investment in developing and maintaining a well-trained and well-resourced security forces.

He emphasized that advancing the operationalization of the nexus at scale, with national government at the center and a focus on PoC/durable solution is essential, with more investments needed in peace and stabilization to reduce civilian exposure to violence and humanitarian need, and that addressing underlying drivers of conflict, such as illicit financial flows and mineral exploitation, is imperative to securing the protection environment. The primacy of political solutions, including at regional level, remains.

The speaker noted 3 lessons we can draw already: 1) the transition conversation must begin as early as possible in the life of a mission to work out transition and succession arrangements. Work on the post-mission approach to protection is critical throughout the mission lifespan – to build systems, with national authorities, with communities, with civil society; 2) to design a comprehensive funding strategy and build engagement with the government, member states, partners and IFIs from the outset; and 3) to prepare for the post-mission context in terms of mechanisms and capacities to support for continued humanitarian operations, in particular with logistics and security.

The speaker **Ms. Cynthia Jones, Emergency Coordinator, WFP in DRC**, recognized the successes involved in the MONUSCO transition planning to date, with critical engagement led by the DSRSG with government and humanitarian-development-peace actors. However, she pointed out the vacuum created by mission withdrawals, which increases risks not only for civilians but also for humanitarian workers, and noted the intensifying violence and displacement in eastern DRC, which also links with rising levels of food insecurity. The speaker highlighted how MONUSCO disengagement reduces significantly the logistics capacity and support to government and humanitarian operations and in particular services to WFP-run UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS). Such services are a key enabler for the continuity of protection, access and duty of care and at this stage, they are set to largely end in the next few months due to lack of budgets. Identifying the logistics and operational gaps linked to mission transitions and withdrawals, which will hamper any PoC continuity efforts, and embedding the planning from early on in the mission lifespan is much needed. Importantly, these efforts must closely involve national and local authorities from the

beginning. As a final point, the speaker noted that member states must remain clear eyed about the consequences of reduced mission capacities and resources on the continuity of protection and continue to take a pragmatic approach towards supporting gradual, sustainable and responsible withdrawals.

The next speaker, **Mr. Mohamed Toure, Country Representative, UNHCR in Mali**, highlighted increasing reports and documentation of human rights violations and protection incidents in the period that has followed the abrupt withdrawal of MINUSMA in Mali. The situation for civilians in various areas of the country has significantly deteriorated alongside a worsening security situation and further disruptions to essential services and economic systems. Amidst killings, abductions and conflict-related sexual violence, there is a sense of growing impunity. Insurgent groups have targeted aid workers and many organizations, including protection partners, have been forced to scale back or delay operations and the delivery of life-saving assistance. Many humanitarian and protection partners are struggling to respond to growing humanitarian needs and displacement amidst rising insecurity all while needing to ensure complex logistics and security arrangements are in place in the absence of the mission. Not only are civilians being exposed to greater levels of violence, they are no longer able to rely on some degree of safety they may have sought out previously in proximity of a MINUSMA base, for example, or in IDP sites where MINUSMA was present.

Following the UN Security Council's decision to approve the withdrawal of MINUSMA, at the request of the authorities, the UN Humanitarian Country Team was left ill-equipped to grapple with the resulting security vacuum and shift in protection capacities. The time and resources needed to adapt and build different protection systems were simply not there and the resulting gaps in the protection response have come at a time of enormous precarity and violence for civilians. Going forward, the Mali experience offers some important lessons around the criticality of preparation for mission withdrawals throughout the lifespan of the mission, recognizing such departures are not always foreseen or linked with a phased approach. Looking forward in Mali, the need for national authorities, with the support of the international community, to promote accountability for violations is clear, as is the need to invest in community-based and civilian-centered protection mechanisms and capacities, grounded in meaningful collaboration with civil society groups and local protection actors.

Ms. Mathilde Vu, Advocacy Manager, NRC in Sudan outlined the devastating impacts of 13 months of horrific violence on civilians across Sudan and raised the alarm for potential atrocity crimes in north Darfur. She noted that at this moment, the lack of protection for civilians in Sudan has never been so blatant. She also emphasized how PoC has been deprioritized with mission transitions and withdrawals in Sudan, both for UNAMID and subsequently for UNITAMS. Even prior to the war in Sudan, the speaker pointed to the constrained capacity and resources of UNITAMS, limiting its ability to carry out its already circumscribed PoC mandate. She noted that with the UNITAMS exit, there was a clear assumption the authorities would uphold their responsibility to protect and this assumption has been fully undermined with the conduct of the war. However, the full engagement of national authorities and other duty bearers with PoC is critical - the speaker stressed that the protection of civilians cannot be handled by humanitarian and civilian actors alone; it requires cooperation with political actors and complementary political action.

The speaker noted that international efforts in support of PoC often overly focus more on ceasefire agreements and military victories than longer-term peace agreements and peacebuilding processes.

Where protection is happening in Sudan it is largely a result of the leadership of civilians and grassroots groups, including those running the Emergency Response Rooms. Civilian-led protection efforts are having real impacts, with communities better able to negotiate localized, temporary ceasefires and other protection-focused arrangements that are reducing violence. Mathilde advocated for further investment in such local-level solutions, and doing this over the long term, to build on local initiatives and mechanisms for dialogue/protection.

Ms. Niemat Ahmadi, Founder and President, Darfur Women Action Group highlighted the dire situation for civilians in Sudan, including for civilians still in El Fasher where the most vulnerable are being targeted. Civil society groups are receiving information that the armed groups are clearing areas in El Fasher of civilians, using indiscriminate force. For so many civilians in Sudan, they are being re-victimized, attacked once again, on the run for a third, fourth or fifth time. There is no safe place in Sudan right now. The speaker emphasized the role of youth, women and different community members as first responders and the risks they face, including recruitment and violence. They are often targeted by both sides in the conflict, perceived as assisting or supporting one side or the other instead of recognized in their humanitarian role. With a crisis like the one happening in Sudan, she emphasized how it's not only about protecting people, it must also be about letting protection organizations do their job, ensuring the safety and access of staff and volunteers.

She also stressed that the withdrawal of UNAMID left a void, with the same threats persisting as when the mission first started. There were some successes in terms of strengthened PoC thanks to UNAMID's presence and efforts, but these gains quickly disappeared with UNAMID's withdrawal. She highlighted that in the absence of meaningful planning in relation to the withdrawal and engagement with key protection actors, including at community levels, many of the investments made during UNAMID's lifespan in civilian protection lost in light. This was especially the case for the protection of women and girls and other vulnerable groups. She pointed to the particular importance of ensuring the continuity of protection during mission withdrawal processes – the UNAMID withdrawal effectively signaled to perpetrators that they could continue to violate international humanitarian and human rights law without consequence. She closed by urging world leaders and the international community to not sit by and let severe violence against civilians and atrocity crimes continue unchecked in Sudan.

Following the interventions from speakers, several **interventions were made from the floor, including:**

Brazil acknowledged the serious challenges that mission transitions and withdrawals present for the protection of civilians. The representative also noted that while it was an elected member of the UN Security Council there were discussions with MONUSCO, prior to any change in mandate. At the time MONUSCO had emphasized the positive engagement they had with the government and the enabling role they played with the protection of civilians. An example of this role was that, while not responsible for monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children, the mission provided the needed security and logistics that enabled human rights actors to go to difficult places and collect needed information and verify violations. The representative offered a suggestion for colleagues with the privilege of currently sitting as a member of the Security Council – that when considering mandates and resources, there must be clarity on mission roles and transition plans, and there must be adequate resources for a range of interventions and experts, including on human rights, SGBV, children's rights and so on. It is in this way that withdrawals might have less of a negative impact.

A representative from **the Kingdom of the Netherlands** reflected on the powerful examples from DRC, Mali and Sudan. He noted how these experiences in different contexts of transition and withdrawal showed how community-led and locally led initiatives can very much make a difference in the protection of civilians and deserve support. Also in our political sphere, civilian self-protection and community led protection needs to be part of discussions. He also posed a question to the panelists, to reflect on how we can enhance these community-led initiatives?

A representative from **OHCHR** then took the floor. He clarified the role OHCHR plays during and after transitions, noting that human rights components leave when missions leave. While in some places, like DRC, there may be an ability to continue with human rights functions as part of ongoing OHCHR presence and efforts, it will be a weakened presence and function as the mission provides the backbone support and resources. When missions leave in such a hasty manner, as seen in Darfur, Mali, Sudan, situations have not been stabilized and in fact, violations are often increasing. The representative asked who will be doing the human rights monitoring and reporting that enables UN Security Council to take needed decisions and support peace and security? He described any notion that human rights functions can easily be transferred to a Country Team as a chimera. He noted the need to balance the importance of host state consent with the imperatives of peace and security. How can we as the UN assist UNSC members to do this thinking?

A representative from **Nonviolent Peaceforce** echoed several speakers and emphasized the importance of local-level protection. Nonviolent Peaceforce has local teams still in place in locations like El Fasher in Sudan. This work started many years ago and it's takes time to establish and strengthen it. In DRC, it's been a few years of work to build up community and civilian led protection efforts, which are now being solidified and hopefully able to provide needed protection supports as the transition and withdrawal continues. As Ms Ahmadi pointed to, this investment in civilian-led protection cannot be ad hoc and cannot be so late – it must be built into prevention and into long term planning, so that it's there to support before the transition happens.

A representative from the **UK** emphasized her agreement that preparation is key to transition and noted how it needs to be 'baked in' at the outset of a given mission. Engagement with communities, expectation management, support for local protection initiatives – these are all critical. From the UK side, we are trying to champion benchmarks in missions but trying to build support with other Council members has been difficult. Ultimately, we see this as a way to help balance host state requests with what's required to ensure the conditions needed for the protection of civilians.

In closing remarks, **H.E. Ambassador Muhammad Abdul Muhith, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations New York**, noted the importance of hearing from colleagues and partners working in mission contexts during the event, noting that Bangladesh is proud of the role it plays as a troop contributing country. Since UNSC Resolution 1265 (adopted in 1999), PoC has become an integral part of the mandate of peacekeeping missions, and he noted how peacekeeping missions and peacekeepers have comparative advantage in working with national authorities and communities in host countries. Peacekeepers have also been undertaking a range of actions in support of protection and peace, from the provision of medical services, to education programmes to bridge construction. These efforts have been critical for building relationships of trust with communities and supporting social cohesion. While progress has been made via the work of peacekeeping missions, there have also been

important challenges. In Mali, the exit created an incredibly dire situation for the affected communities and even for peacekeepers themselves, there was a lack of any safety.

The Ambassador shared several reflections on what can support successful transitions and withdrawals: first, primary responsibility for the protection of civilians goes to the host country. Therefore, to continue protection after withdrawals, the capacity of host governments must be strengthened. Through UNSC Resolution 2594, governments were encouraged to develop national PoC plans and identify benchmarks linked with missions – such measures must be more fully implemented. Second, the special committee for peacekeeping emphasized in its latest report the need to strengthen coordination and coherence between different stakeholders. Clarity of diverse roles is key to building and leveraging complementarity, as is ensuring the needed resources to continue and sustain key activities aimed at protection and peacebuilding. And finally, the Ambassador noted that the protection of civilians depends on political processes being followed through on. Humanitarian and protection actors cannot be left on their own to grapple with such complex crises – there must be a focus on and support for the needed solutions at the political level as a critical aspect of ensuring successful mission transitions and strengthened protection of civilians.

A [video recording](#) of the full event is available on the Global Protection Cluster's website.

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