Peace operations are rapidly adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic

Two weeks ago, peace operations from Cyprus to Somalia was still thinking about how to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Today these missions are all in full crisis management mode and adapting to a radical new situation. 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 UN 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 peace operations are now in the midst of making significant changes to the way they work. They are assessing which functions and operational activities are critical and needs to continue in its current or adapted form, which are important but not critical, and which can be paused until the crisis is over. Essential functions across missions include protection of civilians related patrols and activities, 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 re-programming these funds to support the efforts of local and national institutions to contain the spread of COVID-19.

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 episode in Haiti, UN missions are acutely aware of the danger they may pose to host populations. For example, in the African Union mission in Somalia (AMISOM) all movement of personnel has been reduced to the essential. All rotations and new deployments have been suspended. 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 take-aways. There are limitations on the size and number of meetings that cannot be done remotely. The staff that have arrived in 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 that has recently returned to the mission. Most UN missions have adopted similar measures. In the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) a whole battalion that has recently been rotated into the country is in 14 day quarantine. In the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) non-essential staff that has been working in field offices have been relocated to Bamako.

Most national and international staff work from home or their accommodations. In some locations working from home may imply 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 border have closed and staff are locked in place. This means that staff can no longer go on leave, including for instance 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 that is arising is where can mission staff be evacuated too? 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 DRC (MONUSCO) has approximately 3000 civilian staff, 1000 police officers and 13,500 troops.

From a mission support perspective both the UN's global service center in Brindisi and the regional service center in Entebbe have been affected by travel bans, border closures and

social distancing policies that have most staff working from home. However, essential support is being provided and in most countries cargo flights are not affected by the travel bans.

Peace operations have their own medical services and hospitals, but these facilities are limited and was not designed for this kind of emergency. Very few missions have test kits of their own at this stage. These limited facilities will be quickly overwhelmed if staff start to fall ill. Thus far only one peacekeeper has been confirmed positive and is in isolation in Lebanon. However, as of end-March there is approximately 90 UN staff worldwide that has tested positive for the virus. It is not inconceivable that in some contexts UN country team staff will turn to UN peacekeeping missions for medical assistance, if national medical facilities are inadequate. Emergency medical evacuations can still be arranged, but the countries the UN would normally send people too have now also closed their borders.

The UN headquarters in New York have also introduced social distancing measures and apart from essential staff working in, for example the situation center, the staff that is back stopping and supporting peace operations at headquarters are all working from home. New York is much more severely affected by COVID-19 than any of the UN's peace operations, at this stage. The UN Security Council have resorted to meeting remotely and voting in writing when needed. In most cases where mandate renewals are due, these are being technically rolled-over until the next renewal date.

Peace operations are of course not strangers to crisis management, and there are staff that have experience from managing previous 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 North Kivus (DRC). Still, the pace at which peace operations have had to make significant changes to the way they work over the last two weeks have been unprecedented. 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 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 and when the virus spreads to these countries peace operations will have to make further changes to the way the work, both to protect their staff and to be able to continue to carry out critical functions. No doubt, missions are now starting to plan for that eventuality.

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