

United Nations Troops as the Key Player in Dealing with Armed Conflicts in DRC

Abstract

The United Nations has one significant role it plays in its member states. This role is to maintain peace and security. It is expected that when a country goes into war, the United Nations steps in and, through various processes, helps put the war to an end. The UN has tried to execute this role by sending UN troops to The Democratic Republic of Congo to intervene in the never-ending conflicts. The UN troops have been vital to the conflicts in DRC, which can be seen through their various functions. The UN troops have been critical in helping salvage the conflicts through their commitment to protecting civilians and humanitarian personnel. This paper highlights four main activities the UN troops have carried out in DRC in an attempt to put the conflicts to an end. Through the efforts, it can be concluded that the troops have been key to the conflicts.

Keywords: United Nations, Democratic Republic of Congo, troops

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The United Nations is an intergovernmental organization formed on 24th October 1949. The sole purpose of the creation of the organization was to maintain international security and peace. This remains its sole purpose to date. The UN plays a significant role in sustaining security and preserving peace through arbitration, judicial decisions, mediation, and negotiation (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2010). The UN has been active in its member states, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country that has been in several phases of conflict. According to the United Nations Peacekeeping (2010), in July 2010, the UN established the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) for the primary purpose of peacekeeping in the country. MONUSCO consists of various personnel, including troops, who have been executing their responsibility mainly by protecting civilians, human rights activists, and humanitarian personnel. The UN troops have faced several challenges in their mission to Congo. Despite this, they have been instrumental in their peacekeeping mission in the ongoing conflicts in the country.

A History of the Conflicts

The history of the ongoing conflicts in DRC goes way back to 1994. As stated by Novosseloff (2019), there was a massive refugee crisis in the country resulting from the genocide in Rwanda. It happened after the Hutus from Rwanda found their way to the eastern DRC and established armed groups. It led to the creation of Tutsi rebels and other opportunistic rebel groups. As stated by the Center for Preventive Action (2022), this posed a challenge to the DRC as it became more challenging to defeat and have the various armed groups under control. According to ReliefWeb (2022), between 1998 and 2003, the DRC government managed to start fighting the rebel groups through the support of Namibia, Angola, and Zimbabwe during the Second Congo War. It is estimated that over three million people were killed during this war. A peace deal was reached in 2002 as the country witnessed the formation of a transitional government in 2003. Despite this, there are ongoing conflicts in the country perpetrated by armed groups against citizens, mainly in the eastern region of Congo. The ongoing conflicts result from weak institutions, poor governance, and high rates of corruption.

One of the well-known rebel groups that emerged after the war is known as the 23rd March Movement (M23). The Center for Preventive Action (2022) states that the group was made up of ethnic Tutsis, who, according to allegations, were being supported by the government of Rwanda. M23's primary purpose was to rebel against the DRC government, claiming it reneged on a peace deal signed in 2009 (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). Under MONUSCO, the United Nations Security Council gave authority for an offensive brigade to be conducted in support of the Congolese government in its fight against the rebel group. M23 was finally defeated in 2013 with the help of the UN peacekeepers and the Congolese government army (ReliefWeb, 2022). However, other armed groups have emerged, which keeps the country in unending conflicts.

Congo has a massive resource for wealth. This is expected to be an advantage for the country. However, it is another cause of the conflicts in the country. As the Center for Preventive Action (2022) postulates, it is claimed that the mineral trade in the DRC financially supports the armed groups to buy arms to conduct their general operations. In 2010, the United States tried to resolve this by passing legislation to reduce the buying of conflict minerals to prevent the armed rebels from getting funded. It has, however, been an uphill task since the supply chains for conflict minerals are complex (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). For this reason, multinational companies have terminated purchasing minerals from the DRC. It has made many miners lose their jobs, forcing a majority of them to join armed groups for livelihood, meaning it is nearly impossible for the armed groups to be phased out.

Due to the presence of many armed groups and weak governance, the civilians in Congo have to live with several issues. These include the violation of human rights, widespread sexual violence and rape, and extreme poverty, among other issues (Twardowski, 2022). Different organizations, including the UN and the African Union, have tried and are still trying to address these issues. More than a hundred armed groups operate in the eastern part of Congo. There are more than 16,000 peacekeepers from the UN. According to the Center for Preventive Action (2022), despite this, the armed groups have continually controlled the areas that are weakly governed. Due to the condition in the country, many Congolese civilians have been forced to flee their country. Records from the United Nations indicate that there are 4.5 million people in the DRC who have been internally displaced (ReliefWeb, 2022). It is also estimated that there are more than 800,000 Congolese refugees in other countries (ReliefWeb, 2022). If not contained, the conflicts might spread to neighboring countries like Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, countries

with strong ties with the United States. Hopefully, the continued dedication of the UN troops will someday salvage the current situation.

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The UN troops in the DRC have been instrumental in the conflict in the country. According to Novosseloff (2019), one way in which their presence in the country is critical is that they have contributed to the reunification of the country. As stated earlier, the armed rebel groups in DRC made many civilians flee their homes for safety. Due to this, there are over eight hundred thousand (800,000) Congolese refugees in other nations and another 4.5 million internally displaced civilians in the country (ReliefWeb, 2022). Usually, families are separated when such wars happen, which has been no different in DRC's case. Children are the most victims when it comes to families separating. In DRC, the UN troops have been working round the clock to ensure children separated from their families are reunited. According to a recent report, in July 2022, over eighty (80) children were reunited with their families through the help of the UN troops (ReliefWeb, 2022). The children had lost contact with their families due to the conflict in the eastern part of the country. Some of these children were separated from their families for more than five years. The process of reuniting children with their families was initiated in 2019. In the beginning, the process of reunification was protracted for two reasons: security and logistic concerns made it challenging to access some parts marked as possible search areas, and there was limited information about the children and their families (ReliefWeb, 2022).

Nonetheless, the UN troops have tried their best to reunite these children with their families. The reunification of families is backed up by a UN system that allows separated and displaced civilians to get in touch with their families. In the first five months of 2022, more than

200 children were reunited with their families (ReliefWeb, 2022). As stipulated by the ReliefWeb (2022), between 2017 and 2021, over 2,500 children who had been separated from their families owing to the violence were reunited with their families. It is an uphill task for the UN troops to play their role in the reunification of the country since violence keeps on erupting in different parts of the country. It means the more violence erupts, the more children are separated from their loved ones. It is an eternal cycle. However, were it not for the UN troops, perhaps those separated from their families would never have found their way back home.

Besides reunification of the country, the UN troops have also been key in stabilizing the political atmosphere in the country, mainly by ensuring peaceful elections to prevent violence (Twadowski, 2022). As stated earlier, one driving factor for the conflicts in DRC is poor governance. According to the United Nations Peacekeeping (2010), DRC was, for a long time, led by dictators who made the political atmosphere more unstable. The first president of the country, Mobutu Sese Seko, held the country in a dictatorship for thirty-one (31) years (ReliefWeb, 2022). During his reign, he amassed individual fortunes by selling the country's natural resources while his citizens languished in poverty. The second president, Joseph Kabila, ruled the country for eighteen (18) years. Kabila, under his dictatorship, delayed the country's elections many times to avoid stepping down from power. Due to the presence of the UN troops in DRC, the country, for the first time, experienced a peaceful transfer of power (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). The Center for Preventive Action states that the transfer was experienced during the 2018 elections, where the current president and the opposition leader, Felix Tsisekedi, were declared the winner. For the peaceful transfer of power to happen, the UN troops had done the much they could do to ensure peace before, during, and after the elections.

The first measure they took to ensure a peaceful transfer of power was working with the Independent Election Committee of DRC to register the voters. It should be noted that there was no transparent registration and voting system in the country due to the dictatorial government that was previously ruling the DRC. According to Twardowski (2022), the UN troops actively participated in voter registration by helping distribute voter registration kits to every village in the country. The UN troops had to use any means to get to the remotest villages, which shows their dedication to bringing change to the DRC. The voter registration kits contained a digital camera, a laptop, and fingerprinting materials. It might sound like what is expected of every country, but it was an extraordinary move in DRC because it changed the trajectory of the election aftermath. The benefit of the drive to register voters is that it supported the safeguarding of the rights and access to public services of Congolese citizens (ReliefWeb, 2022). This, in turn, gave the civilians hope in the new government when it eventually started functioning.

In addition to helping facilitate the voter registration process, the UN troops made it their responsibility to conduct a civic education program to prepare the civilians for the election (Twardowski, 2022). There are high illiteracy levels in DRC, and the reason for this is the never-ending war that has kept many out of school. It is the reason the UN troops had to come in to educate the citizens about basic voting procedures. Also, there was looming chaos shortly before the referendum because the company that had promised to pay the electoral workers pulled out at the last minute. The UN came in immediately and committed to paying the 250,000 workers conducting the elections (ReliefWeb, 2022). During the election, the UN troops ensured the different polling stations in the country followed the procedures expected. It is reported that they went to an extent to help the elderly and disabled get to the polling stations and assisted them where necessary. To some political analysts, the election might have been different in the

country's history. However, it cannot be termed as democratic as there were claims of irregularities. The presence of the UN troops in the country during the elections made a difference as no violence was witnessed. It is due to their input that the country is expected to have peaceful elections in the future.

Furthermore, through the United Nations organization, MONUSCO, the troops have been key in reporting, monitoring, gathering, and sharing any information concerning the violation of human rights. Through the Center for Preventive Action (2022), the UN troops have helped the international criminal justice system fight the impunity witnessed in the country. The presence of the UN troops enabled the international criminal court to get hold of Thomas Lubanga, Bosco Ntaganda, Germain Katanga, and many others. In the case of Thomas Lubanga, after actively participating in a war that led to the death of more than 50,000, he was finally arrested by the UN troops in March 2005 (Novosseloff, 2019). The International Criminal Court (ICC) found Lubanga guilty of recruiting children under fifteen years to war. Lubanga led the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC). UPC was an ethnic militia group that actively participated in the war witnessed in the Ituri region in 1999. Bosco Ntaganda is also a convicted war criminal. He is the former leader of the armed militia group known as the National Congress for the Defense of the People. The armed militia group operated in the North Kivu province, DRC. He was found guilty of eighteen counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed between 2002 and 2003 in Ituri (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). Germain Katanga is the former head of another armed militia group known as the Patriotic Resistance Force. Katanga was found guilty of a single count of crimes against humanity and four counts of war crimes committed in 2003. Just like in Lubanga's case, the UN troops were instrumental in the arrest of the other two militia

leaders. The arrest and final conviction of those mentioned above were made possible through the reporting, observing, and sharing of information by the UN troops.

One of the activities of MONUSCO is to handle the Security Sector Reform (SSR). According to the United Nations Peacekeeping (2018), through the troop sent to the DRC, the UN has managed to support the country since its establishment in 2003, mainly in peacekeeping, by assisting the government. The United Nations Peacekeeping (2018) states that the UN troops have managed to implement this through a global agreement on the transition, which includes sharing power in the army. In 2008, the Security Sector Reform Coordination Office was created. Under its direction and other necessary parties involved, the components of the peacekeeping mission were made. The support offered to the SSR by the UN troops focused mainly on three factors: Justice, Police, and the Army. The SSR had to develop a working group for adequate achievement of the set objectives. The responsibility of the working group was to exchange information, experiences, and knowledge among the various groups involved in the Security Sector Reform. As the United Nations Peacekeeping (2018) stipulates, in addition to the above, in 2008, MONUSCO helped the DRC government create a round table for the sole purpose of implementing the agenda of the Security Sector Reform. MONUSCO, through its troops, played a key role in initiating, advocating, and preparing for the formation of three critical groups to advance the agenda of the Security Sector Reform (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2018). The three technical groups comprised national authorities and international partners. The UN, through its troops, has been committed to ensuring that DRC attains full-functioning peace within and without its borders.

Despite the mounting pressure to withdraw the UN troops, they have achieved their mission at the DRC. The presence of the UN was crucial to balancing the needs of warring

factions and containment of the ongoing conflicts. The troops have played essential roles in ensuring that the condition in the country is bearable despite not being able to end the disputes altogether. This has been seen in various roles the troops have played. The first key role the troops have played is being instrumental in the reunification of the country. Due to the war, children have been separated from their families. The efforts of the UN troops have made it possible for a good number of children to be reunited with their loved ones. The second key the troops have played in the conflicts is that they have helped stabilize the political atmosphere in the country. For a long time, the DRC was under a dictatorship. The presence of the UN troops did not help put to an end dictatorship immediately. However, through a gradual peacekeeping process, the country could conduct peaceful elections in 2018 that ended dictatorial governance. The troops have also been key in reporting, monitoring, gathering, and sharing any information concerning the violation of human rights.

Thus, sharing information with the UN made it possible for the troops to arrest Thomas Lubanga, an armed militia group leader. Several militias were also charged with the help of the UN troops. The other area in which the UN troops have played a key role is overseeing the implementation of activities conducted by MONUSCO, the sole organization created by the United Nations to maintain peace in the DRC. The UN troops have actively supported the implementation of the Security Sector Reform. The main purpose of the Security Sector Reform is to ensure that the components of the peacekeeping mission are adhered to as directed by the UN. The conflicts in the DRC have not ended. However, the presence of the UN troops has been of advantage. Thus, the advantages should be outlined before any considerations of withdrawing the United Nations from the country.

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