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UN peacekeeping in the Congo: when is the job done?

Ingrid Samset

Executive Summary

On 28 May 2010, the United Nations Security Council made a critical decision on the future of the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Monuc) – the largest and most costly such operation in the world. The Council decided to reduce the number of peacekeepers by 2,000, and to transform Monuc into a stabilisation force, renamed Monusco.

The decision was made in a context of differences of view between the DRC government and the UN. The DRC has signalled its preference that Monuc should withdraw completely from the country by mid-2011, while the UN says that full withdrawal should be contingent on progress in the reduction of violence and restoration of state authority.

This policy brief considers and analyses these two key positions on Monuc's future. It argues that the Monuc experience offers important lessons that can contribute to a rethinking of peacekeeping operations: among them that the protection of civilians (one of Monuc's core tasks) is a controversial and complicated topic that has been understood too narrowly; and that the UN has been over-ambitious in what Monuc can achieve and has focused too exclusively on peacekeeping.

The way forward is to reset the bar to a more realistic level, to rethink civilian protection, and to shift the focus from keeping to building peace. This approach could lay a firmer basis for enhancing the security of the Congolese people in the period ahead.

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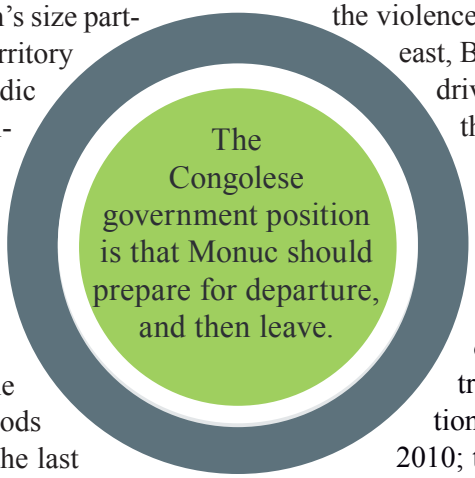
Introduction

When and under what conditions should the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo wind down and leave the country? This question has recently moved up the international policy agenda, in response to several developments. More than ten years have passed since the establishment of the United Nations Organisation Mission in DR Congo, known by its French acronym Monuc. For a peacekeeping force, this is a fairly long time. The Congo also approaches its celebration of fifty years of independence on 30 June 2010, as well as its second post-war elections scheduled for September 2011.

The Monuc drawdown debate also has a wider resonance. Monuc is the biggest and most expensive UN peacekeeping force in the world. As of February 2010, it had approximately 25,000 staff, of whom nearly 20,000 were peacekeeping troops. The operation costs nearly $1.4 billion a year, currently absorbing one-sixth of the UN peacekeeping budget. The mission's size partly reflects the size of the DRC: a territory almost twice the size of the five Nordic countries taken together, and with almost 70 million inhabitants. The trigger for the relatively large Congo deployment, moreover, was one of the most lethal conflicts since the second world war. The stakes are high, given how much time, how many people, and how much money have gone into Monuc – and how many livelihoods have been affected by violence over the last decade in the Congo.



This policy brief presents the two key positions in the debate on Monuc's drawdown, and analyses their background. It then discusses the broader question of what is required to complete the peacekeeping job in weak states such as the DRC.

The drawdown debate: the key positions

Though signs of Congolese impatience with Monuc had been perceptible for some time, the drawdown debate was triggered in December 2009 when DRC President Joseph Kabila voiced his position on the future on Monuc. Three months later, Kabila and his government repeated their stance to high-ranking UN officials in Kinshasa.

The Congolese government position was that Monuc should soon begin preparing for departure, and then leave. The authorities wanted Monuc to start reducing troop levels before the independence celebrations on 30 June 2010, and to pull out completely before the next presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections in September 2011.

The UN responded to this call with scepticism about a fixed timetable, but openness towards negotiating with Kinshasa on the terms of the drawdown. The report issued by UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon on 30 March 2010 proposed a pullout of up to 2,000 troops from eight of the DRC's eleven provinces by 30 June.[1] These include all but the three eastern provinces of South Kivu, North Kivu, and Orientale, where most of the violence of recent years has taken place. In the east, Ban suggested, the drawdown should be driven by a joint review process between the UN and the DRC government.

In mid-May, a Security Council delegation visited the DRC for consultations, and on 28 May, the Council passed a unanimous resolution on Monuc's future. Resolution 1925[2] transforms Monuc into a "stabilisation" force, renamed Monusco from 1 July 2010; the mission is a compromise which integrates concerns of both sides. It accepts the DRC demand of withdrawal of some troops – 2,000, in line with the secretary-general's recommendation – by the end of June, from "areas where the security situation permits" (para. 3). It also extends the mandate of the mission to 30 June 2011 (para. 2), which opens the way for a change around mid-2011, in line with the DRC government's wishes.

1 UN Security Council, Thirty-first report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 30 March 2010, S/2010/164, http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/sgrep10.htm, accessed 10 June 2010.

2 UN Security Council Resolution 1925, 28 May 2010, S/Res/1925 (2010), http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions10.htm , accessed 10 June 2010.

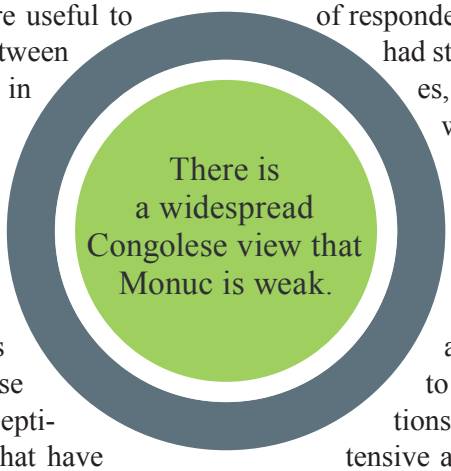
At the same time, Resolution 1925 does not include a fixed timetable, and makes the longer-term future of the force contingent on progress in specific areas. These are: (a) the completion of ongoing military operations in the Kivu and Orientale provinces "resulting in minimizing the threat of armed groups and restoring stability in sensitive areas"; (b) an "improved capacity of the Government… to effectively protect the population through the establishment of sustainable security forces"; and (c) "the consolidation of State authority across the territory" (para. 6).

Making sense of the DRC position

Security Council Resolution 1925 provides the UN mission in the DRC with a map for the year ahead. Yet its adoption was preceded by a largely polarised debate on the mission's future. A sound understanding of the two key positions in this debate is therefore useful to facilitate constructive cooperation between the DRC and its international partners in the time to come.

To start with, the DRC government's apparently uncompromising stance can be understood against the background of the history of the Congo. Monuc's own performance as well as its relationships vis-à-vis the Congolese are also key to understanding local scepticism. As measured against the goals that have been set for the mission, performance has often been disappointing. Crucially, Monuc has repeatedly failed to ensure "the protection of civilians under immediate threat of physical violence", a task which has been part of its mandate since 2002.[3]

The mission succeeded in monitoring the ceasefire and withdrawal of foreign armies from 2000 to 2003, and in assisting the carrying out of the elections in 2006. But despite the fourfold increase of troop numbers over its first decade, as well as attempts at organisational learning within the UN, Monuc has repeatedly failed to protect civilians – in Ituri in 2003, Bukavu in 2004, North Kivu in 2008 and more consistently in relation to foreign militias operating in the country such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from Uganda.



Negative but ambiguous public perception

This is part of the background to the widespread Congolese view that Monuc is weak. An opinion survey [4] conducted in 2005 in all provinces found that only 37% of the 2180 respondents said Monuc had made them feel safer. Even in the Kivu provinces and Orientale, which had a stronger UN presence, not more than half of respondents said Monuc had made them feel safer (p. 11). Many Congolese, aware that Monuc has made relatively little progress in its chief task of civilian protection in spite of massive investments, see little reason for the UN mission to stay. The 2005 survey found that 60% of respondents already at that time felt that Monuc had stayed long enough. The eastern provinces, in spite of a higher level of violence, were no exception, with a majority of respondents saying Monuc had stayed long enough.

In addition to the perception of Monuc weakness, Congolese scepticism about the mission also seems to relate to the way it has assumed state-like functions. Monuc has, for instance, built an extensive airline infrastructure and the only radio station with countrywide coverage. True, Monuc probably needed to build its own airline network to allow it to function, given the weakness of Congo's own infrastructure. But services such as these with a national reach are ones that states or private companies – not intergovernmental organisations or military operations – are supposed to deliver. Thus, while many Congolese

3 Katarina Månsson, "Use of Force and Civilian Protection: Peace Operations in the Congo", *International Peacekeeping,* vol 12, no. 4, pp 503–519, 2005, http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a723761790~frm=titlelink, accessed 10 June 2010.

4 *Peacekeeping Operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo: The Perception of the Population*, BERCI International, for the Peacekeeping Best Practices Section, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations, 2005, pp 13, http://www.peacekeepingbestpractices.unlb.org/PBPS/Library/MONUC%20perception%20of%20population.pdf, accessed 9 June 2010.

have few illusions about their own state, and even may approve of these concrete manifestations of Monuc's presence, they are also suspicious of external actors that seem to perform a role that should in principle be played by their own state.[5]

This sentiment links to a broad dislike of external intervention among the Congolese people. This resentment is rooted in the legacy of colonial rule, but seems to have been accentuated during President Mobutu's 32 years in power until his overthrow in 1997. Mobutu combined oversight of the continued extraction of Congo's resources by his western allies with skilful play on the idea of Congolese "authenticity" in ways that contributed to the strengthening of national identity. This more remote background helps explain why today, external intervention in the Congo with a heavy footprint tends to be met with suspicion. A particularly widespread view among Congolese is that most foreigners are interested above all in their country's mineral riches.

Alongside negative perceptions however, Congolese attitudes towards the UN mission are also marked by ambiguities. The 2005 survey found, on some questions, greater appreciation of Monuc in the provinces with more violence and greater peacekeeper deployment. Also, while a majority felt it was time for Monuc to leave, half of the respondents also considered that if Monuc left, it might lead to greater national insecurity or a return to war (p 16).

Domestic political manoeuvring

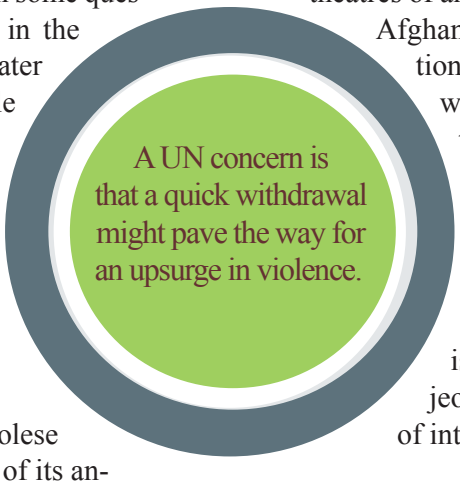
The drawdown argument of the Congolese government, and especially the timing of its announcement, also reflects internal political calculation. The fact that the government wants the Monuc withdrawal to be scheduled to take place just before the elections in September 2011 suggests that it wishes to have full control over the implementation of those elections.

The background to this is that continued violence in the east, as well as delays in a number of government programmes and initiatives since the 2006 polls, have aroused popular discontent against the government. Easterners gave President Joseph Kabila his strongest backing in 2006, yet they in particular have become disillusioned by the army's exactions against its own compatriots.

The government therefore has reason to fear a drop in genuine electoral support next time around, and may seek ways to maximise the leverage of incumbency so as to ensure victory in 2011. In such a situation, the continued presence of the large UN mission may be regarded as an inconvenience whose withdrawal would aid the government in achieving its aim.

Making sense of the UN position

The UN, for its part, has hesitated to accept the government suggestion of a fixed timetable for Monuc's drawdown. In adopting this stance the UN has at least three concerns. The first resonates with other contemporary theatres of an international military presence such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where a vital consideration of involved outsiders is to ensure that when they leave, they can do so "with their heads held high". Monuc's status – the largest UN peacekeeping force in the world, deployed in a crisis-ridden region – makes it a test case for peacekeeping. It matters for the UN's prestige that the exit from the DR Congo is conducted in a way that is seen not to jeopardise the organisation's core values of international peace and security.



The second UN concern is that a quick withdrawal might create a political and military void, paving the way for an upsurge in violence. The worry is that unless institutions are in place, that provide basic services for the population, and unless the army and police are able to protect the people and country from mass violence, then the UN force's departure might be followed by the emergence of new attacks From this flows the advice that in the areas most affected by violence, drawdown

5 Xavier Zeebroek, "La Mission des Nations Unies au Congo: Le Léviathan du maintien de la paix", Theodore Trefon, ed, *Réforme au Congo (RDC): Attentes et désillusions*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009.

should be based on progress on dimensions considered key to ensuring the Congo is prepared to "stand on its own feet".

The third concern relates to the idea of an international "responsibility to protect". If this norm is seen to apply, it may seem counterintuitive to let a mission endowed with this task leave a country where violence against civilians remains widespread in some areas. Monuc may often have been unable to protect Congolese civilians from violence; but if its departure leads to a worsening of their conditions then that is no good solution either.

Getting the job done

The UN and Congolese perspectives are very different, but both raise the question of what conditions have to be fulfilled before the peacekeeping job in the DR Congo can be said to be done. This highlights the issue of what kind of "progress on the ground" is needed, and how the pace of the drawdown can be adjusted in relation to it. This is a complex question involving a number of challenges, which go beyond reaching agreement on where and on what topics there should be progress before withdrawal. Equally tough questions include how much progress there should be; how much leeway there should be for setbacks; and how these developments should be measured and monitored.

The benchmark approach, which is part of Security Council Resolution 1925 and thus of the mission's mandate, is tricky to implement successfully. This is not only because implementation will require credible monitoring and thus considerable resources, but also because the approach creates the prospect of new periods of waiting for potentially elusive progress. More generally, the major difficulties already experienced by Monuc and the army suggest that progress cannot be ensured merely by the infusion of more time and the new lead concept of stabilisation. Yet it is in everyone's interests that these difficulties are overcome – and that the eventual withdrawal of peacekeepers happens in a way that safeguards Congolese sovereignty, the Congolese people's wish to lead a secure life, as well as regional and international peace.

In this light, if the peacekeeping job is to be done – and in a manner that lays the basis for a more constructive international engagement – the UN presence in the Congo will be well advised to follow three courses of action in particular: a) avoid overstretch; b) rethink the civilian protection part of the mandate; and c) transfer resources from peacekeeping to peacebuilding.

Avoid overstretch

A paradoxical yet common trend affects international military operations in conflict-prone areas:[6] namely, that when faced with problems in carrying out their mandate, the response is often to give them additional tasks which they are presumed to need to fulfil in order to implement their original objectives. Monuc is no exception: from modest beginnings in 2000 and a relatively brief, clear-cut set of tasks, the mandate has been adjusted many times and new tasks added – in spite of Monuc's repeated troubles in achieving what it already had been set to do.

The tasks assigned to Monuc have thus grown – and more quickly than its organisational capabilities. This has led it into a squeeze, whereby Monuc finds it virtually impossible to live up to the world's expectations at the same time as its high ambitions may spur local suspicion that it (representing the outside world) is trying to assume the functions of the Congolese state.

To escape this squeeze and rebuild trust, the UN system needs to reduce its ambitions to what it can realistically accomplish in the Congo. By resetting the bar to a more realistic level – that is, by resisting pressures to take on tasks that the state does not yet do, and instead focusing on transferring and building capacity in its Congolese partners – Monuc will stand a stronger chance of regaining confidence from the local population. By reducing its ambitions, Monuc will also facilitate its own exit, since it will more likely reach the targets deemed required for a gradual withdrawal.

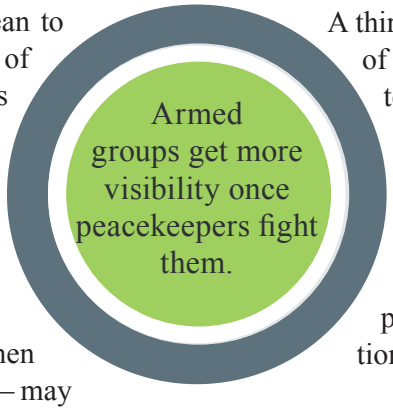
Rethink civilian protection

"To protect civilians under immediate threat of physical violence" has been part of Monuc's mandate from early on. Even so, thousands of civilians have been exposed to violence during and in the areas of Monuc deployment.

6 Richard Gowan, "The Future of Peacekeeping Operations: Fighting Political Fatigue and Overstretch, New York", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and The Century Foundation, Briefing paper 3, March 2009, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/global/06238-20090331.pdf,accessed 7 June 2010.

The causes of failure are rooted both in institutional realities (the nature of Monuc and the UN system, and of the Congolese state) and in the intricacies of the idea that peacekeepers should protect civilians from physical violence when they are "under immediate threat". This demanding requirement is fairly new in the history of UN peacekeeping: it rose to prominence only at the end of the 1990s, at around the same time Monuc itself came into being.[7]

The Monuc experience suggests that the protection of civilians by peacekeepers is both complicated and controversial. It should therefore stimulate a rethink of civilian protection as a peacekeeping task. The salient questions include: what should it mean to protect people "under immediate threat" of violence? What do the Monuc difficulties suggest about how it can be done? And how useful is it to focus more on protecting civilians when they are "under immediate threat" than on the reasons for that threat arising?



Attempts at civilian protection by armed men in uniform – with or without blue helmets – may also have counterproductive effects. One is that armed groups get more visibility once peacekeepers fight them, and through that improve their bargaining position in the competition for political patronage. The presence of an external force which promises to fight non-state armed groups may act as an incentive for violence, given that the attention thus accruing to the groups may improve their bargaining position vis-à-vis the provincial, central, or regional elites.[8]

Another quandary relates to the question of exactly who are the civilians to be protected. The discourse on civilian protection often implies that these are mainly women and children, though civilian men too are vulnerable to various forms of violence in conflict situations. The danger here is that failure to protect civilian men, beyond the risk to the men themselves, may place civilian women and children at even greater risk. This is because most household heads are men, and because men's traditional gender role has been associated with protecting and providing for the family. Failure to protect civilian men may thus generate resentment and nurture seeds of division in the host society.[9]

A third dilemma is that in eastern Congo, some of the violence against civilians is committed by civilians.[10] As a result, if peacekeepers try to protect some civilians, they risk injuring or humiliating other civilians, which in turn may give rise to retaliatory violence. All these complexities raise major doubts about the efficiency of the primarily military approach to the protection of civilians.

From peacekeeping to peacebuilding

The complicated, controversial, and sometimes counterproductive nature of civilian protection by military means supports the emerging suggestion in both UN and Congolese circles that the international presence in the DR Congo should shift its focus from peacekeeping to peacebuilding. These two approaches, after all, have different logics. Peacebuilding focuses on building institutions, reducing poverty, and addressing the deeper reasons why individuals resort to violence. Peacekeeping operates according to the logic of military deterrence and deals more with the effects than the causes of conflict.

7 UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 8 September 1999, S/1999/957, http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/62038AA80887F23A85256C85007230A4 , accessed 7 June 2010; International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, The Responsibility to Protect, Ottawa, International Development Research Centre, 2001, http://www.iciss.ca/report-en.asp, accessed 7 June 2010.

8 Alex de Waal, "Mission without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace", International Affairs, vol 85, no. 1, pp 99-113, January 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/18785/international_affairs.html, accessed 7 June 2010.

9 R. Charli Carpenter, "'Women, Children, and Other Vulnerable Groups': Gender, Strategic Frames and the Protection of Civilians as a Transnational Issue", International Studies Quarterly, vol 2005, no. 49, pp. 295–334, 2005, http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/ISQ_WomenChildrenOtherVulnerableGroup.pdf, accessed 7 June 2010.

10 HHI & Oxfam, "Now, the World is Without Me": An Investigation of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambridge, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam America, 2010, http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/now-world-without-me, accessed 7 June 2010.

In the DR Congo today, a pivotal task is to create the conditions in which conflicts can be resolved peacefully. A thorough understanding of why people resort to violence should therefore be the basis of targeted programmes to address these causes. While victims of violence certainly should be assisted, multifaceted efforts to address the sources of persistent violence are likely to constitute the most sustainable form of conflict prevention. This approach requires resources to be transferred from military to civilian efforts; more investment in fields such as conflict resolution, community development and the justice system; and the creation of more civilian jobs.

Conclusion

The answer to when the United Nations peacekeeping job is done in the Democratic Republic of Congo depends in large part on how that job is defined, and to what extent it is combined with other peace-promoting activities. This policy brief suggests that the DRC job has been defined in too ambitious terms and with a too exclusive focus on peacekeeping.

The UN's organisational transition from Monuc to Monusco in the DRC this year should therefore be accompanied by a gradual shift from keeping to building peace. By building institutions and communities, and addressing the reasons why violence is resorted to in the DRC, the international community is likely to garner more goodwill from its hosts and lay a firmer basis for reaching the aim of enhancing human security for the Congolese people.

Further reading

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2. R. Charli Carpenter, "'Women, Children, and Other Vulnerable Groups': Gender, Strategic Frames and the Protection of Civilians as a Transnational Issue", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol 2005, no. 49, pp 295–334, 2005, http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/ISQ_WomenChildrenOtherVulnerableGroup.pdf, accessed 7 June 2010.

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4. Denis M. Tull, "Peacekeeping in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Waging Peace and Fighting War", *International Peacekeeping*, vol 16, no. 2, pp. 215–230, http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a910740659~db=all~order=page, accessed 10 June 2010.

5. Xavier Zeebroek, "La mission des Nations Unies au Congo: Le laboratoire de la paix introuvable", Brussels, Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité (GRIP), 2008, http://www.grip.org/fr/siteweb/dev.asp?N=simple&O=616&titre_page=2008-5, accessed 10 June 2010.

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