

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Peacekeepers on African Soil during COVID-19 Procedures, Challenges, Lessons¹

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Abstract:

Active United Nation missions on African soil are: MINURSO in Western Sahara, UNMISS in South Sudan, MINUSMA in Mali, MONUSCO in Democratic Republic of the Congo, MINUSCA in Central African Republic and UNISFA in Abyei. Peacekeeping has always been highly dynamic and has evolved in the face of new issues. But, in addition to the challenges they face while assisting host countries on the difficult path from conflict to peace, peacekeepers have recently had to deal with procedures and obstacles caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the article is to investigate the performance of everyday tasks in the COVID-19 era with an emphasis on issues related to the availability of basic supplies for UN peacekeepers, personal protective equipment, medical services, welfare, travel restrictions, and connections with the resident population in Africa. In this paper, we will present the results of qualitative research (in-depth interviews) on the experiences of UN staff from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) who served in the mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), in the period 2020-2022. In anticipation of malaria, typhoid, hepatitis, salmonella, etc., the peacekeepers faced a new unknown disease, a shortage of medicines, they had no access to hospitals, and personal protective masks were made from their underwear. In some areas the local population believed that COVID19 was a “mysterious disease” brought and spread by peacekeepers and this fact shed new light on (non)cooperation with UN staff. Apart from the UN, the mission staff were (not) provided with support and assistance in various ways by the countries which they came from.

Keywords:

COVID-19; Africa; South Sudan; UN missions; peacekeepers; support.

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Introduction

Africa is a very challenging and demanding continent, offering the prospect for an end the proxy wars that had been fought across the length and breadth of the continent for decades. The continent therefore faces the double challenge of development and democratisation (Cilliers 2021).

From the other side, Europe is increasingly involved in peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations all over the world. But, peacekeeping has always been highly dynamic and has evolved in the face of new issues (Apuuli 2020; Pushkina 2020; Walter et al. 2021). Indeed, geographic and climate features have a profound impact on operational preparation. Depending on the country where the staff are deployed, the health and sanitary rules are also quite different (Besenyő 2017). Furthermore, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the spread of the coronavirus in Africa poses a high risk, and officials claimed that Africa is clearly not ready to stop an epidemic caused by a coronavirus (Besenyő and Kármán 2020). Attention to the factors that impact the effectiveness and prospects for successful peacekeeping in Africa (Akonor 2017) was fullfield with COVID 19 awareness.

Police and military structures from BiH have been participating in peacekeeping missions and peace support operations since 2000. Police forces from BiH entered the African mainland for the first time in 2004, as part of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). The mission was aimed at maintaining peace and strengthening the capacity of the local police in providing police service to citizens with an emphasis on vulnerable populations. According to the available data, 81 members of the police structures from BiH who stayed in Liberia were appointed to the positions of police advisors for criminal investigations, team leaders and deputy regional commanders (Sikimić 2021). Since 2011 the police staff from BiH have been participating in UNMISS. South Sudan is one of the most divided and unstable countries in the world and has become the scene of some of the worst human rights abuses on the African continent. When South Sudan became independent in 2011, a special peacekeeping mission was created specifically for the newly independent country (Zambakari et al. 2019).

UNMISS was established for one year on 9 July 2011, but with recommendation to renew it for subsequent periods. Now, UNMISS is authorized to use all necessary means to implement its mandate, which has been extended until March 15, 2023. In order to protect civilians and build lasting peace, almost 20,000 peacekeepers from 73 countries are serving in South Sudan. According to the available data as of November 2021, there were 13,254 troops, 222 experts in the mission, 1,411 police officers, 2,268 civilians, 425 staff officers and 402 UN volunteers on site in the mission. The approved budget for the period 07/2021-06/2022 was \$ 1,201,887,500 financed through a special account approved on an annual basis by the General Assembly. Civilian, military and police staff work daily with a focus on four main pillars, namely: protecting civilians, creating conditions for the delivery of humanitarian assistance,

supporting the implementation of the revitalized agreement and the peace process, and monitoring and investigating human rights (UNMISS, 2022; Roach and Hudson 2019).

Methodology

In order to explore the specific peacekeeping procedures, challenges and lessons from the COVID-19 era, we applied a qualitative method and obtained data using in-depth interviews. For this research, it was essential to gather information about participants of the mission, identify the problem based on their story, and determine the circumstances for which the qualitative exploratory research is the appropriate method. This method provides an opportunity for respondents to share their experience, opinions, and ideas, to improve the wider society's understanding of peacekeeping and provide valuable advice to future peacekeepers. Objective, independent results are not the main purpose of qualitative analysis, whereas experience, everyday practice and subjective reality of interviewees are at the service of better understanding of peacekeeping in the COVID era. In this way, the practical implications are of primary interest (Kelemen-Erdos and Meszaros 2021; Kelemen-Erdos 2019).

The interviews were conducted in the period from August 8, 2022 to September 9, 2022. The results shown in this paper are based on the answers of 7 respondents who were selected based on their experience, jobs, and tasks they perform on a professional or semi-professional basis in UN missions in Africa. More specifically, these include police officers from different police agencies in BiH, who were on a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan in the period from January 2020 to Jun 2021.⁴ Semi-structured guide was used to obtain accurate results, while the moderator let the conversation flow with some questions (Kelemen-Erdos and Molnár 2019).

Taking into consideration the information obtained from the type of an interview it was necessary to understand the common life conditions in the peacekeeping missions (which the first interviews emphasised) and to elaborate additional issues during COVID-19. Moreover, regarding the analysis of the gathered data, we used qualitative content analysis to discover the central issue, sub-issues, and specific circumstances in South Sudan during COVID-19.

The study focuses on the following research questions:

- Q1: When and how did the COVID-19 related concerns arise in UNMISS?
- Q2: What are the most serious obstacles and disadvantages during UNMISS, in the COVID-19 era?
- Q3: How are the UNMISS staff dealing with the issues of COVID-19 and what lessons have been learned?

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Results

Basic supplies, personal protective equipment and connections with the resident population

Before the start of the mission and the outbreak of COVID-19, there was no mention of this disease for the BiH contingent. It was only after arriving at the mission in February 2020 that they encountered the first information about the new virus in the form of an additional mandatory online test that they had to take. The first month of service in South Sudan passed in line with expectations and they received pre-mission information regarding living and working conditions.



Republika Srpska police officer in South Sudan (Source: the photo obtained from the personal archive, November 2020)

In March 2020, there were restrictions on a wider scale. The measure that affected the peacekeepers most was related to restrictions on water consumption. An individual could take (receive) one package of 12 bottles (18 liters of water) on a weekly basis, that is, about 2.5 liters for one day. Since daytime temperatures in South Sudan go up to 50 degrees Celsius, and the staff patrol in the open, the amount of available liquid was, according to the interviewees' experience, absolutely insufficient. They tried to find alternative sources of drinking liquid, but at the same time all cafeterias in the camp stopped working. They found the solution in technical water, which they filtered before the use for personal hygiene and for food preparation, since even ready-made food delivery services were no longer available. Due to the fear of transmission of covid and the attacks on members of the UN, going to the local market or market area became strictly prohibited after the declaration of the pandemic and punishable by disciplinary action.

Since the borders of South Sudan were closed, there was also a shortage of personal hygiene products. There was no soap or toilet paper, and cleaning services were suspended (although the charge for that service was not suspended, \$3 per day). The staff did not have adequate accessories for cleaning their rooms. Hand sanitiser was available in 30 ml for 10 days, and the masks provided were cotton, handmade, and not suitable for that type of purpose.

Interviewee 2: Some countries (Sri Lanka, Norway, Canada) delivered packages with basic necessities (food, medicine, personal hygiene products, clothes, etc.) to their nationals on mission, including items sent by family. Nobody received even an email from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

With the advent of COVID-19, there were drastic changes in the behavior of the resident population towards members of the UN. South Sudanese officials called the new virus a “mysterious disease”, and the population believed that the disease was brought by white people, primarily peacekeepers. At the end of March 2020, the local population became violent towards the UN staff, they threw stones at official vehicles, attacked individuals with machetes, knives and spears. Fortunately, no member of the mission was seriously injured in these attacks. Violence against UN staff was even openly promoted on social networks. It is important to point out that the president and vice president of South Sudan, as central figures, strongly condemned these attacks and announced harsh punishments against the perpetrators, after which the situation relatively calmed down.

In accordance with the changed circumstances caused by COVID, a decision was made to suspend regular patrolling in the protection of civilians site (PoC). Members of the mission entered the PoC only in the case of a large-scale violation of public order and peace, rape or murder, that is the most serious crimes. They maintained contact from the UN camp through mobile phones which they had procured - bought themselves, and delivered to the chiefs - leaders in the PoC. To enter the PoC as needed, permission from the mission headquarters was necessary, and upon returning, the members had to prepare a report with a detailed description of the actions and measures taken.

Interviewee 3: Jobs and tasks were increasingly demanding, and there was less and less communication which became exclusively online.



Field Office Bentiu during COVID-19 (Source: the photo obtained from the personal archive, September 2020)

In accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, the UN headquarters also ordered physical distance measures (1.5-2m) and a limited number of people in closed rooms. This also applied to official vehicles, meaning that only two people (instead of 5) could go on assignments and to PoC. In the case of using a helicopter with a capacity of 20 people, only 8 to 10 could be boarded. The arrangement of accommodation and work schedule resulted in the quarantine of three people in the event that one person had contact with an infected person. This led to a significant lack of personnel and difficulties in organizing the minimum work process. Also, certain jobs and tasks were adapted to be performed by only one UN member, (e.g. only one duty officer in the office, instead of two as it was the case before the measures), then one duty officer at the entrance to the camp (previously there were 2 or 3 members), which represented an increased security risk.

The described situation lasted until the beginning of 2021, when the measures were relatively relaxed.

Medical services

In the UN camp in South Sudan, there were two clinics, Level 1 and Level 2. Level 1 is a regular clinic with working hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., while Level 2 served as a COVID ward.

The mission staff, in case of need, contacted medics by telephone, who often prescribed quarantine and available therapy (limited number and type of drugs were available) without a direct personal examination or a detailed description of the indications.

Interviewee 4: *A colleague was diagnosed with COVID 19 for a painful hip and together with his contacts was ordered to self-isolate.*

To make matters worse, malaria did not let up, and in combination with COVID, death was the most certain outcome. The decision of the authorities was that there would be no burial for those who died of COVID-19, nor transport to the country of origin, and that they would be “buried” on the territory of South Sudan. Members of FO Bentiu received news that in case of death caused by COVID, the body will be “buried” in one of the largest swamps in the world, which is located near the camp. For other FOs, the practice was to isolate or bury the body somewhere outside the camp and village, but it was definitely not possible to send the body home, nor to keep it in the morgue in any hospital. The BiH contingent experienced the real drama which they do not like to recall, when a colleague suffered a stroke and was in a coma without adequate medical help and care. After extensive diplomatic interventions at the UN headquarters in New York and in the mission, the colleague was operated on in Uganda ten days after the stroke, survived and returned to BiH, but permanent consequences for his health were not avoided. The reason for the refusal to operate in the state hospital in Juba or to allow him to be medically evacuated to Uganda (MEDEVAC) was that the state institutions, as well as the surrounding African countries, completely locked down, without exception.

In May 2021, members of the mission were vaccinated against COVID-19 with the Astra Zenneca vaccine, and revaccinated two months later. Vaccination was recommended, but only voluntary.

Travel restrictions and welfare

The travel restriction hit the mission in two ways. The first was that at the time of the introduction of measures to combat the corona virus, part of the UN staff was on regular annual leave in their countries. Due to the ban on crossing national borders introduced by countries around the world, the peacekeepers could not return to South Sudan from their annual vacation and the UN terminated their contracts with them.

Another way the travel ban affected the mission was that none of the staff could leave the UN camp for a longer period of time. The peacekeepers could not visit their families for a whole year and this caused a feeling of powerlessness towards the family, anxiety, etc.

In addition to all the above, the ban on socializing between members of the mission had a special weight. It was strictly forbidden for them to socialize and stay in the same room or in the same area. In this way, it was impossible to celebrate birthdays, New Year, religious holidays, etc. People became alienated from each other and many members felt serious signs of depression and anxiety. In many field offices, gyms were closed entirely, or had limited opening hours with a limited number of members allowed to stay in the gym, up to a maximum of 60 minutes. The only thing that was allowed and encouraged by the mission, was running or walking within the camp, of course, not in groups but individually or with a



roommate from a room/container/accommodation. So those walks were the only *welfare* for a certain part of the time, that is several months.

Final remarks

During COVID-19, the entire world population was exposed to new living and working conditions. Numerous papers have been published on this topic, and with this work we intended to draw attention to additional aggravating circumstances in which members of the UN peacekeeping missions lived and worked. According to the testimonies of the BiH contingent in South Sudan, during their stay in the mission there was a lack of institutional support, both from the permanent mission of BiH to the UN in New York, and from the police agencies where they are permanently employed. The common conclusion of all respondents is that the most difficult thing for them was being separated from their family and not being able to help families who also faced COVID-19.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

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