Despite their burgeoning reputation in peacekeeping, the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) are apparently finding the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) difficult to resolve. The explanation involves, in part, the complex situation within the country, apathy on the part of national political elites, and a lack of local participation in peacemaking. Other factors are linked to poor field leadership, the composition of the peacekeeping contingent, and the nature of the mandate. The situation demands more analysis of peace operations and the political conditions under which such operations occur, with a view toward lessening human suffering, making peacekeepers accountable, and brightening the prospects for peace.

THE PROBLEMS OF AU PEACE SUPPORT IN CAR

The escalation of violence between two opposed factions—the Séléka and the anti-Balaka—by the second half of 2013 signalled the virtual collapse of the government of CAR and the onset of a refugee problem in neighboring countries. On December 5, 2013, the United Nations Security Council, through its Resolution 2127, authorized the AU-led International Support Mission (Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique sous conduite africaine, or MISCA) to deploy to CAR. The Support Mission was supported by a French Force of 2,000 troops, code-named Operation Sangaris.

MANDATE

Although the five-point mandate of MISCA was precise regarding its protection of civilians, the mission did not fully achieve this goal. Part of the challenge was that the civilians the mission was meant to protect were the very ones committing the atrocities, as the militias who attack each other were civilians themselves.

This gap between the mandate and the reality was exploited by the warring factions who melted into the population making it almost impossible for peacekeepers to take action. Saddled with a mandate too inflexible to respond to changing conditions, peacekeeping contingents often resort to their home countries’ rules of engagement, leading to incoherence in peace support operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- AU and UN-led peace support operation mandates should be flexible enough to respond adequately to the actual conditions as well as the local dynamics of a conflict.

- The AU should consider the local histories of mission areas and the sociocultural affiliations of peacekeeping contingents before, during, and after deployment.

- The AU and UN should improve peace support training and raise the awareness of peacekeepers with respect to the significance of local support for success.

- CAR’s political elite should demonstrate greater commitment to inclusive forms of democratic governance and genuine reconciliation and peace.
SIZE AND CHARACTER OF THE CONTINGENT

Experts recommend one peacekeeper to two hundred civilians as ideal for effective peacekeeping. The notion of keeping the peace with 6,000 peacekeepers in a country with an estimated population of 4.6 million (including approximately 600,000 internally displaced persons)—a ratio of 767 civilians per peacekeeper—was rather ambitious.

Another challenge facing MISCA was the cultural blend of its forces. A mission’s composition in terms of cultural beliefs and ethnic affiliations matter, especially in religiously or ethnically charged mission areas. Sometimes intervening troops share in the constructed identities of the mission areas, and this can seriously hinder effectiveness. In CAR, French forces were accused of siding with the Christian anti-Balaka, while Chadian soldiers were accused of showing solidarity with the Muslim Séléka.

Finally, while MISCA has been described as high-handed in its actions, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in CAR (MINUSCA), which succeeded it, has been no different. Relationships between peacekeepers and civilians have remained strained by reports of rape and reprisal attacks by MINUSCA members.

All these factors have undermined the credibility of the mission in CAR, leading to a loss of faith in the peacekeepers and cases of outright hostility.

LOCAL PARTICIPATION

Peace authors have acknowledged the difficulty of promoting reconciliation in conflicts based on ethnic or religious schisms—a position that certainly explains MISCA’s inability to put a lid on the crisis in CAR. The deepening animosity among the local population and the unwillingness of these groups to come to terms posed serious challenges to MISCA.

Long periods of poor governance, lack of cohesion within the political elite, and regional instability have continued to worsen the intractability of the crisis. Even the new interim president, while enthusiastically endorsing national reconciliation, has been unable to shake off perceptions of bias amid accusations of nepotism in state appointments. With the lack of demonstrable will by political elites to embrace reconciliation and resolve differences through nonviolent means, the situation remains, at best, a no-war, no-peace stalemate. This situation undermined the efforts of MISCA, and it still frustrates MINUSCA.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CAR is a stark reminder that no matter how robust and determined a peacekeeping force is, it cannot coerce a country into peace. People, particularly leaders, have to be convinced peace is in everybody's interest and be committed to seeing it through. Consequently, the following recommendations are made to avert a repeat of the peacekeeping failure in CAR:

- AU and UN-led peace support operation mandates should be flexible enough to respond adequately to the actual conditions as well as the local dynamics of a conflict.
- The AU should consider the local histories of mission areas and the sociocultural affiliations of peacekeeping contingents before, during, and after deployment.
- The AU and UN should improve peace support training and raise the awareness of peacekeepers with respect to the significance of local support for success.
- CAR’s political elite should demonstrate greater commitment to inclusive forms of democratic governance and genuine reconciliation and peace.

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