

Box 2.3.1 Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations

The operational and political challenges of protecting civilian populations in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere have dramatically underscored the growing divide between ambitious mandates issued by the Security Council and the ability and willingness of UN peacekeepers to implement them in the field. This reality has prompted much debate among member states and the UN Secretariat. Further, the failure to deliver on protection-of-civilians mandates has had negative impacts on the broader image of the UN peacekeeping enterprise. With this in mind, during 2009 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) commissioned a study on protection of civilians in peacekeeping contexts to help enhance the ability of UN peacekeeping missions to effectively achieve this frequently mandated task.

Released in November 2009, as a point of departure, the study acknowledges the severe difficulty that UN peacekeeping missions have faced in maintaining

legitimacy among host countries due to constant attacks against civilians and lack of proper protection. Similarly important is the fact that peace agreements often do not stop armed violence or widespread human rights abuses, and thus peacekeeping missions are the most visible components of the UN system for the protection of civilians in these contexts.

In order for UN peacekeeping to better protect civilians, the study identified a series of challenges to be addressed: a capacity gap between mandates and available required resources; a conceptual gap between policy and strategy, given lack of clarity concerning operational concepts and rules of engagement, especially regarding the use of force; an information collection and analysis gap; a leadership gap, given lack of consistent understanding of planning and strategy for civilian protection across missions; and a readiness gap, as peacekeepers are rarely trained to protect civilians.

The study was released with consensus passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1894 on 11 November 2009. The

resolution mandated UN peacekeeping and other relevant missions to assist in creating conditions conducive to safe, timely, and unimpeded humanitarian assistance and in the training of public officials, members of armed forces and armed groups, personnel associated to armed forces, civilian police, and law enforcement on civilian protection.

Protecting civilians in conflict zones is a difficult task, especially with the rise of irregular warfare and insurgencies. Distinguishing between who is a civilian and who is party to a conflict is often difficult. Protection is also hindered by the current problem of perpetrators seeing the UN as a legitimate target for violence. The study and the resolution acknowledge that peacekeeping missions are limited in the extent to which they can protect, but also that improvements can be made in utilizing their capacity to do more.