Box 2.2 Peace Operations and Electoral Violence

Elections play a vital role in postconflict countries and are a critical component of peace agreements, enabling the populations of war-torn societies to build democratic political processes and consolidate peace. In 2011, over eighty countries—thirty in Africa alone—held at least one election.

While the majority of elections are conducted without incidence of violence, countries that have experienced electoral violence in the past have a high risk of recurrence. At particular risk are countries—especially young democracies—with underlying systemic grievances, such as disputes concerning land rights, employment, or ethnic marginalization.

Peace operations play an important role in assisting countries in the various stages of the electoral process, from pre-election planning, to the conduct of the elections themselves, to support during the post-election period. Peace operations, along with their partners on the ground, assist in establishing independent election management bodies and forming electoral laws and guidelines; assist in establishing dispute resolution mechanisms; encourage inclusive and transparent election processes; and support the dissemination of information about the electoral process. Peace operations also assist in delivering electoral material, while military and police personnel provide crucial security functions. Mission leadership meanwhile use their good offices to mediate between the various parties to create an environment conducive to peaceful elections.

Where electoral violence does occur, blue helmets often serve as the first responders to quell such outbreaks. When Haiti experienced violent protests in December 2010, following the announcement of preliminary results of the presidential elections that put popular candidate Michel Martelly in third place, troops from the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) moved to establish public order and security and to guard government buildings. Following the events of the first round of elections, MINUSTAH, along with national and international partners, identified measures to improve security for the second round, which included the replacement of electoral personnel involved in fraudulent or violent behavior. The second round of elections, in March 2011, led to the first peaceful transfer of power to the opposition in the country's history.

In Côte d'Ivoire, electoral violence broke out in December 2010 after incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo refused to step down from power and recognize president-elect Alassane Ouattara as the winner of the elections. The UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) along with France's Operation Licorne, played a decisive role in protecting civilians in the ensuing violence and in guarding the president-elect and his cabinet. UN and French peacekeepers also provided crucial backing to pro-Ouattara forces in defeating Gbagbo and in installing the president-elect to office. UNOCI also assisted the government in preparing for the December 2011 parliamentary elections by providing security and technical assistance and fostering dialogue and reconciliation.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, pre-electoral violence erupted in September 2011, when supporters of President Joseph Kabila's People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) attacked the headquarters of the opposition Union for Democracy and Social Progress in an apparent retaliation for an arson attack on the PPRD's headquarters. The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) strongly condemned the violent incidents ahead of the November 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections and worked with the various parties to encourage dialogue. In anticipation of the election, MONUSCO also began training more than 700 police officers to provide increased security in the country's South Kivu province.

Peace operations play an important role in assisting countries throughout the electoral cycle, not least because, as first responders, they are critical in mitigating violence, protecting civilians, and reestablishing order. However, resource constraints—such as inadequate troop levels and aerial assets, particularly military helicopters—can hamper the ability of missions to perform this vital role.