Safety and Security in UN Peace Operations

UN personnel in peacekeeping and political missions operate in hazardous environments that are often experiencing or just emerging from violent conflict. In this regard, 2012 was a particularly important year as UN peace operations were deployed in environments with continuing violence, as in Syria, and into newly secured areas, as is the case with the UN's Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS).

As of October, UN peace operations suffered seventy-nine fatalities in 2012, with significant losses in theaters such as Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire. This represents a nearly 20 percent decrease from fatalities that occurred in the same period in 2011, an important signal of progress in the UN's agenda on increasing the safety of the environments in which its personnel operate. However, despite the decrease in overall fatalities in UN peace operations, UN personnel in the field are often subject to harassment, intimidation, and kidnappings. While peacekeepers often suffer disproportionate fatalities in the field, political missions are also subject to hazardous environments. The attack on the convoy of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Libya in April and a repeated attack on a UN convoy there in December 2012, as well as the restricted movement that encumbers staff members of the UN Political Office for Somalia, underscore these challenges. The UN has sought to address these issues by enacting new security policies and programs aimed at managing risk.

The UN's security risk management system has responsibility for over 150,000 personnel in over 170 countries, over 80 percent of whom are active in peace operations.[1] The UN's Department of Safety and Security, the body responsible for the oversight of the security management system, has sought to further strengthen its management capacity by analyzing systemwide best practices and information on the range and scope of safety and security incidents involving its personnel. Concurrently, the UN introduced a security policy manual in 2011 to reflect the changes in its security policy. The manual is available to all UN personnel, including nationally recruited staff.

Despite these measures, the primary responsibility for the safety of UN personnel remains with the member states. However, less than half of the UN's 193 member states are signatories to the 1994 Convention on the Safety and Security of United Nations and Associated Personnel. In August 2010 the convention was extended to include personnel providing political or peacebuilding assistance. While this was an important step in furthering legal protection to staffers, only twenty-eight member states have ratified the optional protocol.

In 2012, peace operations conducted their work in challenging security environments. Security concerns hampered the reporting and monitoring activities of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) and ultimately contributed to the mission's suspension. In light of a deteriorating security environment, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) took measures to increase the protection of its personnel, while the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) deferred the planned drawdown of military personnel. While peace operations will continue to work in precarious security environments, operational challenges, including inadequate coordination between the UN and host governments and lack of adequate resources, hamper the ability of personnel in the field to safely and securely fulfill the Security Council's mandated tasks.

Note: 1. These include uniformed personnel, civilian personnel, and UN volunteers.