

UN peacekeeping on 75th anniversary: successes, failures and challenges ahead in a divided world

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On the 75th anniversary of U.N. peacekeeping, the United Nations chief said Thursday that peacekeepers are increasingly working in places where there is no peace and praised the more than 4,200 who have given their lives to the cause of peace since the U.N. authorized its first military deployment in 1948.

It was a day to look back at the successes of peacekeeping from Liberia to Cambodia and its major failures in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, but also to the challenges ahead, including dealing with more violent environments, fake news campaigns, and a divided world that is preventing peacekeeping's ultimate goal: successfully restoring stable governments.

And it was a day to honor the more than 2 million peacekeepers from 125 countries who have served in 71 operations since the U.N. Security Council sent those first military observers to supervise implementation of Israeli-Arab armistice agreements following their war.

At a ceremony honoring the fallen peacekeepers, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres asked the hundreds of uniformed military officers and diplomats to stand for a moment of silence in their memory and then presented medals for the 103 peacekeepers killed in 2022 to ambassadors from their 39 home countries. And at the start of a U.N. Security Council meeting on peace in Africa shortly after, all those in the chamber stood in tribute to peacekeepers who paid the ultimate price.

The secretary-general told the ceremony, after laying a wreath at the Peacekeepers Memorial on the lawn at U.N. headquarters, that what began 75 years ago "as a bold experiment" in the Mideast "is now a flagship enterprise of our organization." For civilians caught in conflict, he said, peacekeepers are "a beacon of hope and protection."

But peacekeepers trying to help countries move away from conflict are now "on the front lines in some of the world's most dangerous places," he said.

Guterres stressed the need for "a new generation" of regional operations to end conflicts and combat terrorism that are mandated and financed by the U.N.'s 193 member nations.

That has been a major goal of the African Union for years, and the continent's nations are urging quick action to make this happen.

At the Security Council meeting, there was widespread support for Guterres' view but differences on how the U.N. should do this.

U.N. political chief Rosemary DiCarlo told the council that putting AU peace operations “on solid footing is increasingly pressing” and the case for adequate financing is “beyond solid.” The U.N. therefore hopes the council will provide financing from U.N. member states for AU-led peace operations, she said.

Adeoye Bankole, the African Union commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, welcomed “the very constructive and positive thrust” of the secretary-general’s comments.

“We cannot continue to use traditional peacekeeping methods in the face of the complex nature and scope of conflicts that traverse our beloved continent, particularly violent extremism, ideology of hate, terrorism, rebellion and insurgency,” he said.

U.N. peacekeeping operations have grown dramatically. At the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, there were 11,000 U.N. peacekeepers. By 2014, there were 130,000 in 16 far-flung peacekeeping operations. Today, 87,000 men and women serve in 12 conflict areas in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

There have been two kinds of successes, U.N. peacekeeping chief Jean-Pierre Lacroix said in an interview Wednesday with The Associated Press. Those are the long list of countries that have returned to a reasonable degree of stability with the support of U.N. peacekeeping, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Angola and Cambodia, and the countries where peacekeepers are not only monitoring but preserving cease-fires like in southern Lebanon and Cyprus.

As for failures, he pointed to the failure of U.N. peacekeepers to prevent the 1994 Rwanda genocide, which killed at least 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and Hutus, and the 1995 massacre of at least 8,000 mostly Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica during the war in Bosnia, Europe’s only acknowledged genocide since the Holocaust during World War II.

The U.N.’s reputation has also been tarnished by numerous allegations that peacekeepers charged with protecting civilians sexually abused women and children, including in Central African Republic and Congo. Another high-profile blunder was the cholera epidemic in Haiti that began in 2010 after U.N. peacekeepers introduced the bacteria into the country’s largest river by sewage runoff from their base.

Despite that, Richard Gowan, the International Crisis Group’s U.N. director, said “U.N. peacekeeping has a surprisingly decent track record” and “has done a good job of tamping down crises, protecting civilians and rebuilding broken states in cases from the Suez crisis in the 1950s to Liberia in the 2000s.”

Looking ahead, the U.N.’s Lacroix said the major challenge peacekeeping is facing is the divided international community and especially divisions in the U.N. Security Council, which must approve its missions.

“The result of that is that we’re not able to achieve what I call the ultimate goal of peacekeeping — to be deployed, support a political process that moves forward, and then gradually roll down when that political process is completed,” he said.

Lacroix said peace processes aren't moving or aren't going fast enough so the U.N. has to be content with "what I call the intermediate goal of peacekeeping — preserving cease-fires, protecting civilians, we protect hundreds of thousands of them ... and doing our best, of course, to support political efforts wherever we can."

Lacroix pointed to other challenges peacekeepers are facing: more violent and dangerous operating environments and more sophisticated attacks and fake news and disinformation which are "a massive threat to the population and the peacekeepers." And old and new drivers of conflict — including transnational criminal activities, trafficking, drugs, weapons, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, and the impact of climate change exacerbating competition between herders and farmers — are also having an "absolutely massive influence."

The Crisis Group's Gowan told AP it's pretty clear that the U.N. is "trapped" in some countries like Mali and Congo where there aren't enough peacekeepers to halt recurring cycles of violence. Some African governments, including Mali's, are turning to private security providers like Russia's Wagner Group to fight insurgents, he said.

"I think we should be wary of dumping U.N. operations outright," Gowan said. "We have learned the hard way in cases like Afghanistan that even heavily armed Western forces cannot impose peace. The U.N.'s track record may not be perfect, but nobody else is much better at building stability in turbulent states."