

Protection of Civilians In South Sudan: the Contribution of Special Operations

Proteção de civis no Sudão do Sul: a contribuição das operações especiais

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INTRODUCTION

The 2016 Juba crisis can be considered a continuation of the South Sudanese conflict that broke out in 2013 between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), headed by the President and Dinka ethnic Salva Kiir, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), led by an ethnic Nuer and First Vice President Riek Machar (CIVIC 2016, 4; Radon and Logan 2014).

Among the main causes that triggered the 2013 conflict in South Sudan are the deterioration of relations between Juba and Khartoum following South Sudan's independence in 2011. After a period of relative calm between 2005 and 2011, under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) sponsored by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway, long-standing disputes resurfaced. Those included the sharing of oil revenues, border demarcation, and mutual support for armed opposition groups (Day et al. 2019, 42).

Internally, tensions intensified when President Salva Kiir was no longer able to maintain the informal patronage system used to secure tribal loyalty, largely due to the decline in oil revenues after the closure of oil fields in 2012 (Day et al. 2019, 36). As funds dried up, Kiir began to marginalize important political figures, including Vice President Riek Machar, whom he considered a threat. In retaliation, Machar founded the SPLM/

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SPLA-IO, launching a military rebellion. Although Kiir's forces gained some advantage on the battlefield and forced Machar into exile, the SPLA failed to achieve a definitive victory (Williams 2020, 85).

In 2015, almost two years after the beginning of hostilities between both movements/armies, the international community pressured Salva Kiir and Riek Machar into signing the Peace Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) (Day, Tchie, and Kumalo 2022, 13). In April 2016, in compliance with the ARCSS, the First Vice President returned to Juba from exile with more than 1,200 armed SPLA-IO fighters, launching the official formation of the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) (IOM 2019, 7). Despite the security risks and strong objections of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and international security advisors, the SPLA-IO soldiers were placed in cantonments less than a kilometer from the UN House¹ and the protection of civilian (POC) sites, which housed more than 30,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (United Nations 2016a, 2).

On July 8th, 2016, the collapse of the fragile peace agreement between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar led to a battle for the control of the country's capital city. During the next three days, heavy gunfire and artillery spread throughout Juba, leaving a trail of suffering and destruction. The warring parties' use of heavy weapons was frightful, including tanks, helicopter gunships, and rockets (IPG 2016, 6). In the middle of the crossfire, 182 UN House buildings were hit by bullets, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades. The four days of intense fighting took the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians and two peacekeepers (United Nations 2016a, 3).

On July 11th, a shocking event took place only about 1.2 kilometers from the UN House. On this occasion, an estimated 80 to 100 government soldiers attacked the Terrain compound, where they raped at least five international aid workers, sexually or physically assaulted at least a dozen others, and killed a local journalist, apparently because of his Nuer ethnicity (CIVIC 2016, 6).

The Juba crisis shocked the international community and led to the issuing of the Security Council Resolution 2304 (United Nations 2016), which raised the troops' ceiling to 4,000 additional blue helmets by creating the Regional Protection Force (RPF) to provide a secure environment in and around Juba (Williams 2020, 85). The RPF was initially designed with three infantry battalions and other enabler units, including reconnaissance, combat engineers, attack helicopters, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Most notably, the RPF also received a Special Operations unit known as the High Readiness Company (HRC), a relatively new concept in UN peacekeeping operations (Silva 2022, 49).

In fact, Special Operations units have been implemented in the past two decades as a new strategy to enhance the UN robust peacekeeping operations' capability to use force to protect civilians and achieve their mandate. Currently, in addition to the UNMISS, Special Operations units have been deployed in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) since 2005 and in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) since 2017 (Dacin 2021, 243).

Despite the recent adoption of Special Operations units to reinforce peacekeeping operations, it remains a challenge to measure the impact of this new UN Security Council strategy on the POC. Concerning the UNMISS, Day et al. (2019, 97) have been able to superficially assess the performance of the RPF as a whole, stating that this intervention force appears to perform below expectations. However, there are no studies in the literature that assess the specific performance of the HRC during its deployment in South Sudan. In this regard, how has the HRC contributed to the protection of civilians in South Sudan?

Thus, this study aimed to analyze the role played by the HRC as a Special Operations unit and its contribution to the POC in South Sudan. To achieve this objective, this paper initially examined the employment of the HRC over a 5-year period, from its implementation in 2017 until the year 2022. After that, this research analyzed the HRC's impact on the protection of civilians by considering different POC indicators. Finally, this study concluded on the effectiveness of the HRC in protecting civilians and fulfilling its mission in South Sudan.

Therefore, this paper is relevant because it analyzes the actual impact of a Special Operations unit within the UNMISS, offering insight into the effectiveness of this innovative Security Council strategy. More broadly, the research contributes to the ongoing debate on the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping operations, particularly regarding the role of the military component in fulfilling a POC mandate.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

Historically, the idea of POC emerged in response to the atrocities committed during the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, based on the belief that those not involved in combat should be protected from the violence of warfare. This perspective is reflected in International Humanitarian Law, specifically in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 and its additional protocols from 1977 (Breakey et al. 2012).

From the 1990s onwards, with the end of the Cold War, the concept of POC took on greater relevance. In a new environment marked by the growing number of civil wars, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian actors, Bachmann and Gelot (2012, 133) point out that POC was brought to the center of the international community's debates. Furthermore, the major failures of UN peacekeeping operations to protect civilians from genocide in Rwanda (1994) and Bosnia (1995), as well as the near collapse of the UN peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone (1999), reinforced the need to prioritize the POC (Ucko and Berdal 2015, 7; Lyons 2018, 110; Visacro 2018, 60). As a consequence, the POC was formally accepted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) through Resolution 1265 (1999) (United Nations 1999).

In addition to the formal acceptance of the POC, the post-Cold War conflict environment required a more complex approach to guaranteeing the protection of the civilian population. This is because, in the current type of conflict, the battlefield is undefined and can include not only the military apparatus, but the entire enemy society. Therefore, the separation between combatants and non-combatants has become very subtle (Simons 2010, 398; Phelan 2011, 97).

As a result, civilians have been more exposed to a wide variety of dangers and risks such as murder, kidnapping, hunger, and disease. For this reason, Kaldor (2012a, 3) states that previous conflict resolution strategies, based on the use of military forces trained to deal with conventional attacks by foreign armies, have proved inefficient in the face of these new security demands.

Realizing that the armed forces alone were no longer capable of resolving contemporary post-Cold War conflicts, the international community decided to implement the comprehensive approach, based on a civil-military cooperation perspective. De Coning (2008, 8) argues that this new approach is based on the assumption that all the stakeholders involved, such as agencies, governments, and organizations, must join forces to develop models and mechanisms that provide coherent, cooperative, and coordinated responses to the protection of civilians and conflict resolution.

The comprehensive approach strategy has had a significant impact on UN peacekeeping operations, making them more complex and multidimensional. In this aspect, in addition to military forces, current peacekeeping operations carried out in hostile and unstable environments also include police and civilian components. Unlike traditional peacekeeping operations, which focused on monitoring borders, establishing buffer zones to separate opposing forces, and verifying aspects related to demilitarization, multidimensional peacekeeping operations encompass disarming

combatants, organizing and supervising elections, delivering humanitarian assistance, protecting civilians and UN personnel, guaranteeing freedom of movement, and strengthening the host state (Bellamy, Williams, and Griffin 2010, 194; Kaldor 2012b, 119). Therefore, the main objective of multidimensional peacekeeping operations is to address the structural or root causes of contemporary armed conflicts, creating the foundations for lasting peace.

Within the framework of multidimensional peacekeeping missions, the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) has developed its own doctrine, embodied in documents such as the Protection of Civilians Manual (Manton 2012) and the Handbook on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peace Operations (United Nations 2020). According to these DPO documents, the protection of civilians must be implemented through three tiers under the POC Operational Concept: protection through (political) dialogue and engagement; provision of physical protection; and establishment of a protective (or safe) environment. The three tiers are equally important and must be implemented simultaneously (United Nations 2020, 12).

Tier 1 (protection through dialogue and engagement) includes a series of activities that seek to protect civilians through political and strategic engagement such as structured and regular dialogue with perpetrators of violence against civilians, strategic communications, reporting on human rights and protection concerns, conflict resolution and mediation between parties to the conflict, local conflict resolution and cohesion activities, advocacy, investigation, and reconciliation initiatives. Tier 2 (provision of physical protection) includes activities involving the use of force performed by uniformed components (Force and Police) to prevent, deter, pre-empt, and respond to threats to civilians. Finally, Tier 3 (establishment of a protective environment) focuses on peacebuilding and conflict prevention/resolution objectives. Thus, Tier 3 activities help prevent the re-emergence of threats of physical violence, support the legitimacy of the host state and its capacity to protect civilians, and support the re-establishment of the rule of law and criminal justice (United Nations 2020, 12; Manton 2012, 70–2).

Moreover, the POC mandate is conducted in four phases: prevention, pre-emption, response, and consolidation. As well as the three tiers of the POC Operational Concept, these four phases are not mutually exclusive and can overlap. The prevention and consolidation phases occur when the security environment is stable and the threats to civilians are distant, unlikely, or subsiding. In this context, the actions should focus on the long term and the mission must address the root causes of the conflict. Thus, the prevention and consolidation phases are more associated with Tier 1

and Tier 3 activities. On the other side, pre-emption and response phases take place when there is no peace to keep and violence against civilians is frequent or highly likely. In this sense, the mission must focus on short-term actions to address the immediate causes of the conflict and protect the civilian population. Hence, pre-emption and response phases are more related to Tier 2 activities (United Nations 2020, 138; Manton 2012, 71).

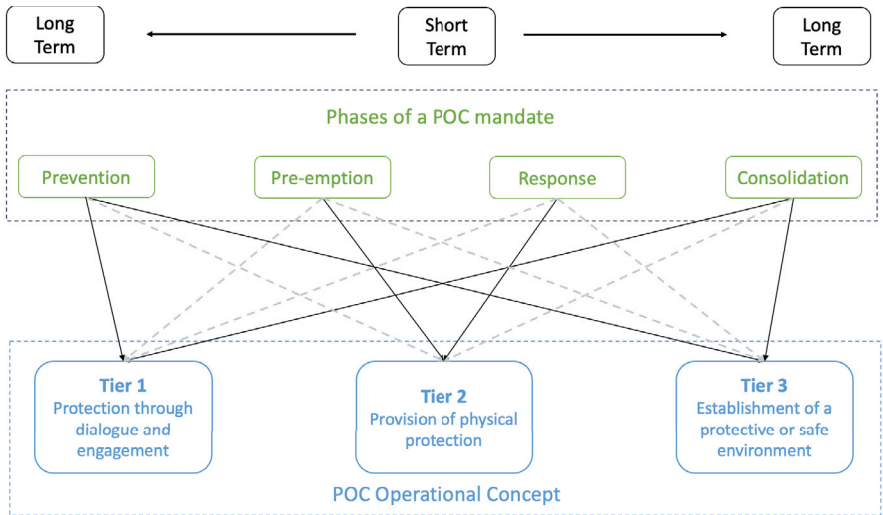


Figure 1 — Correspondence between the phases of a POC mandate and the POC Operational Concept.
Source: The author.

SPECIAL OPERATIONS PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS TASKS

Special Operations units have recently been used in the structure of some multidimensional peacekeeping operations, particularly those under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Also called robust peacekeeping operations, these UN missions allow the use of force at the tactical level with the consent of the host authority and/or the main parties to the conflict (United Nations 2008, 19).

In defense of this type of peacekeeping operation, Hegre, Hultman, and Nygard (2018, 216) argue that the more robust the mandates, the greater the chances of reducing conflict. On the other hand, lightly armed peacekeeping operations with limited mandates are likely to have no effect on achieving peace. Furthermore, Berdal (2019, 125) points out that, in the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in the use of force

in peacekeeping operations, resulting in some major achievements at the tactical level.

Indeed, several initiatives have sought to strengthen and consolidate the use of force in peacekeeping operations in recent years. Among these, the 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), the 2015 Kigali Principles, and the 2017 Cruz Report stand out. According to Howard (2019), although the HIPPO report recognizes the need for greater clarity regarding the use of force, both the Kigali Principles and the Cruz Report explicitly advocate for a more proactive and robust use of force by peacekeepers. Howard (2019, 197) summarizes the Kigali Principles with the stark conclusion: “if peacekeepers do not use force proactively to protect civilians, they may be relieved of their mission.”

Regarding the Cruz Report, Howard (2019, 198) notes that General Santos Cruz, former Force Commander of the MONUSCO, calls for a fundamental change in the mindset of peacekeeping forces. According to the Brazilian general, peacekeeping forces must move beyond the so-called “Chapter VI syndrome”, a reference to the traditionally passive stance associated with Chapter VI of the UN Charter. Instead, they should adopt a more assertive posture, taking the initiative and employing overwhelming force to neutralize threats (Santos Cruz, Phillips, and Cusimano 2017, 10–2).

Therefore, robust peacekeeping operations depend on the effectiveness of their military component in making use of all necessary force to fulfil the mission’s mandate. Within this context, the UN Special Operations doctrine assigns Special Operations units three principal missions: Special Tasks, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance (United Nations 2015, 17).

Special Tasks are precise operations conducted with minimum collateral damage, limited in scope and duration, to acquire, disrupt, recover, neutralize, or disable designated high-value and high-payoff objectives. When conducting Special Tasks, Special Operations units focus on well-defined objectives of strategic and operational significance, as well as decisive tactical objectives (United Nations 2015, 18).

Furthermore, Special Reconnaissance corresponds to operations carried out to collect or verify information of operational or strategic significance. Usually, Special Reconnaissance occurs where terrain masking, weather, hostile countermeasures, or unavailability of other systems impose constraints. As a result, these specialized troops can provide well-defined, specific, and time-sensitive information to support the decision-making process at the highest level within a UN mission (United Nations 2015, 17).

Finally, Military Assistance involves activities that support and influence friendly assets through organized training, advising, and mentoring.

In this regard, Military Assistance activities include engagement and capability building of UN troops and host defense/security forces (United Nations 2015, 19).

After analyzing all current UN robust peacekeeping operations, Silva (2022, 53) explains that, in UN peacekeeping mandates, Special Tasks often correspond to the following POC tasks: neutralize actors who pose an imminent threat to civilians; capture weapons or members of armed groups who pose an imminent threat to civilians; and respond to threats or attacks on civilians, including UN personnel, UN associates, and humanitarian actors. In turn, Special Reconnaissance can be associated with the following POC task: establish surveillance and monitoring of possible threats to civilians (Silva 2022, 54). Finally, Military Assistance can be translated into the following POC tasks: provide expertise, advice, and training to local defense/security forces; and provide expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops (Silva 2022, 55).



Figure 2 — Correspondence between UN Special Operations missions and military POC tasks.

Source: adapted from Silva (2022).

RESEARCH METHODS

Methodologically, this paper consists of a mixed-methods case study, combining both qualitative and quantitative data. In this regard, this research was structured on an embedded design prioritizing qualitative data collection and analysis, and using quantitative data collection and analysis

in a secondary role (Creswell and Plano Clarke 2007, 91). Thus, the quantitative results seek to enhance, illustrate, and clarify the results obtained by the qualitative research.

The hypothesis that guided this study is that: the employment of the HRC significantly increases UNMISS's capability of protecting civilians in and around Juba. In this context, the employment of the HRC emerges as the independent variable, once it directly affects the dependent variable: UNMISS's capability of protecting civilians in and around Juba.

In order to analyze the independent variable, *the employment of the HRC*, this study used as a reference the six POC tasks normally carried out by Special Operations units in robust peacekeeping operations, as described in the previous section of this paper. The main objective of this analysis was to verify whether the HRC has been used in accordance with the UN Special Operations doctrine in South Sudan.

On the other hand, this research used POC indicators based on the UN Handbook on Protection of Civilians (United Nations 2020) to examine the dependent variable: UNMISS's capability of protecting civilians in and around Juba. Hence, the parameters selected to analyze this variable were violent deaths; sexual violence by armed groups; deaths by state forces; clashes between armed groups; IDP population; and POC sites population.

Concerning the data collection techniques, bibliographic research, documentary research, and interviews provided the qualitative data for this case study. The bibliographic research helped to understand the South Sudanese conflict, the circumstances that triggered the 2016 Juba crisis, and the brief discussion on the need for the use of force in robust UN peacekeeping operations. The documentary research contributed to the comprehension of the UN Special Operations and POC doctrines, as well as the HRC tasks, organization, and employment in South Sudan.

Moreover, five semi-structured interviews were conducted via video-conference with key Unmiss personnel deployed in the mission between 2017 and 2022, including a Force Chief of Staff (FCOS), military staff officers from Force Headquarters (FHQ) and Sector Juba Headquarters, and civilian staff from the Joint Operations Center (JOC). These experts were selected because they have basic knowledge of UN Special Operations doctrine and have had direct contact with the HRC. In this regard, the impressions provided by the interviewees were fundamental for understanding with accuracy the role played by the HRC in South Sudan and the impact of this Special Operations unit on the protection of civilians.

Furthermore, documentary and database research provided the quantitative data for this study. Aiming at complementing the qualitative research, the quantitative data focused on the POC indicators selected for

the analysis of the dependent variable. In this context, descriptive statistics were used to examine the numbers associated with each POC indicator. While data on violent deaths and deaths by state forces were obtained from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), data on sexual violence by armed groups and clashes between armed groups were obtained from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). In addition, data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) was collected from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), while figures on the POC sites population were taken from the official UNMISS website.

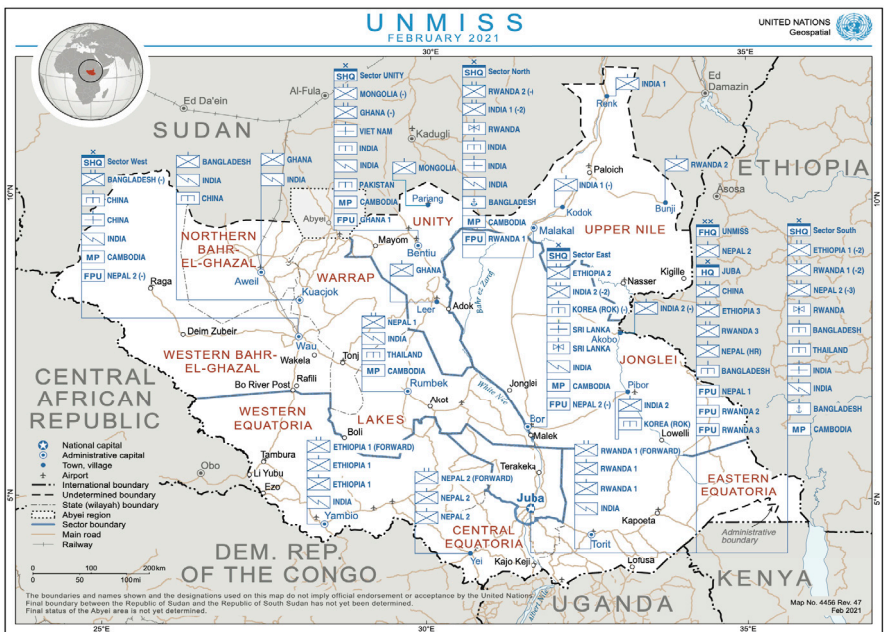


Figure 3 — Unmiss deployment map. Source: United Nations (2021b).

Some important limitations affected this study. Firstly, the secrecy and the low profile of Special Operations made access to documents and mission reports difficult. Also, the research was conducted from a distance due to limited financial resources and also because UNMISS is deployed in a conflict zone, where national authorities limit access. Hence, online interviews with UNMISS personnel and documentary research on available

mission orders and reports helped mitigate these limitations. Finally, as the HRC was created as part of the RPF and currently belongs to Sector Juba, this research was geographically limited to the Central Equatoria state, which includes the South Sudanese capital and its vicinities.

THE EMPLOYMENT OF THE HIGH READINESS COMPANY

Before analyzing the impact of the HRC on the protection of civilians, it is essential to understand whether this Special Operations unit has been employed as expected by the UN Special Operations doctrine. This is important because the misuse of this unit or its use as an infantry troop throughout the entire research period would invalidate the continuation of this study. Thus, relying mainly on interviews with experts who have had direct contact with the HRC, this section of the article assesses whether the HRC has carried out the POC Tasks associated with Special Operations missions.

The HRC was created by the Security Council Resolution 2304 (United Nations 2016) as part of the RPF, following the 2016 Juba crisis (United Nations 2016b). In December of the same year, Security Council Resolution 2327 (United Nations 2016) unified the UNMISS and RPF mandates (United Nations 2016c). However, RPF troops did not commence deploying until August 2017 (Williams 2020, 85). By 2020, four years after Resolution 2304 (2016) issuance, only about half of the authorized RPF troops had arrived in South Sudan (Silva et al. 2024, 7).

One year later, RPF battalions and enablers, including the HRC, were officially reassigned as Unmiss' Sector Juba (United Nations 2021a). This decision was mainly motivated by the objections and obstructions of the South Sudanese government to the full deployment of the RPF, which they considered an attack on South Sudan's sovereignty. Thus, the HRC became part of the newly created Sector Juba (De Coning 2021).

As a positive aspect and despite all the difficulties imposed by the South Sudanese government, the HRC has been deployed in Juba since 2017, contributing to enhancing UNMISS capabilities in South Sudan. As a Special Operations unit, the HRC is required to be able to conduct the three principal UN Special Operations missions: Special Tasks, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance (United Nations 2017).

Special Tasks

In South Sudan, the HRC has performed Special Tasks very occasionally and mostly in a reactive way. According to all interviewees, the Nepalese

Special Forces Company has never been used to neutralize actors who pose an imminent threat to civilians or to capture weapons or members of armed groups who pose an imminent threat to civilians, even though there were solid opportunities to use the HRC to strike or capture armed militias which threatened the POC sites in Juba (Interview with Hughes 2021).

On the other hand, the HRC has been sporadically used to respond to threats or attacks on civilians. In this regard, it is essential to keep in mind that the Terrain incident is the main reason why Special Forces have been deployed within UNMISS. After that incident, it became clear that Unmiss needed troops to quickly and effectively respond to threats against civilians (Interview with Hughes 2021). Hence, especially around Juba and limited to Central Equatoria state, the HRC has been deployed to prevent imminent attacks or to respond to violence against civilians. For example, after being confirmed by the mission's intelligence in late 2021, the Nepalese Special Forces were preventively deployed on the axes Nimule-Juba and Yei-Juba to deter armed groups' ambushes against civilians and humanitarian actors (Interview with Kilian 2021).

Special Reconnaissance

In South Sudan, the HRC has conducted Special Reconnaissance on several occasions. Usually, when there is a clash between armed groups, including government forces, the HRC is deployed in sensitive/hostile areas to provide reliable intelligence for decision-making at the Force Headquarters level (Interview with Kilian 2021). It is vital to consider that, in the context of the South Sudanese environment, access to conflict zones for producing detailed reports with photography, georeferencing, and accurate information takes great risk. Even the capital Juba can be considered a sensitive area. However, despite the adversities, the HRC produces high quality reports that support planning at the FHQ (Interview with Da Silva 2021).

Moreover, the conduct of Special Reconnaissance by the HRC is not restricted to Juba and its vicinities. In this sense, the Nepalese Special Forces are deployed in other areas of the country when the situation is too dangerous for conventional troops and/or military liaison officers to access the conflict zone and collect time-sensitive information (Interview with Néto Júnior 2021).

Military Assistance

In South Sudan, the HRC has only partially performed Military Assistance. This is because the Special Operations unit has not been able to engage with local defense/security forces to provide expertise, advice, and training. More broadly, the absence of security sector reform (SSR) and the lack of effective demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) processes have made the professionalization of the South Sudanese military notoriously unsuccessful. As a result, many communities face the severe risk of dealing with predatory and dangerous behavior from the state forces (Day, Tchier, and Kumalo 2022, 20).

Moreover, as the South Sudanese government remains incapable of protecting its people from violence, protection responsibilities fall disproportionately on UNMISS (IPI 2019, 3). Thus, the provision of expertise, advice, and training to the South Sudan's People Defense Forces (SSPDF), which replaced the SPLA, as well as to the SPLA-IO troops, emerges as an essential condition for the success of the peace process.

Conversely, the HRC has increased its engagement with Unmiss troops. In the beginning, this Military Assistance activity occurred informally through sporadic training on specific subjects such as rules of engagement (ROE) (Interview with Da Silva 2021). Lately, the Nepalese Special Forces have participated in the Force's field training exercises (FTX) as referees, also conducting practical demonstrations of how conventional blue helmets should react to the proposed incidents (Interview with Néto Júnior 2021). Hence, the HRC has been able to work as a force multiplier within UNMISS.

Analysis of the High Readiness Company's employment

The HRC has partially or totally performed the three principal missions established by the UN Special Operations doctrine. Moreover, the Nepalese Special Forces have performed three of six identified POC tasks linked to Special Operations capabilities. Thus, it is possible to affirm that the HRC has been doctrinarily employed as a Special Operations unit, although with limitations. The table below summarizes the Special Operations missions and POC tasks in which the HRC has been employed.

Table 1
HRC employment in South Sudan

Special Operations missions	POC tasks	Yes/No
Special Tasks	Neutralize actors who pose an imminent threat to civilians	No
	Capture weapons or members of armed groups who pose an imminent threat to civilians	No
	Respond to threats or attacks on civilians, including UN personnel, UN associates, and humanitarian actors	Yes
Special Reconnaissance	Establish surveillance and monitoring of possible threats to civilians	Yes
Military Assistance	Provide expertise, advice, and training to local defense/security forces	No
	Provide expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops	Yes

Source: The author.

After analyzing the HRC employment, it becomes evident that the Nepalese Special Forces have worked as a deterrent to violent armed groups by responding to threats or attacks on civilians in and around Juba. Also, by establishing surveillance and monitoring of possible threats to civilians, particularly in hostile areas, the HRC has enhanced UNMISS intelligence capabilities and provided the mission's data for better planning at the Force level. Furthermore, by providing expertise, advice, and training to UNMISS conventional blue helmets, the Special Forces unit has improved the quality of the UN troops in South Sudan. Therefore, there has been a fair use of the HRC as a Special Operations troops.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to conclude that the HRC has not been used to its full potential, which limits the results obtained by this Special Operations unit. Concerning the conduct of Special Tasks, Unmiss has missed some opportunities to use the HRC to engage armed militias that constantly threaten the POC sites/IDP camps in Juba (Interview with Hughes 2021). In this regard, an assertive posture of the Nepalese Special Forces against armed militias can increase the deterrent effect and dissuade them from attacking civilians. Moreover, an HRC engagement with the SSPDF and the SPLA-IO is essential for the peace process in the long term. By providing expertise, advice, and training focused on human rights and the protection of civilians, the Special Operations unit can certainly help change the aggressive behavior of those officially recognized armed groups over time and contribute to decreasing violence against civilians.

However, it is also essential to acknowledge that UNMISS faces political constraints to employ the HRC in South Sudan effectively. This is because the UN operation has agreed to share information about every movement of troops with the government of South Sudan to ensure freedom of movement. In practical terms, the sharing of information has worked as a request for movement from UNMISS to the South Sudanese government, which undermines the HRC actions when the SSPDF or the SPLA-IO are involved in human rights violations (Interview with Machado 2022).

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE HIGH READINESS COMPANY TO THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

In the spectrum of peacekeeping, Special Operations units contribute directly or indirectly to all three tiers of the POC Operational Concept. However, in robust peacekeeping operations, it is noticeable that the three principal missions performed by Special Operations units can be directly associated with Tier 2 and Tier 3 activities. In this context, Special Tasks can be included in Tier 2 activities because they require the use of force to pre-empt or respond to threats or attacks on civilians. On the other hand, Military Assistance activities are related to Tier 3 since they aim at building local capacity or increasing the UN troops' performance to ensure the success of the peace process in the long term. Finally, Special Reconnaissance may produce relevant intelligence that contributes to all three tiers of the POC Operational Concept. Nevertheless, in a robust peacekeeping operation, Special Operations units are required to access hostile and/or sensitive areas to collect accurate and time-sensitive information, mainly to prevent imminent attacks on civilians. For this reason, when conducting a POC mandate, Special Reconnaissance can be largely associated with Tier 2 activities.

Therefore, considering the greater participation of Special Operations units in Tier 2 and Tier 3 activities, the indicators selected for the analysis of the contribution of the HRC to the protection of civilians were gathered in two categories: physical violence against civilians (Tier 2) and establishment of a safe environment (Tier 3).

Physical violence against civilians

Physical violence against civilians encompasses all sorts of direct and indiscriminate attacks targeting civilians (both attacks targeting civilians and attacks which do not distinguish between combatants and civilians). It also includes attempts to kill, torture, rape, forcibly displace,

starve, abduct or arbitrarily detain, maim, kidnap, traffic persons, recruit children, and harm civilians through the existence of mines, explosive remnants of war, and improvised explosive devices. Some main perpetrators of violence against civilians are non-state armed groups, host state defense and security forces, foreign state security forces, inter-communal violence, self-defense groups, and organized criminal groups (United Nations 2020, 83).

According to the DPO, UN missions are not expected to stop or intervene in all instances of violence in a country. Nonetheless, they are required to protect civilians within their capabilities in their area of responsibility (AOR). The HRC AOR in South Sudan comprises Juba and its vicinities (United Nations 2019). Therefore, considering measurable parameters of violence against civilians and the HRC area of responsibility, this research selected violent deaths, sexual violence by armed groups, and deaths by state forces, limited to Central Equatoria state (including Juba and its vicinities), as indicators to analyze the contribution of the HRC to reducing physical violence against civilians. The following graphs help visualize the numbers related to these POC indicators.

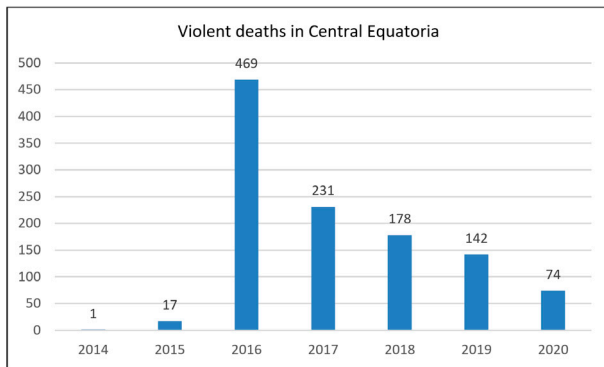


Figure 4 — Violent deaths in Central Equatoria.
Source: Adapted from Uppsala University (2022).

The number of violent deaths in Central Equatoria grew from 17 in 2015 to 469 in 2016 due to the Juba crisis, meaning a massive increase of 2,658.8%. From 2016 to 2017, there was a significant decrease of 50.7%. Since then, the numbers gradually decreased from 2017 to 2020, reaching 74 violent deaths in 2020. Between 2014 and 2020, the average number of violent deaths in Central Equatoria was 158.86.

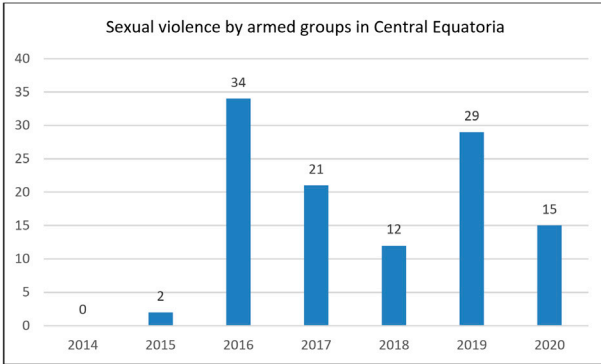


Figure 5 — Sexual violence by armed groups in Central Equatoria.
 Source: Adapted from ACLED (2022).

The number of events associated with sexual violence by armed groups in Central Equatoria also peaked in 2016 due to the Juba crisis. In 2017 and 2018, corresponding to the first two years of the HRC deployment in Juba, there was a decrease in the numbers of 64.7%. However, sexual violence by armed groups increased by about 141% in 2019. In 2020, there was another significant decrease of 51.7%. The average number of events associated with sexual violence by armed groups in Central Equatoria between 2014 and 2020 was 16.14.

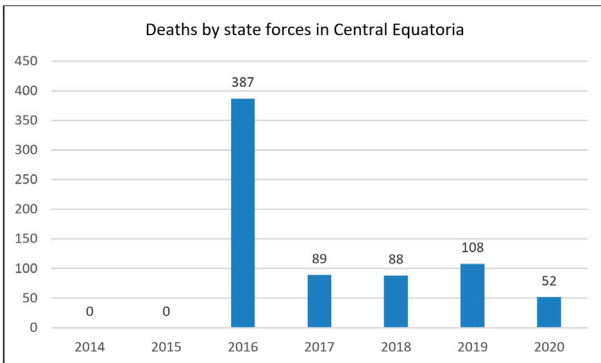


Figure 6 — Deaths by state forces in Central Equatoria.
 Source: Adapted from Uppsala University (2022).

After reaching the amount of 387 due to the Juba crisis, the deaths by state forces dropped considerably from 2016 to 2017, corresponding to a decrease of 77%. As well as the number of sexual violence by armed groups, there was also an increase in the number of deaths by state forces in 2019, followed by a decrease in 2020. In this context, the numbers grew by 22.7% in 2019 and reduced by 51.8% in 2020. Between 2014 and 2020, the average number of deaths by state forces in Central Equatoria was 103.43.

Analysis of physical violence against civilians

To facilitate the analysis of physical violence against civilians, the following graph presents fluctuations in each indicator using a percentage scale. Here, 100% represents the year in which each indicator recorded its highest number of incidents.

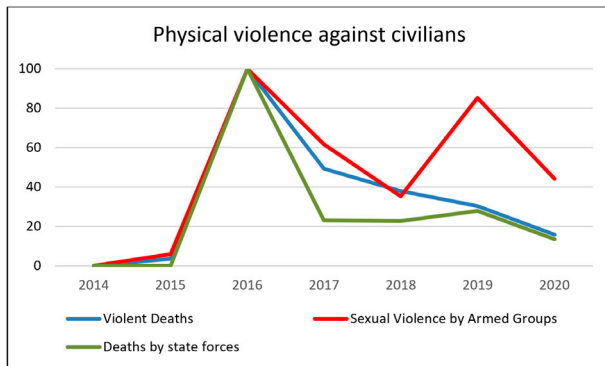


Figure 7 — Physical violence against civilians in Central Equatoria.
Source: The author.

The HRC was created in 2016 in the context of the RPF. However, the HRC took about one year to deploy in Juba. Thus, the first effects of the HRC on the protection of civilians occurred in the second semester of 2017. In 2018, the Nepalese Special Forces unit contributed to the POC for the entire year for the first time, which helps to explain the gradual decrease in physical violence against civilians between 2016 and 2018.

Nevertheless, the HRC was mostly employed as a better-trained infantry company in its first years of deployment (2017-2019) (Interview with Hughes 2021). Hence, during this period, the most significant contribution

of the RPF, including the HRC, was to allow more troops to expand their presence in the Equatoria states (Eastern Equatoria, Central Equatoria, and Western Equatoria) by relocating to other bases beyond Juba. Unlike other UN robust peacekeeping operations, which used the concept of protection through projection to quickly deploy troops to respond to threats or attacks on civilians, the capacity of UNMISS to provide a deterrent presence beyond its regular bases was minimal (Day et al. 2019, 19). As a result, in 2019, two out of three POC indicators associated with physical protection against civilians worsened, showing that the increase in blue helmets was not enough to improve POC in Central Equatoria.

From 2019 onwards, there has been a change in HRC employment. In this regard, the HRC has performed more Special Operations tasks. Instead of infantry tasks such as regular patrols and escort of convoys, the Nepalese Special Forces unit became more focused on tasks such as response to threats or attacks on civilians, establishment of surveillance and monitoring of possible threats to civilians, and provision of expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops. At the same time, UNMISS has gradually transitioned the control of the POC sites to national authorities and shifted to a more mobile posture to deter or stop violence throughout South Sudan (Day et al. 2019, 62), counting on the HRC as an effective tool to create a deterrent effect (IPI 2021, 1). In other words, the HRC has helped UNMISS to develop a robust capacity to deploy quick-reaction forces (Day, Tchie, and Kumalo 2022, 30).

In this new context, all POC indicators related to physical violence against civilians improved in 2020. Thus, in line with the UN POC Handbook (United Nations 2020, 39), the Nepalese Special Forces unit has worked as a strategic asset to gather information and ensure physical protection through projection and deterrence.

However, it is crucial to remember that indicators related to Tier 2 of the POC Operational Concept are the result of actions mostly associated with the pre-emption and the response phases of a POC mandate, aimed at improving POC in the short term (United Nations 2020, 12). For this reason, the effects of these actions are expected to dissipate over time. It is therefore important to take advantage of the temporary decrease in physical violence against civilians to implement actions in Tiers 1 and 3 of the POC Operational Concept, in order to achieve permanent progress in the peace process.

Establishment of a safe environment

Establishing a safe environment is a fundamental goal of a UN peacekeeping operation and involves actions by the host government, the UN system, and humanitarian organizations. The establishment of a safe environment includes three basic elements: promotion of legal protection, facilitation of humanitarian assistance and advocacy, and support to national institutions. It also incorporates activities related to DDR and SSR (Manton 2012, 72).

In order to quantify the safety of the environment in Central Equatoria state, three indicators were selected: clashes between armed groups, IDP population in Central Equatoria, and Juba POC sites population. These indicators were chosen because they help to understand whether the population is at risk of collateral damage and/or overflowing violence (clashes between armed groups) or whether the population feels safe enough to return to their homes (IDP population in Central Equatoria and Juba POC sites population). Taking that into consideration, the following graphs show the numbers related to these POC indicators.

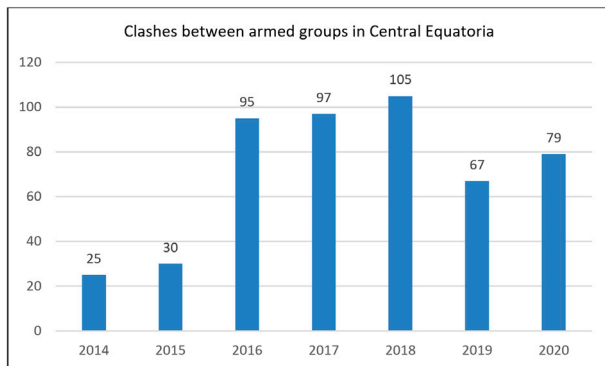


Figure 8 — Clashes between armed groups in Central Equatoria.
Source: Adapted from ACLED (2022).

The clashes between armed groups in Central Equatoria grew 216.7% from 2015 to 2016, as a spillover effect of the Juba crisis. From 2016 to 2018, there was a slight increase of 8.2%. The total amount of clashes between armed groups dropped 36.2% in 2019 and rose 17.9% in 2020. The average number of clashes between armed groups in Central Equatoria between 2014 and 2020 was 71.14.

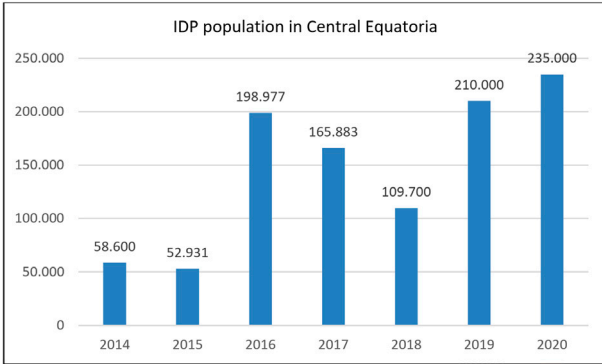


Figure 9 — IDP population in Central Equatoria.
 Source: Adapted from UN OCHA (2022).

After decreasing 9.6% in 2015, the IDP population in Central Equatoria grew 247.8% in 2016, as a result of the Juba crisis. From 2016 to 2018, there was a consistent decrease of 44.9%. However, from 2018 to 2020, there was a significant increase in the IDP population by 114.2%. From 2014 to 2020, the average number of IDPs in Central Equatoria was 147,299.

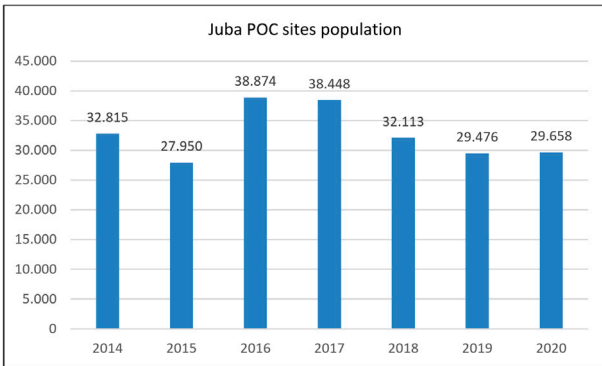


Figure 10 — Juba POC sites population.
 Source: Adapted from United Nations (2022).

Following a decrease of 14.8% between 2014 and 2015, the POC sites population grew 39.08% in 2016, as a consequence of people seeking shelter due to the Juba crisis. There was a slight decrease in numbers from

2016 to 2017, followed by a consistent reduction of 16.48% in 2018. In 2019, there was a new decrease in the POC sites population of 8.21%. From 2019 to 2020, there was no significant change in the number of IDPs sheltering in Juba POC sites. Between 2014 and 2020, the average Juba POC sites population was 32,762.

Analysis of the establishment of a safe environment

Similar to the analysis of physical violence against civilians, this research compares fluctuations in indicators related to the establishment of a safe environment, presented in percentage terms, as illustrated in the graph below.

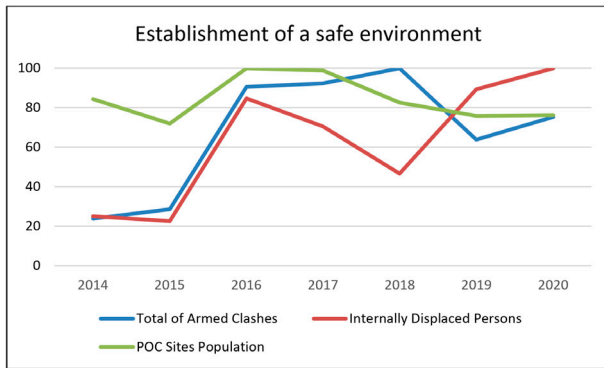


Figure 11 — Establishment of a safe environment in Central Equatoria.
Source: The author.

Unlike activities related to physical violence against civilians, the military component of a UN mission is not the prominent component for creating a safe environment. This is because other factors, such as food, health, poverty, economic opportunities, and crime, also impact the safety of an environment (Buzan and Hansen 2009). For this reason, it is harder to establish a direct connection between the military component of a UN peacekeeping operation and these activities related to Tier 3 of the POC Operational Concept.

As a common fact for all three POC indicators, the numbers worsened significantly in the year 2016, as a consequence of the Juba crisis. During the following years, between 2016 and 2018, clashes between armed groups kept increasing gradually, showing that this POC indicator did

not improve right after the deployment of the RPF, including the HRC. On the other hand, in this same period, the IDP population in Central Equatoria dropped by almost 50%. This decrease in the number of IDPs coincides with the arrival of the RPF in Juba, which allowed UNMISS troops to increase their presence outside the South Sudanese capital and to establish a new permanent base in Yei, south of Central Equatoria and a perennial conflict area (United Nations 2018). In this same direction, the deployment of the RPF increased the number of troops in Juba, raising the sense of security and contributing to a 17.4% reduction in the population of the POC sites between 2016-2018.

From 2018 to 2020, the clashes between armed groups decreased considerably in Central Equatoria. That happened together with the change to a more mobile posture of UNMISS troops and the HRC being used as a deterrent asset by performing Special Operations tasks. During this same period, about 2,500 more people returned from the POC sites to their homes in Juba. However, the IDP population in the entire Central Equatoria state doubled between 2018 and 2020, demonstrating that the improvement in the Force posture, enhanced by the High Readiness Company, was not enough to establish a safe environment outside Juba.

In general, activities related to the establishment of a safe environment, or Tier 3 of the POC Operational Concept, aim in the long term, especially in the prevention and consolidation phases of a POC mandate. Typically, the Force contributes to this goal by supporting the civilian and the police components. As an exception, at the field level, the Force has a key role in SSR, focusing on building and preparing local security forces to gradually replace the blue helmets (Sedra 2016). In this context, as a Special Operations unit, the HRC is capable of directly engaging in SSR through Military Assistance activities directed to South Sudanese defense/security forces (United Nations 2017).

Thus, even in a secondary role, the military component of Unmiss could contribute more to the creation of a safe environment. However, in South Sudan, the HRC has never been tasked to provide expertise, advice, and training to the SSPDF or the SPLA-IO to ensure that these troops respect human rights, including women's and children's rights. Without proper guidance, SSPDF and SPLA-IO become a perilous threat to the civilian population. According to UNMISS reports, in the first three-quarters of 2021 alone, the SSPDF was involved in 45 incidents of human rights violation, while SPLA-IO participated in 30 incidents of human rights violation (Day, Tchie, and Kumalo 2022, 15).

Therefore, the analysis of the POC indicators does not demonstrate that the environment in Central Equatoria became safer after the arriv-

al of the Nepalese Special Forces in Juba. Furthermore, the underuse of Special Operations capabilities, particularly in what concerns Military Assistance to South Sudanese defense/security forces, has resulted in a very modest and limited contribution from the High Readiness Company to the establishment of a safe environment.

CONCLUSIONS

This research verified that the Juba crisis in July 2016 was a major and tragic landmark in South Sudanese history. In view of the conflict between Sudan People's Liberation Army, currently SSPDF, and SPLA-IO, the Unmiss proved to be unable to protect civilians in the country's capital city. After four days of intense fighting, hundreds of civilians and two peacekeepers were killed.

As a response to the failure of Unmiss during the Juba crisis, the UNSC authorized an increase of 4,000 blue helmets in the mission and the creation of a RPF comprised of specialized troops, including the HRC, which is a Special Operations unit from Nepal. Deployed in Juba in 2017, the Nepalese Special Forces have been tasked to conduct the three principal UN Special Operations missions: Special Tasks, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance. In this context, the research question for this study was: *how has the HRC contributed to the protection of civilians in South Sudan?*

In order to respond to the research question, this study was guided by the following hypothesis: *the employment of the HRC significantly increases UNMISS's capability of protecting civilians in and around Juba.* Hence, *the employment of the HRC* was the independent variable of this research, directly affecting the dependent variable: *UNMISS's capability of protecting civilians in and around Juba.*

Initially, this study addressed the independent variable. In this regard, the employment of the HRC was analyzed to verify whether this specialized troop has been used in accordance with the UN Special Operations doctrine. As a result, this article concluded that, despite political constraints, there has been fairly good employment of the HRC as a Special Operations asset, which has performed POC tasks associated with all three UN Special Operations principal missions. However, the lack of engagement with local defense/security forces within the scope of Military Assistance stands out as the most relevant point to be improved.

After understanding that the HRC has been employed in compliance with the doctrine, although with limitations, this paper analyzed the

impact of the Nepalese Special Forces on the protection of civilians, considering two POC tiers: physical violence against civilians and establishment of a safe environment. By analyzing qualitatively and quantitatively three POC indicators associated with physical violence against civilians, it is possible to affirm that the HRC has worked as a strategic asset within UNMISS to gather information and to ensure physical protection through projection and deterrence. In this way, the Nepalese Special Operations unit has allowed UNMISS to develop a robust capacity to deploy quick-reaction forces able to deal with incidents such as the Terrain compound one.

However, the contribution of the High Readiness Company to the protection of civilians consists mostly of actions aimed at the short-term perspective. As demonstrated by the analysis of the three POC indicators related to the establishment of a safe environment, the deployment of the Nepalese Special Operations unit has not had a significant impact in and around Juba. As mentioned, the HRC has not engaged in security sector reform by conducting Military Assistance with South Sudanese defense/security forces focused on respect for human rights, including women's and children's rights. Therefore, the provision of expertise, advice, and training to the SSPDF and the SPLA-IO represents a valid and achievable contribution from the HRC that would generate long-term results for the peace process in South Sudan.

Therefore, some lessons learned can be drawn from this study. First, the use of Special Operations units such as HRC increases the deterrent capacity of robust peacekeeping operations such as UNMISS. Secondly, the reduction in physical violence against civilians achieved through the strengthening of peacekeeping operations does not automatically translate into the establishment of a secure environment. This requires long-term actions that also include initiatives in the political, social, and economic fields. Finally, to maximize their potential and also contribute to the long-term protection of civilians, it is essential that Special Operations units are employed in military assistance, especially in the development of local defense/security forces.

Finally, this study does not exhaust the knowledge on the impact of Special Operations units on the protection of civilians in UN robust peacekeeping operations. In fact, this research only covers a period of five years of the HRC deployment in South Sudan. Thus, a follow-up of the performance of the HRC in Central Equatoria, as well as further studies on the deployment of Special Operations units in other peacekeeping operations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter are recommended to complement this research.

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NOTA

1. United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Headquarters.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN SOUTH SUDAN: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, as a new strategy to strengthen the protection of civilians (POC), the UN has introduced Special Operations units into the structure of some of its most challenging peacekeeping operations. In this regard, as a response to the 2016 Juba crisis, the United Nations Security Council implemented a Special Operations unit called the High Readiness Company (HRC) as part of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Thus, the purpose of this paper was to analyze the role played by the HRC as a Special Operations unit, as well as its contribution to the POC in South Sudan. Methodologically, this research consisted of a case study on the HRC, in which the quantitative data and analysis played a secondary role in support of the qualitative data and analysis. As a result, it was possible to verify that the HRC has worked as a deterrence mechanism and has effectively contributed to the reduction of physical violence against civilians in the short term. However, the HRC has been unable to implement POC tasks aimed at the long term. Therefore, the improvements in the physical protection of civilians did not reflect in the establishment of a safer environment.

Keywords: High Readiness Company; Protection of Civilians; United Nations Special Operations; South Sudan.

RESUMO

Nas últimas duas décadas, como uma nova estratégia para fortalecer a proteção dos civis (POC), a ONU introduziu unidades de Operações Especiais na estrutura de algumas de suas operações de manutenção da paz mais desafiadoras. Nesse sentido, em resposta à crise de Juba de 2016, o Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas implementou uma unidade de Operações Especiais denominada Companhia de Alta Prontidão (HRC) como parte da Missão das Nações Unidas no Sudão do Sul (UNMISS). Dessa forma, o objetivo deste artigo foi analisar o papel desempenhado pela HRC como uma unidade de Operações Especiais, bem como sua contribuição para a POC no Sudão do Sul. Metodologicamente, esta pesquisa consistiu em um estudo de caso sobre a HRC, no qual os dados e a análise quantitativos tiveram um papel secundário, servindo de apoio aos dados e à análise qualitativos. Como resultado, foi possível verificar que a HRC tem funcionado como mecanismo de dissuasão e tem contribuído eficazmente para a redução da violência física contra civis a curto prazo. No entanto, a HRC não tem conseguido implementar as tarefas de POC destinadas ao longo prazo. Portanto, os avanços obtidos na proteção física de civis não se refletiram no estabelecimento de um ambiente mais seguro.

Palavras-chave: Companhia de Alta Disponibilidade; Proteção de Civis; Operações Especiais das Nações Unidas; Sudão do Sul.

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