Summary of the 2023 UN Peacekeeping Ministerial Preparatory Meeting on Protection of Civilians and Strategic Communications co-hosted by Indonesia, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Rwanda Kigali, 23-24 October 2023

The Preparatory Meeting on Protection of Civilians and Strategic Communications, co-hosted by Indonesia, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Rwanda was attended by 300 participants from 44 Member States. One of the main purposes of the meeting was for Member States to discuss and consider pledges for the Peacekeeping Ministerial in Accra, Ghana on 5-6 December 2023 related to the themes of the meeting and in line with the UN's pledging guide.

Opening session

The Hon. Juvenal Marizamunda, Minister of Defence of Rwanda, opened the session by drawing a strong connection between hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, and increased threats to communities and the safety of civilians. He stated that these issues would be best combated with capacity building, digital literacy, and the full integration of strategic communications in United Nations peace operations, with host nations playing a key role in the process of fostering a conducive environment. Joost Flamand, Director of Security Policy in the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spoke to the need for the Ministerial to generate momentum for UN peacekeeping missions. To safeguard support and cooperation from host nations, he said that engagement with local communities and subsequent improvements in supporting their needs are of paramount importance. He commended all who contribute to peace and particularly the African and Asian countries whose peacekeepers form a strong majority of deployed personnel.

Martha Pobee, Assistant Secretary-General for Africa in the UN Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, noted the need for holistic solutions to peace fragmentation and pointed to the Kigali Principles as a guiding light for reaching goals of peace through protection of civilians. She highlighted the personnel, equipment and technologies that enable protection and communications activities in missions, including needs and gaps that can inform the direction of future peace operations. She further underscored the strong interconnection between protection of civilians and strategic communications, as both are founded on trust and credibility, community engagement and situational awareness.

Session 1 – Evolving Context

The session was moderated by David Haeri, the Director of the Division of Policy, Evaluation and Training (DPET) in the Department of Peace Operations (DPO). In his opening remarks, he recalled that peacekeeping had always adapted, through failure and success, also alongside regional organizations. For peacekeeping to succeed, there was a need for a viable political process and support at national, regional, and international levels. One of main challenges was that the political consensus at all three levels was fraying.

Colonel Mohammad Tariq Hossain, Colonel Staff, Overseas Operations Directorate of Army Headquarters of Bangladesh Army, provided an overview of the evolving context of UN peacekeeping, starting with the earliest missions in 1948 through the emergence of multi-dimensional missions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Threats to civilians became a primary concern for peacekeeping missions during this period, resulting in reforms that professionalized peacekeeping, including those arising from the Brahimi report (2000), as well as more robust mandates with a focus on protecting civilians. Colonel Tariq also spoke about major recommendations made by more recent reform panels and reports and the main elements of the updated Protection of Civilians Policy issued earlier this year. He emphasized that POC was a national responsibility, the need for it to be gender-responsive, reflect child protection concerns and operationalize the three tiers of POC. All peacekeepers (civilian and uniformed) had to use every tool available to them to protect civilians under threat.

Dr. Fonteh Akum, Executive Director of the Institute for Security Studies, focused on current peacekeeping missions in Africa, where 84% of all peacekeepers are deployed. While growing tensions among the P5 present a challenge for peace operations, it also presents opportunities for the E10 to lead in innovative areas, e.g. climate and maritime security. Another important trend in Africa was the regional ad hoc initiatives that were reshaping security landscapes. Dr. Fonteh mentioned several dilemmas facing peacekeeping missions, including their geographical limitations to national borders in transnational conflict dynamics, regionalized and regionalizing insecurity systems, and an increasing overlap with climate and health challenges. In some regions, e.g. Mali and the Sahel, there were competing collective security arrangements that were often not well coordinated. There was also persistent vulnerability and high levels of violence in the margins, not the center. Governments often struggled to have effective territorial control, with one third of their territories controlled by non-state armed actors. These and other factors pointed to the need for peace operations to navigate growing levels of complexity, including transnational threats like climate change and transnational organized crime. Peace operations needed top "act nationally and think regionally" and even globally. They needed to be flexible and able to adapt to fluid contexts.

Martha Pobee spoke on the unique role that UN peacekeeping continues to occupy, saying that the new challenges should be met with the same adaptability it has exercised throughout its history. The complex environments in which peacekeepers operate now feature more intractable transnational dynamics, splintering armed groups, eroding host country consent, and increasingly weaponized mis- and disinformation. She indicated examples of violence against peacekeepers in UNIFIL and MONUSCO linked directly to the new information environment. Focusing on the upcoming Ministerial, she drew together several initiatives and mission-specific approaches that similarly reflect the primacy of political strategies to achieving success. A stronger communication strategy can particularly aid mission perceptions. Ms. Pobee cited the New Agenda for Peace as a call for peace operations to remain active and versatile, using the wide array of tools and models available. Recognizing the opportunities available in technology and data, she spoke about the Digital Transformation Strategy and the Unite Aware platform as examples in which peacekeeping has integrated emerging tools to respond to new challenges.

During the discussion, participants noted that the consent of some parties was often lacking, asked about the capacity building of host state authorities, and commented on the intentional

targeting and displacement of civilians, including by government forces. There were also questions related to the determination of who is considered a 'civilian' and the impact of other security actors on the relationship between peacekeeping missions and the host government. Some emphasized that credibility and trust of mission were earned, not 'managed', and that lack of results was the main reason populations and host governments had negative perceptions of missions. History had also shown that unity among the P5 was essential to the success of missions.

In response, the panelists discussed community alert networks, increased rates of response to greater numbers of alerts, e.g. in DRC, and efforts related to the Comprehensive Planning and Performance System (CPAS). In addition to efforts to protect civilians, perpetrators had to be held accountable for violations. The denial of access by host authorities was mentioned as a factor impeding the implementation of POC mandates. Panelists also emphasized the importance of measuring political and development outcomes, partnerships and engagement with host governments, the role of the UN Country Team, and partners such as the EU. Regarding institution building and the extension of state authority, panelists noted the long-term nature of these effects (10-20 years) and tensions that can arise between the extension of state authority and the state's utility, including in areas where land is a major source of conflict. The reform of the Security Council was mentioned as well, which could provide opportunities to reduce polarization. Panelists noted that challenges of consent affect other types of missions and envoys as well and recalled that peacekeeping as an instrument continued to enjoy strong political support. There was a need for a diversity of tools that could complement each other.

Session 2 – Protection of Civilians

This session was moderated by Oliver Ulich, Head of Performance and Protection Pillar, DPET, DPO. He noted that the vast majority of peacekeepers were implementing protection of civilian mandates, as well as other protection mandates, including those related to child protection, conflict-related sexual violence and human rights. He recalled that POC was an all-of-mission effort requiring effective coordination and integration across all components. He also referred to the key capabilities required for the implementation of protection mandates, ranging from community engagement and patrolling to air assets and expertise needed in Force HQs.

Lieutenant General Mohan Subramanian, Force Commander, UNMISS, talked about the evolution of POC mandates, which had become more robust and expansive. Robust mandates had become a necessity considering the threats against civilians on the ground. He emphasized that peacekeeping principles, including impartiality and consent, were compatible with robust POC action and mandates and that red lines needed to be drawn clearly with regard to the expected behavior of key actors. He spoke about the need for effective (and truthful) strategic communications and stressed the importance of mindset and its key components, including leadership, training, and trust. He illustrated dilemmas for ground commanders and explained that the only factor guiding decisions in these scenarios was which option would protect the maximum number of civilians. When these decisions were taken in good faith, the system needed to back up the commanders fully. The general praised contingents that had been operating in extremely difficult conditions for extended periods, as well as actions taken by peacekeepers to protect civilians from flooding. He noted that political caveats undermined

operations and had to be avoided. He concluded by summarizing actions that should be taken by Member States, including ensuring consistent mandates matched by resources, the deployment of units with excellent equipment and pre-deployment training, and engagement with host governments to support capacity building and ensure they abide by agreements they have signed.

Brigadier General Sandra Keijer, Director, Knowledge, Strategy and Innovation, Ministry of Defence of The Netherlands, spoke about the insights she gained during her time with the Office of Peacekeeping Strategic Partnerships (OPSP) in DPO. There continued to be a gap between policies and realities in the field. There was a need to adapt policies to the national and local contexts. She described the concrete protection concerns of affected populations and the important roles uniformed personnel could play in support of civilians. Military and police also needed tools to prevent, mitigate and track civilian harm. She stressed that POC needed to be grounded in community engagement and approached as a collaborative whole-of-society endeavor. Civil society had a major role to play, and the different roles of the military and police needed to reinforce each other. Joint and well-coordinated patrolling could help build trust, and community engagement needed to be seen as a two-way street and partnership that influences planning and mandate implementation. Engagement with women was critical, and their ability to influence armed groups or act as peace brokers was often significant. The general also stressed the need for more integrated and frequent scenario-based training. Mindset and a thorough understanding of the mandate at all command levels was critical as well, putting the communities' interests and safety first. A community-centered approach was also needed to measure the outcome of POC related actions (or non-actions), creating a constant feedback loop that helped build trust and accountability and can help counter negative narratives.

Brigadier General Prem Pun, Director of the Department of Peace Operations, Nepali Army, recalled the contributions Nepal made as a leading troop contributor, with personnel deployed in six missions that have POC mandates. Nepali contingents were conducting highly visible patrols, including to dominate areas and help secure IDP camps. Engagement teams played crucial roles, including woman peacekeepers, and community outreach programs and CIMIC projects supported POC and helped build positive perceptions of the mission. He described a range of challenges, such as restriction of movements, including during night hours, and the vast and difficult terrain in many mission areas. Mindset and posture were of utmost importance, and Nepal was ensuring that its peacekeepers at all levels were deployed with high levels of resilience and readiness. Female peacekeepers played important roles in planning and implementation and were given key roles in Nepali units. Other important areas included the selection of contingent commanders, knowledge transfer, and mission-specific training and exercises. Nepal was expanding its French language training and planning Arabic training as well. The general asked Member States to engage with the host state to ensure freedom of movement. He also stressed the importance of effective communication strategies to help build credibility and trust with local communities.

Josh Jorgensen, UN and Peacekeeping Adviser, Civilians in Conflict, briefed on the peacekeeping-related research done by CIVIC, including early warning and rapid response, integration, and civilian harm mitigation. He explained what capacities were required for increased mobility, integrated analysis and planning (to address gaps in relevant mission units at different levels), and to support community engagement. He also referred to the ways in which

community engagement enables more effective early warning, informs civilian harm mitigation efforts, and shapes the response to protection threats. He encouraged the integration of women peacekeepers in all areas of missions' work beyond their participation in engagement teams.

During the discussion, participants emphasized the importance of civilian protection and close cooperation between mission and civil society organizations, which enhanced the sustainability of peace. There was a need to reduce the dependency of host governments on peacekeeping missions and build the capacities of local communities. In response to the question regarding restrictions on the freedom of movement, panelists explained how missions engaged host governments on patrol plans and access restrictions, which require daily interactions and a careful balancing act. Curfews were sometimes applied too broadly and should not affect uniformed units. Participants also commented on the changing nature of conflicts and threats, and the social and economic causes of conflicts, which required broader responses in these areas.

Session 3: Strategic Communications and Mis/disinformation

This session was moderated by Naomi Miyashita, Programme Manager for the Addressing Mis/Disinformation Unit of DPO. In her introduction, she highlighted that, effectively done, strategic communications was a powerful tool to strengthen consent and acceptance for missions, although it was not a panacea for peacekeeping shortcomings or for mis/disinformation. She underscored that mis/dis/malinformation and hate speech required differentiated, whole-of-mission responses that were not limited to strategic communications. Responses needed to be informed by solid and sustained monitoring and analysis.

Referring to the challenges facing her work, Francesca Mold, Chief Strategic Communications for DPO, highlighted growing global tensions, reduced support from host governments, and complex mandates that had contributed to increased expectations, and a resultant increased focus on crisis communications in recent years. She highlighted that DPO and missions were working on proactively communicating roles and capacities to manage expectations and to demonstrate the tangible impact of work through strong and compelling narratives. She stressed that communications alone could not change minds but that creative, accountable communications that build credibility and trust could influence perceptions over time. She referred to structural challenges to producing timely, proactive and responsive media lines. She emphasized the need for strengthened digital skills, as well as leadership that embraced communications as a core part of their job. She highlighted that uniformed personnel were often the first to detect emerging narratives and changing public sentiment, which needed to be fed back into a whole-of-mission approach to monitoring and response.

Amb. Madeleine Garlick, the United Kingdom's Ambassador to the African Union, stressed the new sophisticated social media landscape that missions operated in, highlighting that parties to the conflict were more tooled up to do short, sharp communications in local languages that were not necessarily embedded in truth. International actors' emphasis on truth made their communications slow and complex, because truth was not simple. She underscored the need to identify the target audience, which could range from the host government to the population missions serve, as well as neighbouring countries and Security Council members. A well-designed communication approach should hit target audiences and should include several

characteristics: appropriate delegation of authority to issue communications; consider when and how to communicate jointly with national counterparts; leverage all members of the team as communicators and amplifiers; use compelling content that speaks to the audiences, through for example the use of pictures.

Yolande Makolo, Spokesperson of the Government of Rwanda, suggested that for PoC, UN agencies should use information that is generated from within the UN system – PoC should not be politicized, she stressed. Language and cultural aspects needed to be understood and contextualized to make stratcomms fit for purpose. There should be an active, two-way dialogue between missions and the population to avoid speculation and manage unrealistic expectations. She said that peacekeepers should not be seen as parties to conflict, in order to build trust and maintain dialogue with the community. The role of mainstream media needed to be understood in perpetuating mis/disinformation, given shifts in resourcing and capacity.

Allan Cheboi, Senior Investigations Manager, Code for Africa, set out the gaps in addressing mis/disinformation and hate speech: the need for better access to data from social media; the need for specialized skillsets, including data analysis and early warning detection techniques for AI generated content; the increasing use of closed applications such as WhatsApp or Telegram to pass divisive and hateful speech; the lack of harmonized legal frameworks governing hate speech; the fact that bad actors act at a cross-border level, making country level jurisdictions insufficient to address information harms. He emphasized that mis/disinformation and hate speech thrived where there was a vacuum of information. Response strategies should be informed by detection measures: a lot of responses were created on the fly, rather than in response to root causes. He underscored the need for multistakeholder collaboration in tackling this challenge and stressed that responses should be adapted to the young audiences of social media, including use of animated, satirical and comic content, which spread more than press releases and formal communications. The development of digital resources was also necessary – local nuances and contexts need to be understood in order to craft adapted lexicons on hate speech for tech platforms.

During the discussion, a number of questions were asked, including on the role of host governments, on managing expectations related to peacekeeping mandates, on the role of traditional and religious leaders, on how to distinguish between mis/disinformation and rightful criticism, and whether mis/disinformation should be the focus of attention. In response, the panelists suggested that missions needed to find a way of creatively communicating on Security Council mandates which were not necessarily clear or direct. The importance of disciplined communication was emphasized. The contribution of faith-based leaders as proxy communicators and allies was recognized, while emphasis was placed on the need to avoid exposing them to harm. On host governments, the importance of the partnership with host governments was stressed, and the possibility of managing alternative means of communications, through New York or through third parties. Further, in response, missions should clarify facts, not narratives and value judgements, and focus on dialogue with government counterparts, including in communicating on successes and the impact of the mission. Mis/disinformation was highlighted as one aspect of wider information harms, which include other digital threats, such as online trolling, information/influence operations, and extremist messaging – these require attention as well, but are not necessarily false. On the risks of AI, the dual role of its use as a

force for good (e.g. for preventive, digital peacebuilding actions), not only as a generator of harms was highlighted.

Session 4: POC-Strategic Communications Interplay

Martha Pobee noted that shortfalls in the protection of civilians cannot and should not be compensated for by strategic communications, but dialogue and outreach could positively influence the protection of civilians outcomes at all levels. She framed the forthcoming panel's discussions as a means to more clearly show the links between the protection of civilians and strategic communications, as well as the ways in which they can mobilize and enable one another, through mission structures, training, capacities and expertise. She further asked panelists to consider how local communities can be better engaged and consulted on protection of civilians.

Police Inspector General Krishna Murti, Head of Indonesia's National Police International Relations Division, proposed three key approaches currently needed in peacekeeping. First, design a communication strategy that accounts for all parties in the mission area. Each mission component must tailor their messages to the background of their audience, with a good understanding of local culture. Training and consultation mechanisms can improve these outcomes and refocus information away from noise and distractions. Second, foster a strong and substantive communication line between the mission, host governments, local communities and headquarters. Communication must be followed up with an assessment of messages' effects, such as through surveys or informal discussions. Furthermore, radio and other media should be explored to improve the reach of communications, and messages should be more strongly informed by in-depth reports from representatives on the ground. Third, elevate peacekeepers' roles in delivering humanitarian assistance, safeguarding peace agreements, and engaging with local communities. Inspector Gen. Murti said that mandates restricted peacekeepers from participating in community activities and engaging in responsive problem-solving. He further mentioned the increased physical presence of peacekeepers in public events as a way to improve trust and communication.

Lisa Sharland, Senior Fellow and Director at the Stimson Center, said that strategic communications serve as a tool to fill information vacuums during crisis response. However, successful communication across all mission levels is more difficult when mandates are poorly understood and relationships with host states are more complex. Limitations of the mission need to be communicated in order to manage expectations. Ms. Sharland said that missions need to recognize and build upon the protection mechanisms that local communities already have in place. This requires two-way dialogue with affected groups, including independent feedback and perception surveys, with attention to women and youth. She said that poor communication erodes local support, which is used by host authorities to undermine cooperation with the mission. The role of senior mission leadership has a critical role in setting the tone, especially when proxies are responsible for protecting civilians. Ms. Sharland emphasized that developing a resilient information environment would have important knock-on effects for community protection.

Colonel Chakib Rais, Head of the Contingents and External Operations Division in the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces raised a Secretary-General initiative for Member States to develop a strategic and operational framework for combating false information without undermining freedom of expression. He said that Morocco's personnel receive pre-deployment training on information verification skills and are encouraged to respect local environments and customs. Col. Rais spoke about a Moroccan Royal Armed Forces draft manual on combating disinformation that will be sent to the UN after being translated into English. The manual recommends increasing the involvement of host countries, strengthening mission communication capacities and resources, and including inclusive communication strategies in mandates, resolutions and other documents. At the informational level, the manual recommends strengthening communication skills of peacekeepers, establishing more trusting and transparent relationships with local media, and improving information monitoring of tech trends and actions. Finally, it proposes appointing focal points to combat disinformation, creating crisis cells in response to information campaign, and reinforcing communication skills with qualified personnel. Morocco encourages learning local languages among their personnel and promotes ensuring access to credible, multilingual media in cooperation with host governments. Col. Rais said that the proposed measures would be discussed at the next COE Working Group.

The discussion included a question on whether strategic communications offices on the ground should be constituted from existing personnel or new specialized individuals. Participants raised several additional lenses through which to approach strategic communications, including local language competency, leveraging female peacekeepers, and increasing the frequency of information to meet the information gap. The discussion further included calls to carefully consider the necessary equipment to meet protection and communication needs, as well as the need to make strategy operationalized and interlinked across mission components and with headquarters. One panelist emphasized that missions cannot quickly push responsibility for protection of civilians onto host governments, as the mission's existence originally derives from the failure of host countries to protect civilians.

The panelists concurred with the need for communications competencies and skills to be improved for civilian components as well as for uniformed personnel, emphasizing language skills and cultural awareness. Expertise would usually be incorporated into units via specially trained officers. One panelist spoke about the joint effects of both women and men working on engagement with local communities. Speakers mentioned a sense of gaps in communication between uniformed and civilian personnel, and particularly the importance of mission strategy and purpose clearly reaching the unit level. One-way communication from mission leaders down to peacekeepers prevents a clear flow of information within the mission. Inspector Gen. Murti offered a best practice from Indonesia's police, proposing a strategic guidance framework on communication that could be delivered during training and built on best practices from across mission components. Panelists emphasized the need to achieve success in mission goals, including political results, for strategic communications to be successful.

Closing session

To begin the closing session, <u>David Haeri</u> noted the capabilities related to the conference's discussions that are most needed for pledges at the Ministerial, including experts in comms and protection, air assets and skilled language staff. He further stated that the Ministerial is an important opportunity to reaffirm a collective commitment to multilateral peacekeeping and to continue adapting to the needs of the future. <u>Police Inspector General Krishna Murti</u> invited troop/police-contributing countries to join peacekeeping trainings in Indonesia, noting the importance of continued collaboration between Member States. He emphasized that the ability of UN peacekeeping to protect civilians will determine its credibility, and therefore commended the efforts toward that goal in the conference.

<u>Amb. Madeline Garlick</u> acknowledged the new realities in peacekeeping contexts as emblematic of a need to strengthen partnerships. She said that the narrative around the current turning point in peacekeeping would have critical impacts on mandate delivery as well as missions' ability to work with host governments. She emphasized the importance of leveraging existing expertise, enabled and defined by capable leadership. <u>H.E. Harold Agyeman</u>, Permanent Representative of Ghana to the UN, noted the gaps between expectations and delivery while reiterating the critical role played by UN peacekeeping. He informed delegations of logistical and substantive ways in which they can prepare for the Ministerial in December, drawing from the themes of the preparatory meetings and the discussions of this conference. He encouraged Member States to develop clearly and effectively defined pledges in collaboration with the Department of Peace Operations and Ghana in advance of the Ministerial.