



Security Council

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Letter dated 23 December 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to refer to Security Council resolution [2531 \(2020\)](#) on the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), by which the Council requested me, addressing perspectives from all relevant actors, including my Special Representative for Mali, in consultation with the Force Commander, to provide the Council with a letter focused on: (a) information on progress in Mission operations, to include security challenges, implementation of the adaptation plan as well as an update on discussions in the Instance de Coordination au Mali; (b) information on performance and rotations of uniformed personnel, including information on undeclared caveats and their impact on the Mission; and (c) an update on the integrated strategic framework and related transition plan, as well as a possible exit strategy for the Mission on the basis of improved security and political conditions and of progress in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali.

Progress in Mission operations

As outlined in my recent reports ([S/2020/952](#) and [S/2020/1281](#)), the Mission has further increased its operational tempo and adopted a more coordinated “whole of Mission” approach to the challenging and evolving security environment owing to important progress in the implementation of the adaptation plan, as well as enhanced integrated planning. Nonetheless, persistent equipment shortfalls, notably of air assets and surgical teams in support of the Mobile Task Force of the Mission, continue to pose significant operational challenges that have an impact on the ability of the Mission to respond rapidly and in a flexible manner.

In central Mali, MINUSMA conducted Operation Mongoose, a key component of its adaptation plan and of its efforts to operationalize the Mobile Task Force concept with a view to protecting civilians who are out of reach of the current deployments of the Mission. On 23 October 2020, Operation Mongoose entered a new phase with the rapid deployment on short notice of troops to Douentza Cercle, Mopti Region, in response to emerging threats to the local populations and in support of the Malian Defence and Security Forces. This operation allowed MINUSMA to practice its increased mobility and ability to respond rapidly. It involved the mobilization of air and land units, including special forces and a helicopter unit from two different military sectors.

The Mission has made further strides to adopt a more proactive posture to protect civilians. Enhanced integrated planning with civilian pillars and the United Nations country team enabled the Mission to strengthen its efforts to protect civilians



in high-risk areas, including Bandiagara, Koro and Bankass Cercles, using temporary operating bases, as part of Operation Buffalo. MINUSMA established seven additional temporary bases during the reporting period, while complementing those physical protection measures with mediation and reconciliation initiatives led by its civilian components. In Koro Cercle, Mopti Region, the integrated civil-military approach of the Mission and the extended presence of temporary operating bases facilitated civilian reconciliation initiatives by providing the time, security and access needed to yield results.

The support provided by MINUSMA to local partners in areas hosting locally-led intercommunity dialogues, which contributed to a reduction of civilian casualties, restored freedom of movement for all communities and enabled some resumption of economic activity. In Ogossogou village, Mopti Region, a MINUSMA temporary operating base supported the facilitation of the first meeting between the Dogon and Fulani communities in two years, marking an important and positive step since two massacres against civilians were committed there. The base of the Mission in the area also made it possible for peacekeepers to assist wounded passengers from a bus that had been attacked nearby while travelling between the towns of Bandiagara and Bankass.

There was a notable improvement in the coordination between MINUSMA and the Malian Defence and Security Forces, in particular in central Mali. The military component of the Mission conducted several coordinated operations with Malian forces to protect civilians, while the MINUSMA police increased the number of joint patrols with Malian security forces in central Mali. Operation Cobra, conducted in October 2020, using the temporary operating base in Timiniri commune, demonstrated an unprecedented level of coordination between MINUSMA forces and police, as well as with the Malian Defence and Security Forces. The operation resulted in eight arrests and the seizure of improvised explosive device materials.

In northern Mali, MINUSMA continued to enhance its efforts to protect civilians. In Timbuktu Region, in coordination with the Malian Defence and Security Forces, the Mission launched a series of initiatives in this regard as part of Operation Winner. Making use of this improved coordination and to ensure resource efficiencies, the Mission maintained its focus on areas with a minimal presence of national armed forces, including in Gao Region, where Operation Seka has contributed to securing the Gao-Labbézanga axis. In Kidal Region, as part of its integrated Operation Amouken, the uniformed and civilian components of the Mission reached isolated villages, where their work included the implementation of confidence-building quick impact projects, which contributed to easing tensions related to resource management and access.

In Goundam, Diré and Niafunke Cercles in Timbuktu Region, where the presence of local security forces is limited and radical groups have disrupted daily life for civilians, the MINUSMA police launched a series of community-oriented policing initiatives with the Malian security forces, providing a measure of protection. Similar initiatives are underway in Mopti Region.

In Ménaka, the Mission continued to support the Ménaka Without Weapons initiative, which is aimed at providing a secure environment in the city – a model that could be replicated elsewhere in northern Mali – through coordinated efforts by the Malian Defence and Security Forces, signatory armed groups and MINUSMA. The Mission supports the establishment of checkpoints in strategic locations, participates in coordinated patrols and provides vehicles to support the deployment of Malian security forces. This initiative has contributed to a reduction in attacks against civilians.

Implementation of the adaptation plan

Despite the restrictions imposed on account of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, MINUSMA has continued to implement its adaptation plan while adjusting its timeline. During the period under review, the Mission completed most of the movements and consolidation of contingents launched earlier in 2020, including the relocation of a mechanized infantry company and base defence unit from Timbuktu to Mopti. However, there were delays in the expansion of the camp of the Mission in Mopti, initially planned to be completed by April 2021. The Mopti base is critical for the implementation of the adaptation plan, as it is expected to become a major launching pad in efforts to support the stabilization and restoration of State authority in the centre of the country and protect civilians. Those delays will, in turn, delay the planned deployment of additional troops and the full implementation of the adaptation plan.

In Gao, an unmanned aircraft system became operational in October 2020. The expansion of the base in Gao consists of multiple components in different phases of completion.

Structures to facilitate the deployment of the Quick Reaction Force of the Mission, the long-range reconnaissance patrol and the first forward command post – a key element of Operation *Mongoose* – are expected to be completed by the end of the year, with other aspects going into 2021.

Coordination of security presences

The Instance de Coordination au Mali remained an effective forum to coordinate the activities of the Malian Defence and Security Forces, the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel, the French forces, the European Union training mission in Mali and MINUSMA. Additional initiatives have helped to improve its operational effectiveness: in between quarterly meetings of the Instance de Coordination au Mali, monthly operational coordination meetings serve as a steering committee during which the issues validated at the quarterly meetings are discussed, with a monitoring cell, chaired by the Malian armed forces, providing oversight. These meetings at different levels have improved decision-making on lines of action and, most importantly, facilitated the implementation of decisions taken, within the framework of the respective mandates of international forces.

At the quarterly meeting held on 5 November 2020, participants agreed on three road maps outlining a clear distribution of responsibilities among international security presences, in support to the Malian Defence and Security Forces, including redeployment and training needs.

Mission performance

Despite restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a major political crisis culminating in a coup d'état on 18 August 2020, MINUSMA has continued to ensure mandate implementation and continuity of operations, while swiftly adjusting to the new realities on the ground. In that context, MINUSMA has played a central role in preventing a further deterioration of the political situation and supporting an inclusive transition. The Mission also continues to assist the parties to the Peace Agreement with overcoming differences through dialogue, to make progress towards its full implementation, and to maintain its critical support to the authorities in their efforts to protect civilians in the centre of the country.

MINUSMA continued to take steps to improve the performance of its uniformed personnel and address shortfalls, with a particular focus on mandate implementation and the safety and security of its personnel. This includes further measures to enhance

the security of United Nations peacekeepers during operations as well as in camps. Ongoing explosive threat mitigation training and mentoring have contributed to the timely detection of an increasing number of improvised explosive devices. In July 2020, within the framework of Operation Toolbox, MINUSMA undertook a series of comprehensive measures to support convoy threat mitigation efforts on all major MINUSMA convoy routes.

However, some units still lack the appropriate jammers and mine-protected vehicles required to prevent casualties in northern and central Mali. I reiterate my call to all Member States to honour their commitments under the Action for Peacekeeping framework and to step up their efforts to ensure that peacekeepers receive the equipment and training necessary to implement their mandate effectively in one of the most challenging United Nations operations. The MINUSMA force currently has 562 armoured vehicles: 483 (86 per cent) are used daily, 33 (6 per cent) are undergoing maintenance and 46 (8 per cent) are not serviceable and need to be replaced urgently owing to improvised explosive device blasts or other issues that have left them beyond the ability of the Mission to repair.

Evaluations of the force and police components of the Mission

In March 2020, MINUSMA suspended the performance evaluation of its military units owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Evaluations resumed in November 2020 and are being finalized. During the reporting period, the force of the Mission updated its evaluation methodology to ensure that it aligns better with the operational environment and enhances its focus on leadership, operational readiness and task performance.

The MINUSMA police component continued to implement the systematic performance evaluation system instituted in June 2019. Since July 2020, 17 formed police units have been evaluated and found to be performing satisfactorily. The criteria for measuring their performance included their ability to engage with communities and their understanding of the mandate and protection of civilians, as well as command and control. Challenges identified included the need to increase the number of mine-protected vehicles and to replace damaged ones. Units were also recommended to further improve their language capacity, enhance force protection and increase safety and security measures, including on patrols.

Performance evaluations were conducted on a quarterly basis and highlighted improvements and steps taken by units and police-contributing countries over the past months. Performance improvement plans continue to be implemented by all units.

Since my previous letter (S/2020/481), no instances of undeclared caveats by troop-contributing countries have been recorded.

Challenges

The coup d'état of 18 August and the ensuing institutional uncertainty had the potential to add significant challenges to the operations of the Mission on the ground.

Ultimately, MINUSMA maintained effective coordination with the Malian Defence and Security Forces during that period, allowing for the acceleration of its operations to protect civilians in central and northern Mali. The sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States after the coup and lifted on 6 October 2020 had a limited impact on the operations of the Mission. They were in part mitigated by remedial measures undertaken by the Mission, such as an air bridge with neighbouring countries to facilitate staff travel, including of individual officers, and collaboration with Member States to ensure the supply of essential goods.

MINUSMA reinforced its COVID-19 mitigation measures to minimize the impact on operations. A COVID-19 Task Force established in March 2020 continued its coordination efforts to ensure preventive measures and an integrated approach with United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. Uniformed components established a COVID-19 Task Group and a monitoring unit to monitor compliance with COVID-19 protection and prevention guidelines, including the 14-day quarantine period. Eighty-nine cases were reported among the forces during the troop rotations. MINUSMA has also taken steps to improve the availability of COVID-19 testing kits, and it received three testing laboratories in October 2020.

Equipment shortfalls continued to hamper the performance of MINUSMA. Rotary wing aircrafts, which are key enablers, are in short supply, following the recent repatriation of a unit. As a result, the use of the helicopter fleet by the military component of the Mission is limited to 25 per cent, having a significant impact on its mobility and ability to respond to emerging threats against civilians in a rapid and flexible manner. The Secretariat continues to work with troop- and police-contributing countries to address that essential gap in order to enhance operational mobility and make full use of the Mission adaptation plan.

Improvised explosive devices have a heavy impact on the civilian population and remain the main threat to MINUSMA, especially on main supply roads and against logistic convoys. Since July 2020, 98 improvised explosive devices have been used in Mali, including 39 against MINUSMA (19 were collected and neutralized by MINUSMA and 20 detonated). While international forces continue to encounter improvised explosive devices in central and northern Mali, recent attacks in previously unaffected regions may indicate a deterioration of the security situation in areas of the south. The Mission remains focused on enhancing measures to improve the safety of its personnel.

Troop rotations

On 1 July 2020, deployments and rotations of uniformed personnel progressively resumed, after their suspension in March as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

MINUSMA continued to implement quarantine measures before and after the deployments. In late August 2020, rotations of contingents and individual uniformed personnel from the region were partially affected by the travel restrictions imposed as part of the ECOWAS sanctions following the coup d'état of 18 August in Bamako. The deployments, rotations and repatriations of personnel resumed following the lifting of the sanctions in October.

Implementation of the integrated strategic framework and transition plan

The Mission continues to use the integrated strategic framework for increased coordination and complementarity between the Mission and the United Nations country team. It serves as a tool to leverage comparative advantages and delineation of responsibilities, as well as for the progressive transition of MINUSMA responsibilities. In line with the directive of the Secretary-General on transition planning of February 2019, the transition calendar was developed in February 2020 and a capacity mapping of national and international stakeholders is envisaged. Terms of reference have also been developed for an exercise that will identify technical and operational gaps and capacities of the United Nations system and national stakeholders in Mali, with a view to progressively transferring MINUSMA-related responsibilities to those essential partners. The planned gender- and human rights-sensitive conflict analyses have been delayed owing to COVID-19 pandemic

restrictions, and it is envisaged to conduct them in early 2021 in parallel to, and in support of, the capacity-mapping exercise.

Comprehensive performance assessment

MINUSMA continued to roll out the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System. For the second consecutive year, MINUSMA used that System to inform the development of the 2021/22 budget report, streamlining its framework with a focus on having a greater impact in support of more effective alignment of resources and mandate delivery, while considering the evolving political and security challenges in Mali. In November 2020, MINUSMA conducted its first performance assessment, bringing together Mission components and pillars in an integrated exercise to collect data, analyse progress towards mandate delivery and propose recommendations for consideration by the senior leadership.

Planning and the road map towards a long-term exit strategy for the Mission

In accordance with resolution [2531 \(2020\)](#), MINUSMA has begun to work on the development of a long-term road map assessing the continued challenges to peace and security in Mali to ensure a phased, coordinated and deliberate transition of security responsibilities, opening the way for a possible exit strategy for the Mission when the conditions are met, without jeopardizing the stability of Mali and the region.

Taking into account the new realities on the ground and the complex challenges that Mali faces, a sequenced approach is envisaged with a set of realistic, relevant and clearly measurable benchmarks and conditions for the 18-month transition period, which is expected to culminate in national elections.

In keeping with its mandate and building on the national action plan, MINUSMA, in coordination with the country team, will focus its efforts during a first phase on: (a) the political process and institutional reform; (b) protection and security support; (c) the national elections; (d) the restoration and extension of State authority; (e) the rule of law and the fight against impunity; and (f) socioeconomic recovery.

The second phase of the long-term road map will focus on major outstanding challenges to be addressed following the transition period and the required capacities to allow MINUSMA to start planning for a phased and coordinated transition of security responsibilities as well as a transfer of responsibilities to the United Nations country team and national stakeholders, based on capacity mapping.

The third phase will be developed at a later stage and will consist of a possible exit strategy for the Mission that envisages a progressive withdrawal, when conditions are met, without jeopardizing the stability of Mali and the region.

As outlined in my previous letter, the role of MINUSMA in Mali remains critical, notably as the country implements its political transition and advances in the implementation of the Peace Agreement and the stabilization of central Mali.

I should be grateful if you would bring the present letter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) António **Guterres**