



Security Council

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Letter dated 1 June 2021 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 within 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 implementation of the integrated strategic framework and the related transition plan.

Progress in Mission operations

As outlined in my report ([S/2021/519](#)), security incidents continued to occur in northern Mali, where extremist groups continued to operate and target national and international forces, in increasingly complex attacks. The threat has grown in the centre, where civilians remain direct and indirect victims of intracommunity and intercommunity violence and terrorist activity.

Within this highly complex environment, MINUSMA has continued to play a central role in supporting the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali and the political transition, as well as stabilization efforts in the centre. The Mission continues to exercise good offices, including during the most recent period of political upheaval, following the forcible resignation of the President and Prime Minister. The Mission's presence and security support remain vital for efforts to provide space to address the political crisis in Bamako, for the peace process to unfold and for enabling the Malian authorities to increase their presence in northern and central Mali in order to ensure the provision of basic services to the population, in close cooperation with other partners.

MINUSMA has further scaled up the tempo of its operations and stepped up efforts to protect the civilian population and to support the redeployment of the Malian Defence and Security Forces. In Gao region, Operation Seka of MINUSMA is under way to secure, protect and stabilize the road between Gao, Ansongo and Labézanga, a key strategic trade and travel route that connects the largest population centres in Gao region with the Niger. The area had been increasingly infiltrated by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and MINUSMA operations have contributed to an improved security environment, allowing the local population to conduct business



and to socialize, even if for limited periods of time. The deployment of a formed police unit detachment from Gao to Ansongo in December 2020 further reinforced Operation Seka by increasing the number of patrols in Ansongo town. These efforts, among others, have contributed to a reduction in the number of reported protection of civilians incidents in Ansongo in the “quartier hydraulique” (from 10 to 2 per week), and along the Ansongo-Bara Highway, where most incidents had been reported.

Between 8 April and 19 May, the mobile task force conducted the first phase of Operation Meerkat, west of the Niger River, focusing on the Ansongo, In-Tellit and Tessit “triangle”. In this highly contested area, where the civilian population is often caught in crossfires between Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, the 20-day patrol from Gao to Tessit enabled MINUSMA civilian personnel and regional state representatives to visit the town and enhance engagement with communities. In addition, the mobile task force patrol conducted civil-military cooperation activities in close coordination with the local counterparts, including the Malian Armed Forces that have a garrison in Tessit town, further contributing to increased trust by the local population.

In Kidal region, several operations, including Operation Galileo, in the vicinity of Tessalit, Galaxy, in the vicinity of Kidal, and Copernic, in key areas in Tessalit and Aguelhok, were conducted to deter indirect fire and improvised explosive device attacks against MINUSMA and to gather intelligence to protect the local population from attacks by armed groups. In addition, the MINUSMA military component conducted Operation Arer, which also incorporated civil-military cooperation activities, and was designed as a show of strength around Mission camps, in response to the attack against the camp at Aguelhok on 2 April.

Operation Farrier, launched in November 2019, is another operation focusing on Northern Mali to monitor and verify the compliance of signatory armed movements. In order to restrict and limit the circulation of arms in the north and reduce the risk of clashes between signatory armed groups, the Technical Commission on Security decided that it must receive prior notification regarding the deployment of any convoy that comprises more than five vehicles and/or includes heavy weapons. The past months were marked by a significant decline in notifications, which indicates a lack of adherence by the armed movements and the need for further measures to ensure compliance.

In the Timbuktu region, MINUSMA conducted several operations and patrols in Ber, Timbuktu and Goundam areas. Operation Winner around Niafunké, Soumpi and Echefell created conditions to enable the Malian defence and security forces to redeploy to the area. It also allowed the Mission to enhance its interaction with communities in these areas.

In central Mali, Mopti region, MINUSMA conducted Operation Buffalo, aimed at protecting the local population in areas of concern resulting from violence along community lines. As part of Operation Buffalo, the Mission conducted short range patrols in the vicinity of Sokoura and Tori. MINUSMA also conducted three integrated missions, in Ogooussagou, Tori and Sokoura. This allowed MINUSMA to support local reconciliation and social cohesion initiatives and carry out human rights investigations. Coordinated efforts and patrols involving MINUSMA military and police components enhanced community engagement and the gathering of information. They served as a deterrent to violence in some hotspots, including on 25 April, when MINUSMA police effectively interrupted the hijacking of a minibus between Douentza and Sévaré.

Operation Mongoose continued to demonstrate the flexibility and ability of the uniformed components of MINUSMA to deploy effectively from one sector to another in response to threats to the local population, a key objective of the Mission’s

adaptation plan. This was demonstrated by the relocation of a detachment from Sector East to Sector Centre in late January and the deployment of a special operations force from Sector West to Sector Centre for a limited period in January.

Implementation of the adaptation plan

While the timeline for implementation of the adaptation plan has required adjustment owing to delays, the generation and expansion of Mission infrastructure stemming from restrictions due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the August 2020 coup, the objective of the plan remains valid: to enhance Mission proactivity and flexibility, starting with scaling up the agility of the MINUSMA military component and progressively integrating and amplifying the efforts of the civilian and police components.

Additional medical, engineering and intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities are planned to deploy or relocate to Sector Centre and Sector West in the second half of 2021. The expansion of the Mopti camp is progressing. Additional ground units will deploy to the new 16-hectare camp between June and November 2021, while the 11-hectare camp designated for air assets will be completed in the first quarter of 2022.

Outstanding capability gaps include military medium utility helicopter units, armed and attack helicopter units, an infantry quick-reaction force, mobile surgical capabilities, a fixed-wing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance unit and an unmanned aerial system unit. Where possible, in the interest of time, the Mission is considering both military and civilian-contracted (commercial) assets.

The full operationalization of the Mission mobile task force, a core piece of the adaption plan, will require addressing conditions outside the United Nations framework posed by some troop-contributing countries, including with regard to casualty evacuations, which significantly restrict the areas of deployment of the contingents.

Coordination of security presences

The Instance de coordination au Mali continues to be an important forum for coordinating 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, the European Union capacity-building mission in Mali and MINUSMA. The forum has been effective in strengthening coordination among partners, including in supporting the Malian security forces in their security planning for the upcoming referendum and elections foreseen in the transition road map.

Mission performance

In spite of the increasingly challenging environment in which MINUSMA continues to operate, MINUSMA performance has improved; this can be attributed in part to a gradual change in mindset of the military leadership (commanders at both the sector and contingent levels) and their proactivity. The rank and file of the contingents are also demonstrably motivated and well prepared.

In the 2 April attack on the camp in Aguelhok, Kidal region, MINUSMA peacekeepers robustly repelled a complex attack by over 200 extremist elements. The temporary deployment of several units in operating bases in Timbuktu and Mopti regions under difficult circumstances enhanced mandate implementation and community engagement in those areas.

Notwithstanding, significant challenges remain that have an adverse impact on performance. In the absence of pledges for light mobile surgical modules from troop-

contributing countries, the Mission amended the requirements in favour of smaller forward surgical teams. However, several units of the mobile task force still lack such teams, restricting their mobility and flexibility.

The uniformed personnel of MINUSMA continue to face constraints due to inadequate equipment or a lack of equipment, in particular armoured personnel carriers and mine-protected vehicles, many of which have been damaged in operation and have not been replaced, or were not fit-for-purpose in the first place. For instance, out of 40 armoured personnel carriers or mine-protected vehicles belonging to two combat convoy companies based in Gao, 22 are unserviceable, with 16 having been damaged by explosive incidents; 2 of the 16 were damaged in 2021 and the rest in the period between 2018 and 2020. The unavailability of equipment, including vehicles, can also be attributed, to a certain degree, to inadequate maintenance arrangements. MINUSMA is working to address the issue by ensuring adherence to scheduled maintenance plans and the timely replacement of unserviceable equipment.

An additional limitation for MINUSMA police is the incomplete deployment of the second formed police unit based in Mopti: since March 2020 only the 20-member advance team has been present in the Mission, with the deployment of the rest of the team held up as a result of its equipment having been grounded in Dakar owing to a financial dispute between the contractor and the subcontractor.

Evaluations of the Mission's military and police components

Since January 2021, four military units have been evaluated, including three infantry battalions (645, 650 and 849 strong) and one combat convoy battalion (525 strong), and have been found to be performing satisfactorily, except for one sub-unit, in which issues were identified in relation to intelligence, logistics, execution of duties and protection of civilians. Mitigating measures were put in place to improve performance in those areas. The COVID-19 pandemic hindered the regular conduct of evaluations.

MINUSMA police have conducted 20 performance assessment and evaluation reports since 1 January, with performance improvements plans, as necessary, to ensure that operational capacity in the field is maintained or improved. Twenty contingent-owned equipment inspections have also been conducted during the period. No formed police unit or contingent of MINUSMA police is operating with undeclared caveats.

The Secretariat has not registered any declared caveats; therefore, MINUSMA considers all caveats as undeclared. These include limitations such as units not being allowed to deploy to different locations within the same sector. Undeclared caveats hinder the Mission's operations and have been reported to Headquarters, which has made efforts to mitigate their impact by directly engaging troop-contributing countries. In parallel, the MINUSMA Force Commander has undertaken visits to major troop-contributing countries to discuss specific operational requirements in Mali.

Challenges

Notwithstanding the flexible, robust and proactive posture that MINUSMA has adopted, the security situation has continued to deteriorate, especially in the centre. In addition, MINUSMA has faced a variety of situations that have hindered freedom of movement, in particular Bandiagara and Douentza *Cercles*, where the local population and dozos (traditional hunters) have protested against the Mission by blocking roads. These hostilities against MINUSMA are being addressed through the Mission's engagement in a structured dialogue with local populations and self-defence groups. As a result of these dialogue efforts, the blockages that MINUSMA patrols had been

facing since December 2020, in particular in Bandiagara region, have been lifted and MINUSMA has resumed its patrols.

The successful completion of the adaptation plan will depend on the availability of capable and efficient enablers, including airlift capability, enhanced medical support facilities and qualified uniformed personnel with the appropriate mindset. I call upon all Member States to actively contribute to the generation of such specialized capabilities.

Improvised explosive devices continue to have an impact on the civilian population and on national and international forces and remain a major threat to MINUSMA. Furthermore, during the attacks on the temporary operating base in Kerena and the camp in Aguelhok, terrorists used explosives as part of complex attacks, in contrast to the more improvised explosive device attacks on supply routes. There was also an increasing number of unidentified drones observed flying over MINUSMA installations. The Mission has continued to take measures to adapt to the evolving threat of improvised explosive devices through an integrated response that addresses situational awareness, the use of technology, predeployment and in-mission training, and medical evacuations, which has been particularly effective. Since January 2021, over 68 improvised explosive devices have been used in Mali, including 25 against MINUSMA (12 were collected and neutralized by MINUSMA; 13 were detonated).

The Mission observed a decrease in the number of civilians injured or killed by explosive incidents (34 per cent decrease in 2021, compared with the first four months of 2020). While United Nations protection measures in Mali have contributed to increased risk awareness and the resilience of the populations at risk, further monitoring is required to identify causalities or whether the current trend will continue.

In January 2021, a task force to counter improvised explosive devices was established by the Mission, with the participation of the Malian Armed Forces, the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel, the French forces and the European Union training mission in Mali. A common strategy is under development.

Troop rotations

COVID-19-related limitations have led to clustered rotations. In order to mitigate the negative impact of troop rotations, the Mission adjusted the rotation plan to ensure continued availability of uniformed personnel and limit the number of rotations during “high” operational time frames. Notwithstanding, additional challenges continue to result from troop-contributing countries and police-contributing countries not adhering to rotation plans, which, during the reporting period, led to simultaneous rotations by two battalions that resulted in significantly reduced operations.

Implementation of the integrated strategic framework and transition plan

MINUSMA and the United Nations country team continued to coordinate and collaborate with regard to maintaining momentum in the implementation of the Agreement and stabilization efforts in central Mali, while also integrating activities to support the post-coup political transition. As such, there have been delays in the completion of the gender- and human rights-sensitive conflict analyses, in the analysis of environmental risks and in the United Nations country team capacity mapping exercise. Longer-term transition planning, as identified in the second phase of the long-term road map submitted to the Security Council in March (S/2021/300, annex), will be informed by the capacity mapping results and will be initiated as the benchmarks and conditions set out in the first phase of the road map are achieved.

The aim of longer-term transition planning should be understood as strategic collaborative processes with the host Government and other partners to consolidate peacebuilding gains and prevent future conflict. Hence, it should not be conceptualized as a linear process aimed at handing over mission tasks to the United Nations country team or the Government but rather as a process aimed at working with partners. It is against this background that the implementation of a revised integrated strategic framework is foreseen for the second phase of the road map.

As noted in the road map, the first phase – corresponding to the period set for the political transition in Mali – is aimed at the delivery of results through the implementation of an integrated transition support plan developed over the reporting period between MINUSMA and the United Nations country team. The plan is designed not only to ensure integrated planning and “Delivery as one” efforts on transition support and mandate priorities between the Mission and the United Nations country team, but also to improve cross-component alignment of strategic and operational planning within the Mission.

In the context of support for the transition period, the comparative advantages and delineation of responsibilities identified under the previous integrated strategic framework continued to be leveraged in support of mandate delivery in an integrated and comprehensive manner. The projects implemented in Ansongo and Gao, described in the following two paragraphs, serve to illustrate how recent joint programming has been facilitated by the integrated approach, aligning comparative advantages and effective division of labour and resource management. A case in point is the coordinated security support actions under Operation Seka, described above, led by the MINUSMA military component, with MINUSMA good offices, social cohesion and reconciliation activities, and with technical expertise and programming by the United Nations country team, agencies, funds and programmes.

In the Gao region, MINUSMA, the World Food Programme and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, cooperated to support increased food production, improve livelihoods and build the resilience of vulnerable communities, including returnees. The project also included joint efforts to reduce intercommunal conflicts and address the root causes of local recruitment into armed groups, notably south of Gao. In close collaboration with local authorities, MINUSMA provided security, political, technical and logistical support, and the World Food Programme provided capacity development and financial support for women, youth and local authorities. These integrated efforts were complemented by sensitization sessions on peacekeeping and cohabitation through the creation of a framework for dialogue by MINUSMA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

In Ansongo, MINUSMA and the United Nations country team undertook integrated actions to restore state authority and the provision of basic social services, through environmental and sanitation-related projects. These joint efforts served to build local resilience against flooding, strengthen social cohesion among community members and enhance the engagement of civil society with recently deployed state authorities, as well as prevent future intercommunal conflict related to water and sanitation in the area.

MINUSMA has also worked closely with the United Nations country team to ensure an integrated response to the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to leverage comparative advantages in the planning, coordination and establishment of the COVID-19 pandemic task force and support, as relevant, for immunization programmes and United Nations COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

In conclusion, MINUSMA, in cooperation with the Malian authorities and diverse partners, has made a difference in support of efforts to prevent violence,

protect civilians, build community resilience and promote dialogue at the national, regional and local levels. However, much remains to be accomplished, including ending the continued spread of violence, strengthening State capacity in the peripheries and promoting intercommunal harmony. For the progress achieved so far, I wish to commend the tireless efforts of the men and women in MINUSMA who have continued to ensure mandate implementation in spite of an increasingly complex threat environment and COVID-19 restrictions. Although insecurity has spread further, MINUSMA has managed to increase the tempo of its operations through innovative integrated approaches that have produced results in a number of areas with regard to the protection of civilians and engagement with local communities in northern and central Mali. The role of MINUSMA in Mali remains critical, as the country implements its political transition and advances in the implementation of the Agreement and the stabilization of central Mali. The Mission's exercise of good offices jointly with regional mediators from the Economic Community of West African States has been indispensable to efforts to address political upheaval in Bamako and to prevent further escalation of tensions.

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

(Signed) António **Guterres**
