

Klemen Kocjančič

DOI: 10.2478/cmc-2023-0008

REVIEW

ON THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING MISSION MINURSO

In 2023, Routledge international publishing house published *Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara: The Role of the UN's Peacekeeping Mission (MINURSO)*, edited by János Besenyő, R. Joseph Huddleston and Yahia H. Zoubir. As the title reveals, the subject of the publication is the functioning and role of one of the longest-lasting peacekeeping missions under the United Nations Organisation, the *Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara* (MINURSO), which operates in Western Sahara and Morocco.

The introduction was contributed by Marco Balboni who focused on a general overview of the mission, whose primary task is to supervise the ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front, which is seeking independence. The mission, which was set up in 1991, had the additional task of supervising the holding of a referendum on the independence and autonomy of the territory, which, however, never took place. As a result, the mission remains the largest UN mission in North Africa. The introduction further explains the concept of peacekeeping missions, the legal aspect of the mission and the prospects for its continuation in the near future.

The rest of the publication is divided into four parts. The first part includes four independent contributions. The first contribution of Part 1, by Carlos Ruiz Miguel, is a legalistic overview of the background of the mission's creation, namely the previous agreements and plans, the history of the mission and its mandate. The armed conflict in this region began after the end of the World War II, when the African continent was swept by a wave of decolonising national liberation movements, some of which were successful and others which met with overwhelming resistance. The interesting thing about this conflict is that the Polisario is fighting against the Moroccan kingdom, i.e. the indigenous African regime, and not against the European colonisers, as was a common feature of most of the other conflicts. The author also

presents the composition of the mission and the activities of the different elements: the special representative, the civilian part, the independent legal advisor, military units and the police security units. An overview of the special representatives and the nations contributing a team to the mission is also included.

Yolanda Blanco Souto's article is an overview of the most important events in the history of the mission, including the Moroccan obstruction of the mission, the cooperation of mission members with Morocco, the destruction of archaeological sites by the mission, the corrupted mission members, the visit of the UN Secretary-General and the exclusion of Moroccan nationals from the civilian part of the mission, and the exclusion of Moroccan nationals from the civilian part of the mission, and the return of Morocco to the disputed territory.

This is followed by a contribution by Jacob Mundy on the last period of the mission at the end of 2020, when conflict reoccurred. The Polisario Front was launching almost daily attacks on individual Moroccan military outposts, which control a 2700 km long military wall and thus strategically control the disputed territory. The reoccurring outbreak of large-scale fights has raised questions about the rationale and the justification or abilities of the mission whose task was to guarantee peace. The author presents these questions in the light of global politics or world powers, which have a major influence on peacekeeping missions and their activities.

The last article in the first part is by Meriem Naïli, who also focuses on the legal aspect of the mission, pointing out that »it is the only UN post-Cold War peacekeeping mission that does not explicitly include observation, monitoring, and report of human rights violations (p. 77). As a result, both sides commit the latter, and after three decades ceasefire has still not been achieved. The role of the Organisation of the African Unity (OAU) in the years leading up to the mission's establishment and the political obstacles facing the mission are also highlighted.

The second part of the publication includes three papers. The first part of Part 2 is by Toby Shelley and provides an overview of the political and social background to the mission's inability to act against human rights violations. It highlights the role of the growing importance of human rights for populations on both sides in the new millennium, the implications of the death of the Moroccan king and the replacement of the Moroccan interior minister, the Moroccan internal crisis, the role of mobile phones and the Internet, and the increased attention of the world to this crisis area.

Next paper is by María López Belloso, who analyses the role of women in MINURSO. She outlines the growing importance of gender and equality in the context of peacekeeping missions, the presence of women in the mission and their relevance to the operation, including the impact on reducing sexual abuse by mission members.

The last paper in Part 2 is by Elie Quesada and Nick Brooks. The authors analyse MINURSO from the perspective of respect and preservation of local cultural

and archaeological heritage. During more than 40 years of armed conflict, many archaeological sites have been damaged or destroyed, and at the same time, the mission has also intentionally or unintentionally destroyed the remains. Graffiti on cultural and non-cultural geographical heritage is particularly highlighted. The authors point out that, compared to some other armed conflicts, such as Iraq and Syria, there has not been a significant increase in the commercial abuse of such artefacts (black market sales), mainly due to the low interest in local artefacts.

The first paper in Part 3 concerns the military part of the mission, i.e. the tasks and their execution. It was written by Cyprian Aleksander Kozera and Błażej Popławski. Based on interviews with former members of the mission and researchers, they analysed the military contingent in terms of numbers, organisation, equipment, nationalities involved, location and the activities of military observers. The authors thus conclude that MINURSO and its military contingent proved to be a relatively effective international effort (pp. 177-178).

This paper is followed by an analysis of the policing part of the mission by János Besenyő and Marcell György Pintér. Civilian police officers were assigned to the mission when the role of military observers proved to be limited and the presence of police officers essential to the mission. However, the police contingent never reached its intended size. The authors outline the tasks and activities of the police, as well as the initial reduction in their numbers and the subsequent increase in the number of police officers.

Mirela Atanasiu wrote a paper on an often-forgotten aspect of international peacekeeping missions, namely the logistical support as well as the financing of the mission, which has a major impact on the ability of the mission to perform its tasks and duties. The paper presents both the general system of logistical support of UN peacekeeping missions and the specific case of the mission. Logistical support is primarily composed of four components: transport, procurement or supply, air support and security services, both of the mission personnel and of the locations in which they are deployed. Next, it shows how the funding of the mission has varied (between 39 and 63 million US dollars) and how this has affected its functioning.

The last contribution in Part 3 is by János Besenyő, who contributed an analysis of the Hungarian contingent's performance in the mission, both in terms of military and police work, especially in terms of the experience of the Hungarian members. He highlights the limited pool of soldiers and police officers who were prepared for a year's service in Western Sahara, as well as the efforts made by both organisations to recruit volunteers. It is interesting to note that more than half of the military contingent was made up of officers, with almost half being senior officers, while the composition of the police force was more diverse.

Part 4 begins with a paper by R. Joseph Huddleston and Edder A. Zarate who focus on the role of the United States in the mission and how the presence of US troops

was perceived on the ground by both sides. Of relevance here is the fact that the US-Morocco partnership is one of the longest-lasting, with the two countries having signed their first agreement as early as 1787. This fact has had a significant impact on the actions of US mission personnel or diplomats in the area, or on the perception of US (in)bias in this conflict. US involvement is analysed mainly through the actions of top diplomats who were directly involved in the peacekeeping.

Csaba Barnabás Horváth analysed China's action in the light of the mission, as well as China's increasing geostrategic presence on the African continent and its involvement in international peacekeeping missions around the world. The author links China's interest in operating in this conflict zone to the presence of the strategic mineral phosphorus, which is found there or in Morocco. Morocco controls 70% of the world's phosphorus reserves, which is a critical ingredient for agriculture (fertilisers) and thus for the economy.

Sergey Nikonov has contributed an analysis of the action of another world power, Russia, against this conflict or mission. Russia, originally the Soviet Union, has been thus contributing troops to the mission since 1991. The author looks at the (in)ability of communication between the different nationalities on the mission, all of whom spoke English as the official language of the mission, an overview of the academic interest in Russia in this conflict and the mission, as well as Russian activities within the UN regarding the mission.

Éva Fábián focused on France, the former coloniser of a good part of the African continent, which maintains an important political and military role in its former colonies in the post-colonial period. France, which had a protectorate over Morocco for over 40 years, also contributed its citizens to MINURSO. This paper analyses France's strategic orientation towards this conflict and the wider Maghreb.

The next paper by David Vogel analyses the attitudes of the remaining African countries towards the mission and the conflict, with regard to voting related to the mission, as well as their participation in the peacekeeping mission (overview of the countries participating in the implementation of the mission). He also provides an overview of the participation of African countries in all peacekeeping missions around the world. The author points out that the presence of African peacekeepers has risen from less than ten per cent to more than a quarter of all military personnel since the start of the mission, while as of 2019 Africans make up the entire police contingent.

The final paper in Part 4, and thus to the whole publication, was written by Souadou Lagdaf and Yahia H. Zoubir. It is about the mission's never-fulfilled mission (to hold a referendum on the independence of Western Sahara). Despite the constant six-month and one-year extensions of the peacekeeping mission, the mission's inability and, in particular, the unwillingness of the international actors to resolve this military and political conflict is evident, despite several international agreements.

The book provides a good overview of the work and activities of one of the longest-lasting United Nations peacekeeping missions, and of a conflict that has been overlooked and, in fact, forgotten in the light of more high-profile international armed conflicts. A more sophisticated reader might like to read more on the role of Spain, also a former coloniser in Morocco, on the evolution of the political will of Morocco, Mauritania and the Polisario Front in this conflict and, possibly, on the comparisons of the participants in terms of military activity.