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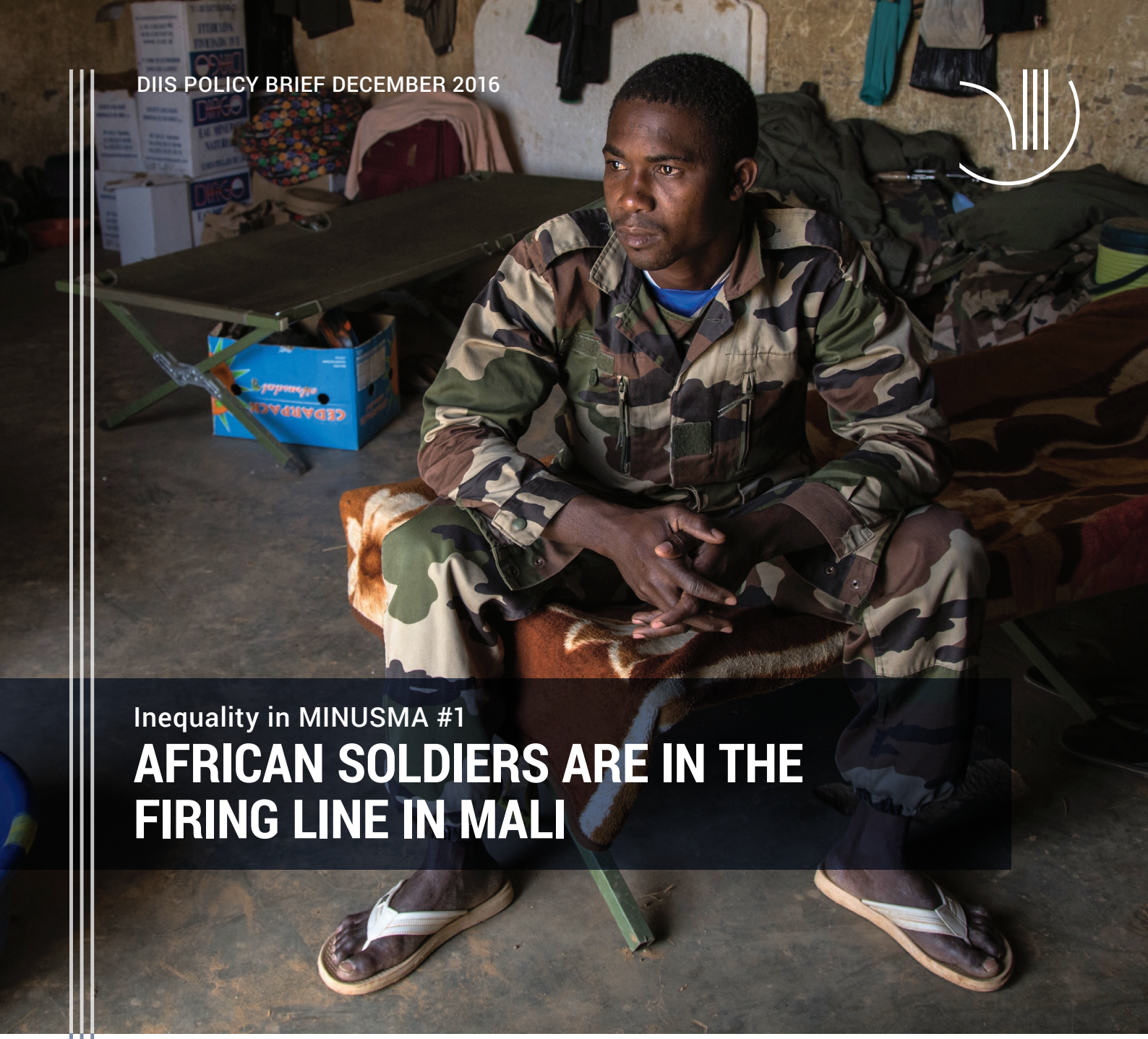

Inequality in MINUSMA #1

AFRICAN SOLDIERS ARE IN THE FIRING LINE IN MALI

African and European soldiers in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) work under very different conditions regarding levels of training, equipment, general support from their governments and the fact that African troops are deployed in the most dangerous areas. The UN should work to reduce these disparities.

In 2013, the UN Security Council established MINUSMA and mandated the mission to support stabilization efforts in Mali. Deployed to a situation of conflict where there is no peace to keep, the mission has suffered the highest number of casualties of any UN-led peace operation. By October 2016, 91 of 109

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The UN should work to minimize the gap between the pledges of troop-contributing countries and the quality of the troops that they end up deploying.
- UN headquarters in New York should make a more clear-cut decision on whether the organization is able to play a genuinely constructive role in stabilization contexts.
- Despite being politically sensitive, it is important to discuss how national caveats can be applied without affecting troop-contributing countries from Africa in an excessively negative manner.

In 2015, MINUSMA had already been referred to as the 'world's most dangerous peacekeeping mission' by the BBC

> **'The Chadians are bringing many positive things to the mission. They have the same kind of crisis as Mali in their own country, so they have the necessary experience to operate in northern Mali.'**
>
> **High-ranking African officer in MINUSMA**

MINUSMA personnel who had been killed were from African countries, 36 from Chad alone, while six came from European countries.

African soldiers are on the frontline of the conflict in Mali, and therefore also on the frontline of the UN's evolving role from peacekeeping to stabilization. During our fieldwork in Mali in June 2016, a European official in MINUSMA referred to Chadian forces, together with the Guineans, as 'the only ones willing to go to the dangerous and impassable parts of Sector North [of the mission].' This was not necessarily seen as a matter of being brave from the perspective of their European counterpart: 'Brave? I don't know, there is a thin line between bravery and stupidity – they seem fearless. They have different norms, values and procedures.'

Chadian willingness to serve in Kidal in the northeast, the Gordian knot of the conflict in Mali, is partially explained as the consequence of a different combat culture or military doctrine. In the words of a high-ranking African officer in Gao: 'Whether there are five, six or seven casualties, it doesn't really matter. If they see an enemy, they stop and fire. At one point, the President [of Chad] announced that it is unacceptable that more of them end up dead, but am I mentioning this [i.e., their combat culture] to say that they are brave people.'

At the same time, the Chadian forces are considered unpredictable and erratic, including by the military leadership in MINUSMA. A common perception across the mission is that Chadians are 'either on low gear or fast, violent and aggressive gear, but there is nothing in between,' as a civilian officer working for MINUSMA and based in Gao explained.

The respective functions and areas of deployment of the European and African troops reinforce the differences between them. European forces are concentrated in and dominate the strategic and coordinating roles of MINUSMA's headquarters located in Bamako, Mali's capital. European Special Forces have also been deployed, though with different degrees of regularity, in all sectors of the mission. For instance, Danish and Dutch Special Forces patrol and gather intelligence in Kidal. African soldiers, in contrast, are permanently deployed on the frontlines of the mission, often without proper equipment or support from the governments that sent them. Some soldiers, notably from Chad, have reportedly been stationed in Tessalit and Aguelhok close to the Algerian border for two to three years without leave. That these differences have very real consequences is evident in MINUSMA's casualty figures.

Especially in MINUSMA's Sector North, which centers on Kidal, the presence of government-led security agencies and public-service delivery are limited or close to non-existent. From the perspective of some within the mission, this makes MINUSMA a proxy for the absent Malian state, which is up against secessionist and jihadist groups in the area.

Jihadist groups perpetrate sporadic violence, including ambushes, kidnappings and targeted attacks against Mali's armed forces and MINUSMA in particular. This puts considerable, some would say insurmountable pressure on MINUSMA to facilitate the process of establishing a government presence in Kidal. It also deploys African peacekeepers to the frontline of a fight for which they are not prepared and perhaps may not fully comprehend.

From peacekeeping to stabilization

The fact that MINUSMA is a target for terrorists directly influences the mission's ability to perform. It also reflects the doctrinal change that the UN is undergoing from peacekeeping to stabilizing ongoing conflicts, to a large extent on the basis of its experiences in Mali. UN member states increasingly recognize the importance of addressing terrorism and organized crime as strategic threats. Nevertheless, UN headquarters in New York has so far only provided limited and often inconsistent guidance on what is required to implement stabilization rather than peacekeeping mandates.

However, the large number of casualties experienced by MINUSMA remains politically unacceptable. By extension, it exposes considerable inequalities between African and non-African soldiers in terms of individual safety, both within the mission and to the international community.

Entering the mission

In addition to aspects relating to the operational environment, a number of factors beyond Mali shape the performance of troop-contributing countries (TCCs) when they deploy. This is important to acknowledge when assessing and understanding why some TCCs perform poorly in MINUSMA. Many of these factors are linked to the UN mechanisms for force generation and thus become visible in the way that TCCs enter the mission.

The UN does not have a standing army. When deploying peace operations, it is entirely dependent on personnel and equipment provided by member states. Contributions to a peacekeeping mission are pledged in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the UN. The MoU details major equipment, self-sustainment services and personnel that the TCC will deploy, and for which it is entitled to receive financial reimbursement from the UN. This is not a one-way

Top: MINUSMA Force Commander Michael Lollesgaard pays his respect at a memorial ceremony for peacekeepers from Burkina Faso who were killed during an ambush in the Timbuktu region in July 2015 © UN Photo/Marco Dormino

Bottom: Members of Mali's National Guard and Police attend a crowd control training conducted by the UN Police (UNPOL) Training Team of MINUSMA © UN Photo/Marco Dormino

relationship involving the TTC in financial gain: the TCC has to keep its part of the deal and deploy troops that are trained and appropriately equipped to fulfil the tasks it is given. This cannot be taken for granted.

The mission carries out an Operational Readiness Inspection of each TCC once every six months or whenever the mission suspects that the equipment or services do not meet agreed standards. These assessments take place to ensure that the TCCs' capability is sufficient and satisfactory. As one logistics officer in MINUSMA noted, they serve the purpose of 'comparing the MoU and the ground holding [of a TCC]: "you have signed to bring X in, but you brought in Y." So if you are not going to fill it up, if you don't have it, you are not going to be reimbursed.'

There are numerous examples of discrepancies between the equipment that TCCs actually possess when deployed and their initial pledge regarding what they will bring into the mission in their MoUs with the UN. Indeed, while a country ideally has to provide 100% of what was pledged, 70% is the minimum requirement. 'Here', a high-ranking European officer in headquarters in Bamako noted, 'we have some countries that only have 29% of the equipment. At that point, the unit stops functioning.' These discrepancies have direct implications for MINUSMA's ability to function.

MINUSMA's inability to deliver on its mandate

The direct consequences for MINUSMA are both technical and political. Technically, the mission is unable to deliver on its mandate because a TCC like Chad does not have the equipment (or training) to operate effectively in Kidal without suffering considerable loss of human life. These dynamics around logistics, and notably the lack of proper logistical support, play into and directly shape conflicts between the orders issued by headquarters in Bamako and the capacity of TCCs to deliver in the sectors of operations.

These conditions are compounded by the fact that the European TCCs have a number of strict caveats attached to their troop contributions in terms of where they can be deployed and under what conditions. For instance, the deployment of most European soldiers is conditioned on helicopter support and access to Level 2 hospitals that can provide basic surgical expertise and life-support services, which are not present in all sectors. The conditions that each TCC negotiates with the UN shape how the mission is organized and the distribution of tasks and equipment, often to the detriment of the African units.

The willingness of the Chadian and Guinean governments to send their troops to some of the most exposed parts of Mali thus stands in stark contrast to the risk-aversion of their European counterparts. As one stabilization officer in UN headquarters in Bamako noted: 'The Dutch, Swedish, German soldiers [based in Gao and Timbuktu] are in their own camps; protected areas aside from everyone else. The UN should not accept the losses among African military staff. It is a huge imbalance'.

The inequalities between European and African peacekeepers extend beyond performance, reflecting deep-seated and political discrepancies of a structural nature. Yet they manifest themselves in fundamental differences in training and equipment, and ultimately casualty statistics.

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Cover photo: UN peacekeeper from Niger is ready to begin a patrol at the Niger Battalion Base in Menaka, eastern Mali © UN Photo/Marco Dormino

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