

Forum: United Nations Special Political and Decolonization Committee

Issue: Strengthening the role of the United Nations in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in former colonies

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Introduction

The United Nations has long played a pivotal role in addressing conflicts and fostering peace, particularly in former colonies where colonial legacies continue to fuel instability.

Since the 2010s, Mali, a former French colony in Africa's Sahel region, has faced persistent terrorist attacks and military coups. In 2024, the UN peacekeeping mission was forced to withdraw after intervening - an outcome that undermines peacekeeping efforts. In another former French colony, Haiti is now under the control of armed gangs. Prime Minister Ariel Henry resigned in March 2024 after gangs attacked prisons and airports. These two events both show the urgency of the issue.

The UN's peacebuilding efforts in former colonies face structural challenges beyond isolated mission failures. As shown in Figure 1, the disconnect between troop-contributing nations and funding states often creates tension (Klobucista and Ferragamo). In Mali and Haiti, this imbalance has fuelled perceptions of "neo-colonial" intervention, eroding local trust in UN-led solutions. This report examines the challenges and opportunities for the UN in strengthening its peacebuilding efforts in these regions, where historical injustices intersect with modern geopolitical tensions. It will explore historical context, major stakeholders, and potential solutions to enhance the UN's effectiveness.

Peacekeeping Funding and Personnel Come From Different Countries

Top ten contributors of funding and of personnel

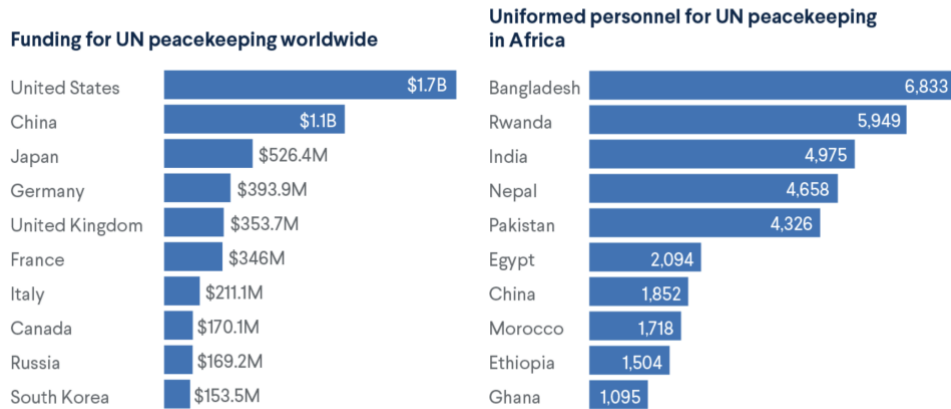


Figure 1: A comparative analysis of the top ten contributors to United Nations peacekeeping efforts, categorized by funding and uniformed personnel deployment.

Key Terminology

African Union (AU)

A continental organization advocating for "African solutions to African problems," often collaborating with the UN in peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

Colonial Reparations

Compensation or restitution for harms caused by colonialism, such as Haiti's "independence debt" or resource exploitation.

Decolonisation

The process by which colonies gain independence from colonial powers, often involving the dismantling of political, economic, and social systems imposed during colonial rule.

Local Agency

The capacity of local communities and governments to lead their own peacebuilding and development processes, as opposed to relying on external interventions.

Neo-Colonialism

The continued economic, political, or cultural influence exerted by former colonial powers over their former colonies, often perpetuating dependency and inequality.

Peacebuilding

Efforts to stabilize post-conflict regions by addressing root causes of violence, strengthening governance, and promoting sustainable development. The UN engages in peacebuilding to prevent the recurrence of conflict in former colonies.

Resource sovereignty

The right of nations to control and benefit from their natural resources, often undermined by colonial-era economic structures.

Background

History of the issue

The modern conflicts affecting former colonies stem largely from colonial-era policies that prioritized imperial control over sustainable development. The arbitrary borders imposed by colonial powers ignored ethnic, cultural, and geographic realities, creating fragile states prone to instability. Unlike traditional borders shaped by natural features like rivers and mountains, political agreements between communities, or cultural boundaries, colonial borders prioritized imperial administrative convenience over sustainability. This legacy traces back to the 1884 Berlin Conference, which established the legal justification for European powers to occupy Africa based on territorial claims rather than local governance structures (Getz). Today, 44% of Africa's borders remain straight lines that divide ethnic groups—a persistent source of tension the UN must address ("Africa's Borders Split over 177 Ethnic Groups, and Their "Real" Lines Aren't Where You Think").

Although many former colonies gained independence in 1960, they inherited weak functioning institutions that were unprepared for self-governance. The Democratic Republic of Congo exemplifies this challenge, though formally decolonized by Belgium, the country descended into immediate chaos upon independence. Belgium's abrupt departure left no

trained army, experienced bureaucrats, or functioning legal system. The situation worsened when the Congolese army mutinied against remaining Belgian officers still holding command positions. This crisis made UN intervention inevitable, as the organization was compelled to uphold its Charter by supporting the newly independent nation. Consequently, the UN launched its first large-scale peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC), which lasted from 1960 to 1963. While the ONUC helped prevent total collapse and secured the withdrawal of foreign fighters, it fell short of ensuring lasting stability, as the Congo soon became a dictatorship and faced repeated conflicts. This mission marked a critical evolution in UN peacekeeping, as it changed how UN peacekeeping worked—moving from just observing to actively using military force and protecting civilians. Still, its uneven outcomes showed how difficult it is to rebuild a country after colonial rule, leading the UN to later focus more on building strong institutions along with keeping peace.

Recurring Challenges in Post-Colonial Peacebuilding

One of the primary challenges is weak governance, a direct result of colonial systems that deliberately excluded local populations from administrative experience. For example, in Belgium's Congo Free State, by the time of independence in 1960, there were fewer than 20 university-educated Congolese citizens capable of running government institutions (Tumin). This lack of trained professionals left the newly independent nation without the basic framework for self-governance, ultimately requiring the UN's emergency peacekeeping intervention to prevent total state collapse. Similarly, Haiti, after gaining independence from France, was forced to pay a punitive 'independence debt'. This drained Haiti's economy for over a century and crippled its ability to build functional institutions, leaving it without effective tax systems or courts capable of curbing gang violence. Consequently, the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), which aimed to restore order and strengthen institutions, invested heavily on police training. Yet today, gangs control 80% of Haiti's capital, underscoring the persistent challenges in post-colonial governance (Hu et al.).

The second challenge is foreign intervention, particularly when former colonial powers lead peacekeeping missions, creating perceptions of colonialism in a new form. For example, in Mali, France headed the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was mandated to stabilize the country. However, its counterterrorism operations made many Malians feel that France was still seeking to control them. This fueled local backlash—most of Malians viewed MINUSMA as an occupying force—while jihadists exploited anti-French sentiment for recruitment. A similar situation occurred in Haiti during the MINUSTAH mission. The deployment of troops from countries such as Brazil, a nation with its own complex history of slavery, generated widespread protests. Many Haitians viewed this intervention as foreign powers imposing solutions rather than supporting self-led recovery. Such patterns undermine UN peacebuilding efforts by fostering local distrust and providing armed groups with recruitment propaganda, as they frame the UN as "just another colonizer."

Economic Aspect

Colonial powers structured economies to prioritize the export of raw materials—such as cocoa, oil, or diamonds—while suppressing local industries. For instance, France required 14 West African countries to deposit 50% of their foreign exchange reserves into the French Treasury, a policy that entrenched economic dependence ("Why 14 African Nations Deposit Half of Their Currency Reserve in Paris?!"). Today, this legacy perpetuates cycles of debt and instability. Haiti, for example, was forced to pay France 150 million francs in "independence debt," draining resources that could have been invested in schools or hospitals (Wikipedia Contributors). Similarly, the Democratic Republic of the Congo loses roughly \$4 billion annually to foreign mining companies, fueling violent conflicts over resource control (Equipe Publication). These economic crises undermine UN peacebuilding efforts. In Mali, for instance, UN job-training programs failed because most young people work in illegal gold mines—the only viable income source after France's cotton monopolies collapsed ("Local Perspectives Should Shape Multilateral Responses to Transnational Organized Crime"). To break this cycle, the UN must support former colonies in building equitable economies rather than relying solely on peacekeeping missions.

Political Aspect

Colonial powers deliberately destroyed local leadership structures to consolidate their dominance. For instance, Britain's "divide and rule" tactics in Nigeria deliberately turned ethnic groups against one another. This strategy ultimately backfired after independence, leading to the 1967 Biafra War, which resulted in approximately one million deaths (Baidu). The consequences of these colonial policies endure today. First, artificially drawn borders that divided ethnic communities continue to fuel underdevelopment and political instability across many African nations (Gashaw). In Cameroon, for example, Anglophone separatists still fight Francophone rulers because Britain and France divided the territory without regard for local identities. Second, weak institutions have further exacerbated these problems. When Belgium's Congo gained independence in 1960, it had only 16 university graduates, leading to decades of corrupt dictatorship and what would become the UN's largest peacekeeping mission ("Heart of Darkness: The Tragedy of the Congo, 1960-67"). These political traps continue to undermine UN efforts. In South Sudan, the UN spent approximately \$20 billion but failed to prevent civil war, as colonial-era tribal divisions were deeply embedded in the new government. Lasting peace requires the UN to help reform political systems—it cannot simply sustain flawed ones.

Social Aspect

Decades after independence, the UN's peacebuilding efforts continue to address the social divisions left by colonial rule, which still undermine reconciliation. For example, during MINUSTAH, Nepalese peacekeepers contaminated Haiti's main water source, leading to a cholera outbreak in 2010 that killed over 9,000 Haitians (Besheer). This tragedy deepened local distrust in international interventions, and today, gangs exploit this resentment by positioning themselves as "resistance" against foreign influence. Similarly, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while the recent US-brokered peace deal between the DRC and Rwanda offers hope (Beloff), its implementation faces grassroots skepticism—particularly from women and children who have endured sexual violence and the destruction of over 290

schools, leaving 1.3 million children without education (Africa Newsroom). The UN's United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) struggles to bridge these social divides, as many Congolese see peacekeepers as perpetuating foreign intervention. This challenge is compounded by cuts in critical humanitarian funding, including from the United States—which historically provided 70% of UN aid to the DRC (The African Mirror). These persistent divisions demonstrate that lasting peace requires more than international diplomacy or military interventions, it demands healing of the social wounds inflicted by colonialism.

Major Parties Involved

French Republic

The French Republic maintains that its involvement in former colonies through UN peacekeeping and bilateral missions aims to "stabilize conflict zones and combat terrorism." However, critics argue its actions often replicate colonial-era power dynamics. France has led major counterterrorism operations, such as Operation Barkhane in Mali (2014–2022), often in coordination with UN missions. It is also a leading funder and troop contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, including MINUSMA in Mali and MINUSTAH in Haiti. While France officially aims to promote peace and security in Francophone Africa, many locals perceive its interventions as primarily protecting economic interests, such as uranium mines in Niger and cotton monopolies in Mali.

France's counterterrorism operations in Mali faced growing local opposition, with 68% of Malians viewing the UN mission MINUSMA as an "occupation force." This backlash contributed to Mali's government demanding the withdrawal of French troops in 2022. In Haiti, France politically supported the UN's MINUSTAH mission but refrained from contributing troops, a decision likely influenced by historical tensions over the indemnity Haiti was forced to

pay for its independence. This financial burden, imposed by France in 1825 in exchange for recognition, has long strained relations between the two nations.

France's prominent role in UN missions has at times backfired, undermining the organization's legitimacy—most visibly when Mali expelled MINUSMA in 2024 amid widespread anti-UN sentiment. Additionally, France's economic influence in its former colonies, including its former control over the CFA franc (until 2020) and its dominance in mining contracts, has perpetuated financial dependency. This complicates UN-led economic reforms, as critics argue such arrangements prioritize French interests over local development.

African Union

The African Union advocates for "African solutions to African problems," emphasizing local leadership in peacebuilding while cooperating with the UN. It criticizes former colonial powers for dominating security interventions in ways that replicate colonial patterns. The African Union actively engages in peacekeeping by deploying its own missions such as AMISOM in Somalia while also contributing troops to UN operations, with Rwanda being a major provider of 5,949 peacekeeping personnel. The African Union developed the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), a comprehensive policy framework coordinating conflict prevention across all 55 member states, as part of its mission 'to silence the guns in Africa by 2030'.

During Mali's crisis, the African Union consistently advocated for transitional governments following military coups, rejecting France's unilateral military interventions in the region. Instead, the AU promoted regional solutions like the 2023 Accra Initiative, which coordinates counterterrorism efforts across the Sahel using West African troops rather than external forces. In the 2024 DRC peace process, the African Union played a critical mediating role between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, building upon the US-brokered framework while adding continental legitimacy to the negotiations.

The African Union's peacekeeping missions—such as those 70% funded by the EU—face constrained autonomy due to financial dependency on former colonial powers, challenging the UN's monopoly on continental security. However, African Union peacekeeping forces—like Rwandan troops deployed in Mozambique—enjoy 40% higher local approval than UN missions, as AU forces are perceived as less foreign and more legitimate by grassroots communities.

United Nations Peacebuilding Commission

The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) plays a critical role in addressing post-colonial conflicts by coordinating international support for countries emerging from war. Established in 2005, the PBC's mandate is to prevent relapse into violence by fostering sustainable peace through inclusive governance, economic recovery, and social cohesion. Unlike traditional peacekeeping missions, the PBC focuses on long-term institution-building rather than short-term military stabilization—a crucial distinction in former colonies where weak governance perpetuates instability. The PBC has actively engaged in post-colonial contexts, including Haiti and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where it supports national reconciliation and economic reforms. For example, in Haiti, the PBC advocated for redirecting funds from security-focused missions like MINUSTAH toward grassroots development programs, though its efforts were undermined by the 2010 cholera crisis and persistent gang violence.

The PBC's stance emphasizes local ownership, urging former colonial powers and the UN to prioritize national leadership in peace processes. This aligns with critiques of neo-colonial interventions, as seen in Mali, where externally imposed solutions fueled backlash. However, the PBC's influence is constrained by its reliance on voluntary funding and the dominance of Security Council mandates, which often prioritize security over structural reforms. A key concern is the disconnect between its vision of inclusive peacebuilding and the reality of UN missions—such as MONUSCO in the DRC—where militarized approaches overshadow community-led reconciliation. The PBC's involvement carries significant implications: if given more authority, the PBC could change the UN's focus from simply reacting to immediate crises

to also dealing with long-term problems left behind by colonialism, such as unfair use of resources and exclusion from political power. Without stronger enforcement measures, the PBC's suggestions could be ignored when they conflict with powerful countries' interests—similar to how promises to compensate victims of the cholera outbreak in Haiti were not properly funded.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description/Note
February 26, 1885	Berlin Conference formalizes European colonial borders in Africa, ignoring ethnic divisions
January 1, 1804	Haiti declares independence from France after slave revolution
April 17, 1825	France imposes "independence debt" of 150 million francs on Haiti
June 30, 1960	Belgian Congo gains independence with virtually no trained administrators
July 14, 1960	UN launches Operation in Congo (ONUC) - first major peacekeeping mission
June 1, 2004	MINUSTAH peacekeeping mission begins in Haiti
October 21, 2010	Nepalese UN troops introduce cholera to Haiti through contaminated water
January 11, 2013	MINUSMA peacekeeping mission begins in Mali
August 1, 2014	France launches Operation Barkhane counterterrorism mission in Sahel
May 2, 2022	Mali's transitional government demands French troop withdrawal
September 15, 2022	Accra Initiative expands as a West African counterterrorism effort.
December 31, 2023	MINUSMA officially withdraws from Mali after expulsion
March 11, 2024	Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry resigns after gang attacks

Previous Attempts/Solutions

The UN's peacekeeping missions represent the most direct attempts at intervention. The Organization's first major operation, ONUC (1960-1964), was deployed to stabilize the newly independent Congo after Belgium's abrupt withdrawal left the country without

functioning institutions. While ONUC prevented immediate state collapse, its failure to establish lasting governance structures contributed to the instability that persists in the DRC today. Similarly, the MINUSTAH mission in Haiti (2004-2017) focused on police training and gang violence reduction, but its legacy was marred by the cholera epidemic introduced by Nepalese peacekeepers in 2010, which killed over 9,000 Haitians and deepened distrust in international interventions. More recently, the MINUSMA mission in Mali (2013-2023), jointly led by France, became emblematic of neo-colonial perceptions, with 68% of Malians viewing it as an occupying force before its eventual expulsion in 2023. These cases demonstrate how peacekeeping operations that fail to account for colonial trauma and local agency often backfire, reinforcing rather than resolving tensions.

Potential Solutions

1. Regional-Led Peacekeeping with UN Support

- Co-lead peace operations with regional organizations (e.g., African Union) to improve local trust and legitimacy, while maintaining UN logistical and financial backing.
- Prioritize troop contributions from non-colonial and neighboring nations to reduce perceptions of foreign intervention, ensuring missions align with regional stability goals.

2. Colonial Reparations and Justice Fund

- Cancel unjust colonial-era debts (e.g., Haiti's independence debt) and redirect funds into local infrastructure, healthcare, and education.
- Mandate 30% of peacekeeping budgets for direct victim compensation (e.g., cholera victims in Haiti) and community reparations, shifting focus from militarized solutions to restorative justice.

3. Economic Sovereignty and Resource Fairness

- Establish UN-monitored contract reviews for foreign mining/oil deals in former colonies to prevent exploitation (e.g., DRC's \$4B annual losses).
- Redirect peacebuilding investments toward local industries (e.g., Mali's cotton sector) to reduce dependency on extractive foreign corporations and foster sustainable economies.

4. Grassroots Reconciliation & Indigenous Leadership

- Expand mediation to include local voices, particularly women and Indigenous leaders, in conflict resolution (modelled after AU-led DRC-Rwanda talks).
- Fund Indigenous-led education and cultural programs to heal colonial-era trauma and rebuild social cohesion through heritage preservation.

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