



# Security Council

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## Letter dated 1 June 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to refer to Security Council resolution [2480 \(2019\)](#) 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 security challenges in Mali, progress in mission operations, troop performance and rotations, and an update on the coordination of security responsibilities; and (b) 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.

### Security challenges in Mali and Mission operations

As outlined in my recent reports ([S/2020/223](#) and [S/2020/476](#)), MINUSMA continues to operate in highly complex and constantly evolving political and security environments. It has continued to play an essential role in helping the parties to the Agreement to overcome differences through dialogue and make progress towards its full implementation, while stepping up its support for the authorities in their efforts to protect civilians in central Mali.

In northern Mali, in response to Operation Maliko aimed at focusing national armed forces operations on strategic locations, MINUSMA increased its efforts to protect civilians in areas from which the national armed forces had withdrawn, including Operation Seka to secure the Gao-Labézanga axis, in Gao Region. It also supported the establishment of a second district police station in Gao and the reinforcement of the Malian police and gendarmerie in Ansongo, Gao Region; in Ménaka; and in Goundam, Niafunké and Tonka, Timbuktu Region. On 26 and 27 April, MINUSMA handed over responsibility for providing security for the Operational Coordination Mechanism camps in Gao and Timbuktu to the Malian defence and security forces, which had strengthened their presence there.

In central Mali, as part of its adaptation plan and increased cooperation with the national armed forces, MINUSMA continued to take concrete steps to strengthen its aerial and ground troop presence, with a particular focus on high-risk areas in Bandiagara, Koro and Bankass *cercles* as part of its Operation Buffalo. MINUSMA established a number of temporary operating bases to support national armed forces and local authorities in protecting civilians, while stepping up mediation and reconciliation initiatives and efforts to fight impunity. As part of its overall support for security sector reform, MINUSMA continued to assist relevant national commissions, including in implementing the national community rehabilitation programme aimed at



promoting the voluntary disarmament of self-defence groups. MINUSMA also helped with the reinforcement of the Malian police and gendarmerie in Bandiagara, Bankass and Koro *cercles* and Sévaré through capacity-building and transportation.

In addition to the efforts by the Mission and national authorities outlined above, a sustainable approach to stemming the violence in central Mali requires a robust security and development response that includes the provision of basic social services, a reduction in community violence and the dismantling of militia groups. Appeals to young people not to join armed groups need to be coupled with employment opportunities. A strengthened justice sector is also essential to fight impunity, including investigating and prosecuting those responsible for atrocities.

The Mission continued its efforts in support of national authorities in the fight against impunity, which is essential for peace and stability in the country and the region. In coordination with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the Mission is supporting the Specialized Judicial Unit to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime in its investigations and in scaling up its criminal analysis and case management capacity. As at 20 May, a total of [618] cases were being investigated by the Unit, including [319] terrorism cases and [77] transnational organized crime cases. To date, [13] individuals have been detained in relation to crimes against peacekeepers; no individual has yet been convicted in relation to these acts. MINUSMA provided technical support to the Special Investigations Brigade, including in its investigation into the abduction of the political opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé. It also assisted the Ministry of Justice with its inspection missions in Kidal (for the first time since 2006) and in Gao.

### **Troop and police performance**

MINUSMA continued to take effective action to improve overall mission performance and address shortfalls, with a particular focus on mandate implementation and the safety and security of its personnel. To that end, it revised some of its standard operating procedures and, in particular, established decentralized procedures for casualty evacuation in early 2020, contributing to shorter timelines. The Mission further reviewed and streamlined its integrated situational reporting and strengthened procedures for the investigation of serious incidents.

In central Mali, the Mission stepped up efforts to ensure an integrated response to threats against civilians. The establishment of a temporary operating base in Douna-Pen in January enabled the Mission to conduct four mediation missions in Koro *cercle*, Mopti Region, and to support a number of small-scale community projects. These efforts contributed to the strengthening of ties among the communities and facilitated access for humanitarian actors. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs joined one of the MINUSMA mediation missions on 10 March to assess the humanitarian needs of the population. Reconciliation efforts backed by stabilization projects are vital in that regard, since terrorist armed groups tend to exploit tensions and conflicts along community lines, while communities with strong social cohesion have suffered fewer attacks.

Temporary operating bases were established in the villages of Dioungani, Koro *cercle*, and Ogossogou, Bankass *cercle*, less than 48 hours after MINUSMA was informed about violent attacks there. The Mission's presence helped to stabilize the situation and enabled the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the conduct of human rights investigations. Upon receiving reports of allegations of human rights violations in Malémana, Ténenkou *cercle*, MINUSMA notified the Malian authorities, who requested assistance to travel to the remote location. MINUSMA subsequently escorted a joint mission, which included the Malian gendarmerie investigation team, to carry out the investigation.

The Mission's improved early warning and quick reaction capacities proved essential in preventing attacks against civilians in the centre of the country. In early March, following a series of violent attacks on villages and hamlets in Bankass *cercle* that had claimed many lives, the Mission was alerted, including through its toll-free hotline, to reports of an imminent attack in the area. In response, it conducted deterrent flights and successfully dispersed the presumed assailants. In parallel, MINUSMA police operations focused on mixed long-range security patrols with overnight stay to ensure engagement with communities in remote areas in Bandiagara, Bankass and Koro *cercles* that are affected by frequent clashes between militia groups affiliated with Dogon and Fulani communities.

To better assess the effectiveness of the protection of civilians response in central Mali, MINUSMA piloted a new incident mapping tool that integrates data gathered by uniformed and civilian components to measure the impact of patrols and temporary operating bases. According to the initial findings, patrols conducted in the framework of Operation Buffalo helped to improve security in the area and played a key role in preventing the escalation of incidents in high-risk areas in Bandiagara and Koro *cercles*. Only a limited number of incidents were recorded in the immediate vicinity in the days that followed. The deterrent effect of patrols may decrease with time but remains noticeable for up to two weeks. No retaliatory attacks against civilians were documented after peacekeepers left an area.

MINUSMA has taken further measures to prevent peacekeeper fatalities and enhance their safety and security. In keeping with its strategy to counter the use of improvised explosive devices, further training courses were developed, with a particular focus on convoy commanders and staff officers. The courses are complemented by targeted training and mentoring activities by the Mine Action Service for units operating in high-threat environments. In March, one combat convoy company detected and cleared five improvised explosive devices while escorting a single convoy. The implementation of threat mitigation measures for improvised explosive devices by all contingents has resulted in a high percentage of explosive devices being detected and neutralized. This has effectively reduced the risk and number of related fatalities, helped to maintain freedom of movement and built confidence among peacekeepers.

Specialized equipment, such as mine-protected vehicles, was essential in preventing casualties in northern and central Mali. I reiterate my call for all Member States to honour their commitments under the Action for Peacekeeping framework and do everything possible so that peacekeepers receive the equipment and training necessary to effectively implement their mandate in one of the most challenging United Nations operations. MINUSMA currently has 550 armoured vehicles: 479 (87 per cent) that are used daily, 30 (5.5 per cent) that are undergoing maintenance and 41 (7.5 per cent) that are not serviceable owing to improvised explosive device blasts or other issues that are beyond the Mission's ability to repair them and need to be replaced urgently.

### **Evaluations of the Mission's force and police components**

Since the beginning of 2020, MINUSMA has evaluated the performance of 24 of its military units, of which 1 was rated excellent and 15 satisfactory, while performance shortfalls were identified for 4 units, including with regard to mandate understanding, training, command and control. The remaining four units were rated as needing overall improvement, and specific recommendations were received to address and rectify the identified shortfalls. Shortfalls are being addressed through further in-mission training, clarified procedures and requests for additional equipment. Overall, 17 units have submitted performance improvement plans and are taking active steps to implement them.

The MINUSMA police component continued to implement a systematic performance evaluation system instituted in June 2019. Since then, all 10 formed police units have been evaluated and found to be performing satisfactorily. Criteria against which their performance was measured 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 armoured personnel carriers or replace damaged ones and expired ammunition. Recommendations were also made to units to further improve their language capacity, enhance force protection and increase safety and security measures, including on patrols. Evaluations were conducted on a quarterly basis and highlighted improvements and steps taken by units as well as by police contributing countries over the past months. Performance improvement plans continue to be implemented by all units.

Since my previous letter (S/2019/1004), no instances of undeclared caveats by troop-contributing countries have been recorded. There was one case of a combat convoy company opposing the conduct of a reconnaissance mission on a new supply route in the absence of night air surveillance over bivouac sites. Although commanders serving in peacekeeping operations are obliged to comply with directives, it was recognized that the increasing threat level in the Mission area might warrant a review of the combat convoy company statement of unit requirements.

### **Challenges**

The increased MINUSMA presence and operational tempo in central Mali have contributed to further heightening of the expectations of the population vis-à-vis the Mission. At times, the situation has fuelled frustration in the light of the Mission's limited capacity to respond to multiple and concomitant incidents. Allegations of human rights violations by the armed forces in the centre of Mali have posed additional challenges for the Mission in its interactions with communities whose members are victims of such violations. In the context of implementing the human rights due diligence policy, MINUSMA continues to encourage Malian authorities to take the steps necessary to prevent human rights violations and swiftly investigate allegations of violations by the armed forces.

Although confronted with a number of cases of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) among its uniformed personnel from the start of the outbreak in Mali, the Mission's swift action and close collaboration with the authorities allowed it to contain the spread within its ranks. The majority of affected personnel have since recovered. MINUSMA acted rapidly to upgrade its medical infrastructure and employ additional personnel to ensure that it had sufficient medical capacity in spite of increased demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the outbreak caused it to slow the conduct of some its activities, MINUSMA nevertheless continued to deliver on key priorities, including support for the legislative elections, which resulted in an increased number of women members of parliament. In the same vein, the Mission continued to support monitoring mechanisms for the Agreement. There has been progress in the participation of women, with six women now part of the Agreement Monitoring Committee.

Global travel restrictions imposed as part of the measures against the spread of the pandemic have affected the Mission air operations. Limitations placed on the rotations of air crews, specialized maintenance teams and the resupply of spare parts have contributed to a reduction in the number of flight hours. MINUSMA has prioritized air operations to ensure continued medical and casualty evacuation, as well as quick-reaction capacity and support for priority missions. Limitations on air operations have further increased the burden on the combat convoy companies to ensure that the Mission's bases are resupplied.

**Troop rotations**

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, new deployments and the rotation of uniformed personnel were suspended at my request. On an exceptional basis, and with the agreement of the Malian authorities, some critical rotations have taken place to ensure business continuity. In those cases, quarantine measures prior to and after the deployment were observed.

**Coordination of security presences**

The Instance de Coordination au Mali continued to serve as the main forum for coordinating the activities of all security forces present in Mali. On 12 March, its discussions were focused on the plan to transform the northern city of Ménaka into an “arms-free” area. Monthly operational coordination meetings, which bring together representatives of all security forces present in Mali at the staff level, contributed to a marked improvement in coordination among the security forces.

**Implementation of the integrated strategic framework and transition plan**

The implementation of the integrated strategic framework continued to contribute to a more coherent, resource-effective and integrated United Nations response in Mali, including in the context of the legislative elections and in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The framework is fully aligned with national development plans and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. It remains an essential enabler and coordination tool to ensure a coordinated response that leverages comparative advantages within the United Nations system.

During the legislative elections held on 19 March and 29 April, the Mission and the country team provided integrated support to Malian authorities through the United Nations integrated electoral team in Mali, co-led by MINUSMA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and in collaboration with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). MINUSMA provided political, technical, security and logistical support to national and local authorities and distributed electoral materials in northern and central Mali. UNDP helped the authorities by providing technical and financial assistance to the election management bodies, civil society organizations and other stakeholders in the electoral process. This included capacity-building activities, payment of some electoral staff, funding of voter outreach activities, election-related conflict prevention and mitigation and preventive measures against communicable diseases during elections. In addition, MINUSMA, UNDP and UN-Women coordinated efforts to promote the participation of women and young people in the electoral process, which had a positive effect. Considerable efforts were made by the Mission and UNDP in support of the Government to put in place preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 during the polls.

In central Mali, MINUSMA and the country team facilitated the return of 3,120 displaced persons to the Femaye commune in Djenne district through good offices and inclusive community dialogue. MINUSMA, together with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNDP, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organization and non-governmental organizations, developed an action plan to address challenges faced by returnees, with a focus on security, protection, shelter, health, water and sanitation.

MINUSMA has worked closely with the United Nations country team to ensure an integrated response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A task force was established to facilitate a coordinated response, and several projects were launched to assist national

and local authorities. MINUSMA, with technical support from the World Health Organization, has redirected resources to help with three large-scale projects aimed at reinforcing the capacities of the Ministry of Health and local authorities, by procuring equipment and material to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and to prevent the virus from spreading further.

In collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross, the European Union and UNDP, MINUSMA provided critical supplies to 21 tribunals and 34 prisons in Bamako and in the centre and north of Mali.

Following the transition workshop held in November 2019, the Mission and the country team validated a transition calendar on 23 January. Considering the highly complex and rapidly evolving political and security situation in Mali, the calendar is focused on the implementation of the integrated strategic framework to ensure a more coordinated United Nations response and strengthened capacity of partners in relevant transition-related sectors. The calendar also includes the undertaking of a gender-sensitive and human rights-sensitive conflict analysis to strengthen gender equality in the long term and a study to identify the capacity of partners and areas to be reinforced, with a view to an eventual transfer of tasks.

### **Possible long-term exit strategy for the Mission**

The eventual withdrawal of MINUSMA should depend on the fulfilment of a set of political and security conditions, including the full implementation of the Agreement and the strengthening of national capacities and regional initiatives to stabilize the situation in Mali and the Sahel region. As the Mission works to support Malian parties and authorities in achieving these objectives, it is vital to continue to assess developments on the ground and maintain the focus on the steps necessary to achieve the ultimate targets.

The overarching objective should remain the creation of conditions for a more stable and peaceful situation in Mali, with sufficient capacity for the State to defend national territorial integrity and sovereignty and protect its civilians, thereby allowing for the reconfiguration or withdrawal of the United Nations peacekeeping mission. The full implementation of the Agreement is an important milestone in achieving a successful transition. Other critical milestones include strengthening the capacity of the State to protect its citizens, peacefully manage political disputes and provide basic services and long-term development. There is no viable exit strategy without national ownership. Its development will need to be based on constructive dialogue and partnership between national authorities and the international community to address priority peacebuilding needs and the underlying causes of recurring instability. As outlined in my previous letter, any premature withdrawal of MINUSMA risks reversing the hard-won gains made in Mali since the establishment of the Mission in 2013 and the considerable investments made by the international community since then, with potentially devastating consequences for Mali and the Sahel region.

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

*(Signed)* António **Guterres**