

MINUSMA: initial steps, achievements and challenges

By Isaline Bergamaschi

■ Executive summary

This policy brief deals with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). It explains its initial achievements and the two main challenges it has faced so far: issues of leadership, including co-ordination between actors and capacities, on the one hand, and issues related to security conditions and the absence of peace, on the other. Finally, the policy brief proposes some recommendations to the actors involved – MINUSMA itself (i.e. its civilian and military personnel) and the UN member states supporting it.

The United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was officially launched on July 1st 2013 following the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2100 on April 25th. With France leading the adoption of the resolution that authorised MINUSMA, the mission created unusual consensus among members of the Security Council. It will eventually include 12,000 troops.

Under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter the mission's broad and ambitious mandate includes stabilising the key population centres, especially in the north of the country; extending and re-establishing state administration throughout the country; supporting the rebuilding of the Malian security sector; developing disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes; supporting the implementation of the transitional road map and facilitating progress towards an inclusive national dialogue and reconciliation process; supporting the organisation and conduct of inclusive, free, fair and transparent presidential and legislative elections; protecting civilians under imminent threat of physical violence; supporting humanitarian assistance; supporting the preservation of Malian culture, in collaboration with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation; and supporting national and international justice. All these actions will be conducted in support of transitional authorities and for the period deemed necessary.

MINUSMA's main headquarters and force headquarters are in Bamako. Civilian and police regional offices are being set up in Gao, Timbuktu, Mopti and Kidal, while sector headquarters are being established in Gao and Timbuktu, which are the command centres for the mission's military personnel.

Initial steps and activities thus far

Blue helmets and MINUSMA civilian staff are arriving on Malian soil in stages. Their deployment has been complicated and delayed by the absence of a legitimate central government, extreme climactic conditions – primarily intense heat (Carayol, 2013) – and the weakening of public administrations in the northern regions following their occupation by Tuareg and Islamist insurgents between spring 2012 and early 2013. The mission's logistical equipment has been deployed in Kidal only since July 28th and MINUSMA will reach its full strength only by the end of 2013. In the meantime the mission's representatives have made contact with Malian authorities in the capital and the regions, journalists, civil society organisations, and UN specialised agencies present in the country such as the World Food Programme and the UN Children's Fund.

One of MINUSMA's important initial tasks was the conversion of the 6,000 AFISMA¹ troops into blue helmets. These troops have four months to comply with UN norms and this process remains a difficult one for many. Burkina Faso sent a contingent of 500-600 troops when the UN asked for 850.

¹ The African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) is the military mission of the Economic Community of West African States to Mali. It was authorised by Security Council Resolution 2085 in December 2012 and included about 6,000 West African soldiers.

The Chadian contingent failed to meet human rights standards in terms of the involvement of child soldiers (Radio France Internationale, 2013). The UN, the U.S., the European Union and Nigeria have provided training.

Another of MINUSMA's initial steps was to supervise the presidential elections on July 28th and August 11th. Despite many organisational weaknesses, the election occurred in overall good conditions, without major security incidents. The first round reached record participation rates (over 48%) and the second round led to the election of Ibrahim Boubacou Keita with an estimated 77% of the vote. His rivals, including his second-round opponent, Soumaïla Cissé, acknowledged their defeat and congratulated Mali's new president.

MINUSMA played a role in this outcome. The UN Development Programme supported the establishment of the biometric electoral register by providing fingerprint and photographic equipment to produce voting cards and supervised workshops aimed at training civil society organisations how to respect and promote human rights during the election. UN staff organised a flight to Nema, Mauritania, to distribute voting cards to Malian refugees. A Senegalese rapid action team supported by Beninese and Guinean troops and Togolese police secured Kidal, which was under the control of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) until June 2013. Blue helmets controlled the city's seven entry points and circulated in mixed patrols with Malian and, more rarely, French soldiers (Autre Presse, 2013).

The election outcome creates an enabling environment and more favourable context for the further deployment of MINUSMA activities. It apparently puts an end to the political vacuum triggered by the March 2012 coup: the newly elected authorities in Bamako should enjoy greater legitimacy and leverage to govern and negotiate with northern insurgents than the former transitional authorities.

On August 14th the Council of Ministers issued a decree promoting Captain Sanogo and some ex-junta members, including Major-Colonel Didier Dacko (commander of military operations in the north) and Colonel Moussa Sinko Coulibaly (minister of territorial administration in the transitional government). Human Rights Watch said that these promotions were "shameful", because Sanogo and his supporters had ordered several illegal arrests and killings after the coup. In addition, Mali's Front uni pour la sauvegarde de la démocratie et de la république declared it would take the case to court to get the decree cancelled on the grounds that it violated Law No. 055 of 2002 on the general status of the military and would send a dangerous political message to other potential coup plotters.

But on August 28th the Council of Ministers announced that Sanogo was no longer chief of the military committee for the monitoring of the reform of the army and security

forces, a position that he had held since February 2013. By taking these two steps Interim President Traoré hoped to help the new government keep the military in their barracks once and for all. In an interview Sanogo guaranteed that he would serve the new president honourably and loyally, but many doubt that he will completely retire from politics.

Initial challenges

Leadership, co-ordination, capacity

Because MINUSMA was instituted after the French military intervention and after Resolution 2100 authorised Operation Serval, the task of "stabilisation" is de facto shared between the French military and MINUSMA commanders. However, "while on paper the division of labour is clear – Opération Serval will undertake peace-enforcement activities, while MINUSMA will 'deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas' – in practice such lines quickly fade and problems arise" (Nadin, 2013).

Leadership and the division of labour within MINUSMA have been contested. Bert Koenders from the Netherlands was appointed head of the mission with French support rather than the African Union's candidate, Pierre Buyoya, the former Burundian president and head of AFISMA. Rwanda's Major General Jean-Bosco Kazuran was appointed force commander of MINUSMA, thus sidelining Nigeria's Major-General Shehu Adbulkadir, the AFISMA force commander since January 2013. But the commander of the French forces, General Vianney Pillet, appears to be the real chief of military operations in practice, in collaboration with Operation Serval commanders (*Jeune Afrique*, 2013).

Together with the need for Nigeria to mobilise all its national forces to fight Boko Haram at home, the subordinate role given to Africans in the mission is believed to have caused the withdrawal of some Nigerian troops from MINUSMA.

China, Bangladesh, Honduras, Sweden, Norway, Burundi and Mauritania have promised to send troops, but the gap of about 6,000 troops has not yet been filled. In addition, because the UN cannot provide military equipment, support from UN member states will be crucial. The mission is "painfully short of resources". It has four aircraft and needs helicopters, engineers and transport aircraft (Flynn and Lewis, 2013). Without appropriate air assets (transport and attack), engineering personnel and equipment, intelligence analysis, and adequate means to transport troops and equipment, MINUSMA will be inadequately equipped and therefore inefficient (Smith, 2013).

Weak basis for intervention: no peace, no security

Richard Gowan (2013) from New York University stated on June 3rd that MINUSMA is "a potentially flawed peace operation". This is due to the absence of a peace settlement between Mali's conflicting parties.

A Preliminary Agreement to the Presidential Election and Inclusive Peace Talks in Mali – called the Ouagadougou Accords – was adopted by the government and representatives of the MNL and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad on June 18th 2013. The agreement sought to “solve some imminent issues” and included “commitments to a ceasefire, the deployment of the Malian Defence and Security Forces in Kidal along with French and MINUSMA troops and the establishment of a joint security commission” (UN What’s in Blue, 2013). As anthropologist Bruce Whitehouse (2013) has argued, however, this agreement was only a pre-election “temporary fix” that left many issues unresolved. Although no major battles or mass killings have occurred, the north of the country is plagued by limited, but enduring insecurity and tensions. When 150 Malian troops entered Kidal in early July, the soldiers accused pro-MNL forces of assaulting pro-state marchers and unilaterally violating the Ouagadougou agreement. Five electoral agents and Kidal’s adjunct mayor were kidnapped in Tessalit on July 20th.

Fighting occurred between groups from the MNL and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad and Songhai in Kidal on July 19th. Harouna Toureh, representative of the Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad, blamed the blue helmets and Malian soldiers for not intervening. He invited MINUSMA to act vigorously to ensure that the Ouagadougou agreements would be respected and to avoid killings. Otherwise, he insisted, MINUSMA will be “responsible for what happens in Kidal and other regions” and accountable to international courts (Fofana, 2013). If it remains unable to prevent or stop attacks, MINUSMA can easily be accused of favouring or protecting the MNL, like the French were.

Moussa Ag Assarid, spokesperson of the MNL in Europe, announced between the two rounds of the presidential election that he would negotiate the autonomy of northern Mali with the new president. Upcoming discussions between the various actors will affect the deployment of MINUSMA and determine the prospects for a sustainable solution to the crisis.

On the “anti-terrorism” front, “hundreds of young Malians ... took to the streets to demonstrate their anger at the return of some former jihadists to Gao” and accused the local police and gendarmerie of not reacting firmly enough, and even of liberating those who had been arrested in return for money on August 25th (Gueye, 2013). Also, supporters of Algerian terrorist Mukhtar Balmukhtar, the al-Qaeda chief and leader of the attacks at the In Amenas gas complex in eastern Algeria in January 2013, allegedly joined the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa.

The way forward: recommendations to the UN and its member states

In its future activities, MINUSMA should do the following:

- **It should focus on quickly ensuring citizen security in the north (using blue helmets).**

- **It should provide its good offices in upcoming discussions between the government and armed groups,** which could take the form of *concertations nationales*, while being careful to maintain its image of neutrality (by using civilian staff).
- **It should build on existing structures.** Despite the limits highlighted by the crisis, the state has a long history and great relevance in Mali, which is neither an ungoverned space nor a failed state. In undertaking its activities, MINUSMA should remember that the country has established – although not perfect – public policies and monitoring mechanisms, as well as competent civil servants in most sectors. On the other hand, traditional aid donors in Mali have developed mechanisms for the co-ordination of their interventions and programmes and the policy dialogue with Malian authorities. These could be revived and include MINUSMA rather than being duplicated.
- **It should enforce the UN codes of conduct and discipline.** MINUSMA has enjoyed less popular domestic support than the French intervention. The blue helmets are deemed to be unable to prevent massacres or protect victims, and are suspected of spreading diseases (HIV/AIDS in particular), while pregnancies and prostitution are claimed to follow in their wake. The abuses committed by blue helmets in other countries have already been detailed in several Malian newspaper articles. The UN codes of conduct and system of discipline were communicated to MINUSMA’s top commanders very early on. The ability of both civilian and military UN personnel to respect them will be key to the mission’s legitimacy and acceptance by the Malian population.
- **It should mitigate the mission’s impact on the environment.** Most of MINUSMA’s activities will take place in northern Mali, a zone characterised by low population density, chronic droughts and lack of water. Resolution 2100 is the first to require a mission to manage its own environmental impact (paragraph 32). Preparatory work included environmental considerations in every aspect of the mission: accommodation, waste management, the use of water and plastics, etc. Although they may seem secondary compared to security-related activities, these efforts must be deepened and supported both by MINUSMA commanders and UN member states.

UN member states supporting MINUSMA must:

- **supply appropriate military equipment and financial support** to MINUSMA and troop-contributing (especially African) countries;
- **continue to finance long-term development projects** countrywide in addition to their emergency programmes; and
- **share their knowledge of and previous experience** in Mali with representatives of MINUSMA at the country level and incentivise them to work with and within existing structures.

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