

UNITAMS in Sudan's Shifting Transition

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Online Seminar, March 18, 2021

The United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission, UNITAMS, which was created in a Security Council resolution in June 2020, has been scaling up its operations with the appointment in January of its head Volker Perthes, at a time of enormous challenges for Sudan. In this webinar, we discussed what role UNITAMS can play in the country's transition.

The mission's ad interim chief of staff, Steven Siqueira, argued that the mission is facing a complex and comprehensive mandate under difficult circumstances. Despite progress, the remaining challenges of the transition are "staggering". Since his appointment, Siqueira said, SRSG Perthes has met with wide segments of Sudan's political scene and civil society to understand their aspirations and the challenges that the country is facing. Through meetings across the country, Perthes has been explaining the mission's mandate in order to manage expectations. This mandate includes support for the political transition, support to the peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements, peacebuilding, and the mobilization of international assistance. These four objectives, Siqueira said, are interdependent: progress on peace will not happen without international assistance, and vice-versa.

The transition, Siqueira said, seems to be moving forward, although at a slow pace. Expanded transitional institutions encompass a coalition of civilians, military and armed movements, allowing for representation of different political currents and their respective constituencies. But important milestones of the transition – the appointment of the transitional legislative council and 40% representation for women in transitional institutions – have yet to be achieved. Sudanese youth, on the other hand, have expressed frustration at their lack of representation.

On the economic front, Siqueira described the unification of exchange rates as a "courageous first step" that will "unlock financial assistance". Mr. Perthes is hopeful that the upcoming investors' conference in Paris will yield concrete results. UNITAMS, he said, calls on the international community to step up its assistance to Sudan, including to the newly launched Family Support Program. Siqueira also praised recent efforts by the Sudanese government to advance the peace process with non-signatories of the Juba agreement and expressed UNITAMS' readiness to assist.

Regarding the protection of civilians, Siqueira said that UNITAMS is working to support the government to strengthen its protection of civilians strategy, and will provide technical advice and capacity building to the ministry of interior to provide early warning. UNITAMS emphasizes that peace will only be sustainable if the root causes of conflict are addressed;

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in this respect, the mission is continuing projects undertaken by UNAMID and considering establishing peacebuilding activities in Eastern Sudan.

Mr. Guma Kunda Komey, associate professor of peace and development studies at the University of Bahri in Khartoum North and former adviser to the Sudanese Prime Minister on issues of peace, argued that Sudan doesn't face a single transition but multiple transitions. UNITAMS, he said, is not operating in an environment where there is a nationwide agreement on what the Sudanese state should be: groups continue to contest key features of the state when they express demands for self-determination or demand the separation between state and religion. The country must also operate an economic transition away from the risk of collapse and towards stabilization. Finally, a social transition is needed to build national symbols that bring the Sudanese together to celebrate diversity and around a nation-building project. These three transitions, Komey said, will have a far reaching impact on UNITAMS' mandate. The mission operates in a very fluid context, which means it will face shifting dynamics as it moves into its mandate.

Komey then questioned whether actors are sufficiently mindful of the link between achieving peace and economic recovery. Without peace in Sudan, there won't be economic recovery or international investment and cooperation. But without financial support for peace, the peace process' implementation will be in question. For actors to understand this link will be crucial for a successful transition and for how UNITAMS will implement its mandate.

Komey then emphasized the important balance between implementation of the Juba peace agreement and the need to continue negotiation with non-signatories. The current peace is not comprehensive. The more time elapses between the Juba agreement and an agreement with the two holdover groups, the higher the risk that these deals would be considered separate, rather than parts of a comprehensive agreement. Addressing this means broadening peace to the holdover groups as a matter of priority. It has now been six months since the Juba agreement and negotiations between the government and the two non-signatory groups are at a standstill. The lack of progress is visible not only in terms of disagreements over the agenda, but over the fact that there is no negotiating process per se. In Komey's view, UNITAMS should push to set up a this process.

Finally, Komey argued that UNITAMS will face challenges from spoilers of the transition, including factions within the government itself which remain hostile, in principle, to UNITAMS' presence in Sudan. To reduce the risk these spoilers pose, UNITAMS should engage extensively with all stakeholders in Sudan. Perthes' current approach goes in that direction.

Volkmar Klein, who is a German MP and the spokesperson of the CDU / CSU for economic cooperation at the Bundestag, broached the question of Germany's support for Sudan's transition. Germany, he said, has been involved in supporting Sudan in many ways, providing troops for UNAMID, hosting the Berlin partnership conference in 2020, and acting as co-pen-holder for Sudan at UN Security Council. Germany, Klein said, is interested in the success of the transition and of the peace process, for two reasons: as an ethical imperative, but also to increase local resilience and security, which at the end of the day benefits Europe and Germany. Security and development, Klein added, are flip sides of the same coin, as one depends on the other. Klein also emphasized that peace needs to be a political process to be comprehensive and that a strong Sudan is important to bring stability to the region in the

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context of disputes over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and the war in Tigray, Ethiopia.

To conclude, Klein elaborated on Germany's bilateral support through humanitarian and development funding: Germany is about to spend 332 million euros in Sudan, including 140 million euros of fresh commitment from last year.

Kholood Khair, Managing Partner at Insight Strategy Partners, highlighted the challenges that UNITAMS faces. Sudan's power sharing agreement, she said, created a bifurcated government with two separate structures – civilians and the military – which rarely share interests. The introduction of the Juba Peace agreement has shifted this somewhat, but the former rebels share much with their former enemies in the military than with civilians. Yet the success of the transition is tied to the success of civilians, and it is hard to understate divisions between civilians and military: Prime Minister Hamdok has sought to work with his military counterparts but has faced less than cooperative behavior.

Among the main challenges that UNITAMS faces, Khair argued, are the modalities of engagement with a divided government, the urgent priorities related to the withdrawal of UNAMID – including the protection of civilians and security sector reform, and the lack of meaningful engagement with civil society.

To conclude, Khair said that UNITAMS will need to show how it is relevant in the Sudanese context. The mission is at risk of being instrumentalized to undermine the civilian government. It will need to engage with the resistance committees and civil society more broadly, drawing on UNAMID's existing networks. UNITAMS will become a major stakeholder of the transition and will therefore have to strike a difficult balance, dealing with military and civilians without falling afoul of either side; supporting the government without undermining sovereignty or its relationship with the public; and balancing the interests of the center and peripheries as well as those of formal and informal government structures.

In the discussion, the panelists addressed questions regarding the priorities for the mission, the protection of civilian in Darfur, security sector reform, planned UNITAMS activities in the Two Areas and Eastern Sudan, and prospects for a peace agreement with holdover armed groups.