

Peacekeepers Day 2021: UNA-UK's Executive Director, Natalie Samarasinghe's Closing Remarks

Thank all those involved in today's event - our partner RUSI, in particular Paul and Peppi, who have delivered a virtual event that in many ways feels richer than our usual gathering. While we look forward to convening in person next year, I hope we will retain the diversity of today. UNA Westminster, especially David and Martin, who managed to capture the essence of the ceremony we normally hold in Whitehall and which never fails to move me. All of our speakers, in particular SRSK Keita, the FCDO/MOD Joint Unit, for offering their support throughout, and of course my own team.

It's a pleasure to return after leave of absence. I spent last year working on the UN's 75th anniversary campaign - the Organization's most ambitious attempt to date to crowdsource priorities and ideas for the future we want, and the UN we need to get there. Over 1.5 million people and 60k organisations from all UN Member and Observer States took part. One theme emerged strongly, echoed by many today: the need for more - and more effective - inclusion and partnerships to overcome increasingly complex and intertwined challenges.

Over the past year, peacekeepers have worked with governments, regional organisations and communities to counter the spread of COVID-19 and support recovery efforts that strengthen resilience to threats such as climate change. It is striking that of the 15 countries most susceptible to climate risks, eight host a UN peacekeeping or political mission. We know that the operating environment for peace operations is only going to become more complex.

And we know that we need all of society to work together to respond. That is not something I say to generate warm, fuzzy feelings. It is based on evidence from the ground on the impact of inclusion on peacekeeping and Peacebuilding. Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee has said: it is the people on the ground, the people the international community is trying to save - particularly women - who have the know-how and motivation to bring about lasting solutions - working in partnership with peacekeepers and other actors.

Over the past year, UN missions have worked in partnership - with the AU in Darfur and Mali; with the EU and Episcopal Conference of Bolivia following the 2019 election crisis; and with the League of Arab States and EU to support the Libyan-led transition process.

These are examples of how missions can be sequenced and designed with partners to play to their strengths. It is simply not feasible to demand that the UN steps up engagement on the political, foresight and community side, whilst also developing capabilities in counter-extremism and tech and the changing nature of conflict, which is fraught with challenges.

As Sir Brian Urquhart - one of the fathers of peacekeeping who died earlier this year aged 101 - said: "A peacekeeping force is like a family friend who has moved into a household stricken by disaster. It must conciliate, console, and discreetly run the household without ever appearing to dominate or usurp the natural rights of those it is helping."

This conference is about the intersection between the UK and UN peacekeeping. Dame Margaret Anstee would have been pleased to see the UK engage in Mali - one of the most complex contexts in which the UN is operating today. She was a strong supporter of UNA-UK's longstanding advocacy on British support to UN peacekeeping.

We've heard some asks today, for the UK to contribute high tech capabilities, security sector reform training, human security, prevention - and aid. UNA is deeply concerned about aid cuts. We look forward to engaging with the Government further on this and on fleshing out the objectives set out in the Integrated Review - on peace operations and how they fit into the broader framework of tools to support conflict prevention, atrocity prevention, peacebuilding and resilience.

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We will continue to work with the UK and with RUSI on taking forward the points we have heard today. The Seoul Ministerial offers one opportunity. The Secretary-General's process of consultation on the future of multilateralism is another. There is much to do - thank you for joining us.