



# COMING HOME:

UN PEACEKEEPING'S ROLE  
IN ALLOWING DISPLACED  
PERSONS TO RETURN

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# OVERVIEW

The last several years have witnessed a surge of conflict around the world, accompanied by a set of increasingly grim statistics regarding global displacement. According to the UN Refugee Agency (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or UNHCR), more than 65 million people have been driven from their homes by war, persecution, or human rights violations, representing the highest level of forced displacement in recorded history. This has placed an enormous strain on UN humanitarian agencies and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as countries hosting refugee populations, who are struggling to cope with an ever-expanding set of needs.

The sheer scale of the crisis has sparked conversation on how to mitigate the primary driver of these historic levels of forced displacement, namely, armed conflict. For example, in a [report](#) released in September 2016, Mercy Corps argues that increased investments in conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and good governance are essential to preventing and ending conflict and, by extension, forced displacement.<sup>1</sup> Similarly two more recent reports, one from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on [countering violent extremism](#)<sup>2</sup> and another from the Experts Committee on Preventing Mass Violence<sup>3</sup>, discuss the massive refugee flows stemming from increased armed conflict and emphasize early prevention as the “most effective course of action not only to save lives, but also to save money, limit military interventions, and promote U.S. national interests.”<sup>4</sup>

The Better World Campaign agrees with these assessments. We also believe that continued and strengthened U.S. investments in UN peacekeeping activities play a vital role in stabilizing fragile states and protecting civilians from armed violence, thereby mitigating some of the factors that compel people to flee their homes. In the following document, we reference decades of research documenting peacekeeping’s role in reducing violence and preventing its resurgence. We also highlight four current peacekeeping operations and their impact on forced displacement, along with recommendations directed at U.S. and UN policymakers.

## PEACEKEEPING ROLE IN REDUCING CONFLICT & CIVILIAN DEATHS

Peacekeeping is no panacea – e.g. the recent disturbing scandals [in the Central African Republic](#)<sup>5</sup> and [South Sudan](#)<sup>6</sup> demand additional reforms to strengthen the efficacy of missions – and dispatching peacekeepers is not an ideal or viable response in every scenario. That being said, it remains a significant and increasingly utilized tool for (1) addressing and minimizing conflict, (2) reducing civilian killings, and (3) supporting transitions from conflict to stabilization. All of these elements play an instrumental role in shaping someone’s decision to return to their home country or territory.<sup>7</sup> In short, many refugees or internally displaced people will not return home unless the security situation in their

area improves and peacekeeping has a proven track record in enhancing security. As Shelly Pitterman, Regional Representative, USA, UNHCR noted, “As a humanitarian agency, UNHCR, has limited capacity to provide physical security for displaced women, men, and children. Peacekeepers have played – and continue to play – a vital role in restoring peace and security and creating conditions under which refugees can voluntarily return home.”<sup>8</sup>

With more than 120,000 personnel deployed to 16 missions across four continents, UN peacekeeping constitutes the largest deployed multinational military force in the world. Since the end of the Cold War, UN

peacekeeping missions have grown significantly in size and complexity, a strategic shift backed by the U.S. and other members of the Security Council. In part, this is because UN peacekeeping operations have proven, on the whole, to be quite effective in reducing violence and preventing its resurgence. For example, a [study](#)<sup>9</sup> conducted by Virginia Page Fortna of Columbia University found that deploying UN peacekeepers reduces the likelihood that a country will witness a revival of armed conflict by about half. Dr. Lise Howard and Dr. Fortna similarly [found](#) more lasting peace “when peacekeepers deploy—and even after they go home—than when belligerents are left to their own devices.”<sup>10</sup> In 2014, Steven Pinker of Harvard University reinforced that peacekeeping works to prevent conflicts from reigniting by responding, “The answer from the statistical studies is: absolutely, they work massively. A country is much less likely to fall back in civil war if they’ve got armed peacekeepers. And the better financed and armed the peacekeeping force, the more effective they are.”<sup>11</sup>

Peacekeeping has also been documented to be quite effective in enhancing civilian protection. A [2013 paper](#) by Swedish and American researchers found that deploying large numbers of UN peacekeepers “dramatically reduces civilian killings.”<sup>12</sup> To support their hypothesis, the authors examined monthly civilian death tolls from civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa between 1991 and 2008. Their findings were striking: in instances where no peacekeeping troops were deployed, the monthly average of civilian deaths was 106. In instances where at least 8,000 UN troops were present, by contrast, the average monthly death toll fell to less than two. The paper concluded that ensuring UN peacekeeping forces “are appropriately tasked and deployed in large numbers” is critical to their ability to protect civilians.

**“Peacekeepers have played and continue to play a vital role in restoring peace and security and creating conditions under which refugees can voluntarily return home.”**

Shelly Pitterman,  
Regional Representative, USA, UNHCR

In 2014, the same group of researchers conducted [another study](#)<sup>13</sup> examining the effect of peacekeepers on battlefield deaths, defined as encompassing government soldiers, rebels, and civilians killed in cross-fire. Similar to their civilian protection findings, they concluded that the intensity of battlefield hostilities decreases as the number of UN troops increases. According to the authors, “the commitment of 10,000 peacekeeping troops has the effect of reducing battlefield violence by 70%.”

All of this is to say that while peacekeeping is by no means a cure all, it remains an effective tool – *when appropriately tasked, financed, and deployed in significant numbers* - for confronting violence and ensuring the protection of civilians. By helping to reduce armed conflict, one of the main current drivers of mass forced displacement, the presence of peacekeeping forces ameliorates displacement as well. While deserving a more thorough and academically rigorous examination than can be provided within the confines of this document, four existing peacekeeping missions - all marked by major armed conflict - illustrate the promise and limitations of UN peacekeeping with regards to addressing forced displacement.



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# LIBERIA

## ROLE OF UNMIL

Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia experienced two devastating civil wars, leaving tens of thousands of people dead and severely damaging the country's economy. UN peacekeeping activities in Liberia were first initiated in 1993. The UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), created by the Security Council to monitor compliance with a UN-backed peace accord and oversee national elections, was composed of just over 360 military personnel at its height. After repeated delays, rebel leader Charles Taylor was elected President of Liberia in 1997, and the Security Council authorized UNOMIL's withdrawal.

Shortly thereafter, however, civil war resumed due to ongoing issues of political exclusion, severe human rights abuses, an unprepared security sector, and continued regional instability. In September 2003, following the resignation of Charles Taylor under international pressure and the signing of a peace agreement between both sides, the Security Council once again turned to UN peacekeepers to help secure Liberia, reform its security sector, and facilitate free and fair national elections. This time, however, the Security Council provided a much more robust force to accomplish these objectives, authorizing 15,000 military personnel, 1,100 police, and a substantial civilian component to serve as part of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

Since then, UNMIL has succeeded in achieving many of the goals set out for it by the Security Council. As noted by Congressmen Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) and David Cicilline (D-RI) during a 2014 trip to Liberia, "Since the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia was first established ten years ago, the UN has conducted two free and fair elections and helped reform and restructure this nation's fractured justice system. Further...under democratically-elected leadership, piped water, and paved roadways are gradually returning. Perhaps most importantly, peace has been sustained for a decade."<sup>14</sup> UNMIL has also helped train thousands of Liberian police officers to ensure security, disarmed and demobilized more than 100,000 former combatants from the civil war, sought to advance the role of women in government and civil society, and worked to monitor and promote human rights. These gains have allowed the peacekeeping force to draw down, and on June 30, 2016, UNMIL officially handed over full security responsibility to the Liberian government. Currently, just over 1,800 uniformed personnel are deployed to the country under the auspices of UNMIL, which was issued its final mandate calling for the withdrawal of forces by April 2018.



Hope floats: Homebound Liberians cross the Cavalla river from Côte d'Ivoire to Liberia.  
© UNMIL/Liberia

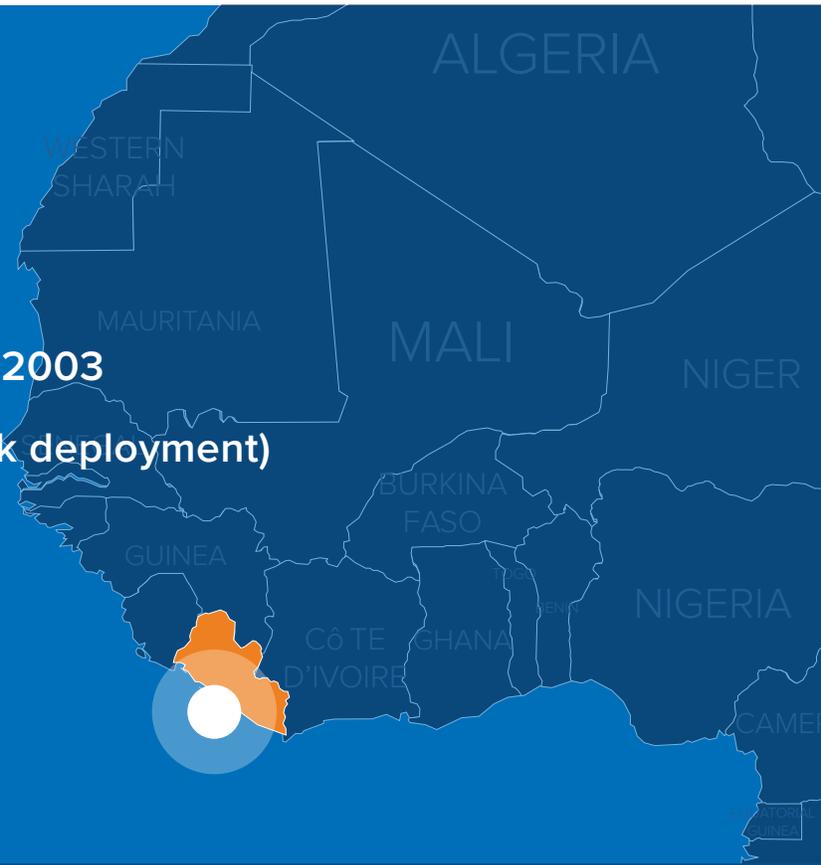
## FORCED DISPLACEMENT LEVELS

In July of 2003, more than 700,000 Liberians had been uprooted by the conflict, including 200,000 who sought refuge in neighboring countries and 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>15</sup> Since 2003, security gains witnessed by Liberia have had an impact on displacement. Between that time and January 2013, UNHCR provided assistance to more than 155,000 Liberian returnees. In fact, in June 2012, UNHCR announced the cessation of refugee status for Liberians in the region, noting that the original cause of their displacement—namely, the fighting and insecurity that had engulfed their country for more than 14 years—no longer existed.<sup>16</sup> This was a major sign of progress in the country's ongoing recovery, and would not have been possible without the efforts of UN agencies, specifically the UN peacekeeping mission, and other international players.



### LIBERIA

- UNMIL Established in 2003
- 14,690 Troops (at peak deployment)
- 1,098 Police
- 1,113 Civilians



## DISPLACEMENT LEVELS AT HEIGHT OF CRISIS VS. 2016

One person amounts to 25,000 refugees and IDPs. Source: UNHCR



July 2003:  
**700,000 refugees  
and IDPs**



October 2016:  
**23,000\* IDPs**

# CÔTE D'IVOIRE

## ROLE OF UNOCI

Beginning in 1999 and continuing for more than a decade, Côte d'Ivoire was beset by conflict and political turmoil. In late 2010, long-delayed presidential elections were finally held, and Alassane Ouattara, a former IMF official and Prime Minister, was certified the winner. However, the incumbent President, Laurent Gbagbo, refused to concede and launched a campaign of violence against Mr. Ouattara's and his supporters. The fighting ended in April 2011 when Mr. Gbagbo was arrested by Ivoirian forces at his residence in Abidjan and extradited to the International Criminal Court. This operation, which effectively ended the political impasse and paved the way for Mr. Ouattara's inauguration, was supported by French forces and the UN peacekeeping mission in Côte d'Ivoire (known as UNOCI), which used attack helicopters to destroy stockpiles of heavy weapons that Mr. Gbagbo's forces had been using against civilians in Abidjan.<sup>17</sup>



UNOCI peacekeepers from Jordan provide free medical check-ups and medicine to school children in Abidjan. © UN Photo/Basile Zom

Since then, Côte d'Ivoire has witnessed steady improvements in security, political stabilization, and economic growth. For several consecutive years, due in large part to a relatively stable security environment, the Ivoirian economy has experienced annual growth rates of nearly 9 percent, making it Africa's fastest growing economy.<sup>18</sup> In another sign of progress, on October 25, 2015, the country successfully held its first presidential election since the 2010 crisis. While not entirely free of controversy, the election was nevertheless mostly peaceful, and nearly 5,000 national and international observers judged the voting process to be generally free, fair, and transparent. In addition to its election-related activities, UNOCI is supporting broader efforts to help stabilize the country, providing vocational training and other services to nearly 20,000 former combatants to help ease their reintegration into society. While numerous political, human rights, development, and security challenges remain unresolved, it is clear that Côte d'Ivoire, with assistance from the international community and critically UNOCI, has made remarkable progress over the last five years. Due to this progress by the mission, the Security Council has called for a withdrawal of peacekeepers by April 30, 2017.

## FORCED DISPLACEMENT LEVELS

At the height of the 2010-2011 crisis, more than one million Ivoirians were forced from their homes: 300,000 fled to neighboring countries and 700,000 were internally displaced. However, much like its Western neighbor, Liberia, improvements in the security and political sectors have helped spur a decrease in displacement. As of June 2016, more than 256,000 Ivoirian refugees—40,000 of them with assistance from UNHCR—have returned to Côte d'Ivoire. Overall, there are slightly fewer than 350,000 who remain displaced: 300,000 IDPs and 44,000 refugees. While still a relatively high number, this figure is significantly less than the peak of the crisis. Consequently, here too, the stability engendered by the work of peacekeepers has coincided with an overall reduction in displacement.



### CÔTE D'IVOIRE

- UNOCI Established in 2004
- 8,151 Troops (at peak deployment)
- 1,293 Police
- 1,143 Civilians

## DISPLACEMENT LEVELS AT HEIGHT OF CRISIS VS. 2016

One person amounts to 25,000 refugees and IDPs. Source: UNHCR



April 2011:  
**1,000,000** refugees  
and IDPs



June 2016:  
**344,000**  
refugees and IDPs

# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

## ROLE OF MINUSCA

Beginning in 2013, the Central African Republic (CAR) was convulsed by political strife and vicious sectarian violence, leaving thousands dead and sparking concerns that the situation could rapidly devolve into genocide. While an African Union-led peacekeeping operation and French military contingent were deployed to help stabilize the country, these forces were unable to stem the bloodshed, and in April 2014, the Security Council voted to dispatch a UN mission. The UN force, known by its French acronym, MINUSCA, is working to carry out a number of essential activities, including protecting civilians from violence, providing assistance to help the country carry out elections, facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid, monitoring, investigating, and reporting on human rights violations, and helping build the capacity of CAR's police force and court system. Due to the lack of law and order in the country, peacekeepers are also mandated to arrest and detain people in order to crack down on impunity.

Over the last year, CAR has seen some promising signs of progress, with peacekeepers playing an important role. In February of 2016, [Amnesty International released a report](#) saying the peacekeepers presence “has saved many lives and prevented much bloodshed.”<sup>19</sup> As a result of improvements in the overall security situation in the country, CAR organized, with UN support, largely peaceful and credible presidential and legislative elections earlier in 2016, ending the term of a transitional government that had been in place since 2014. In late 2016, the new government of CAR, the UN, and the international community held a Donors Conference in Brussels and secured \$2.2 billion in additional pledges to support further recovery and development efforts inside the country. Turning these pledges into commitments will be critical to advance the gains already made.

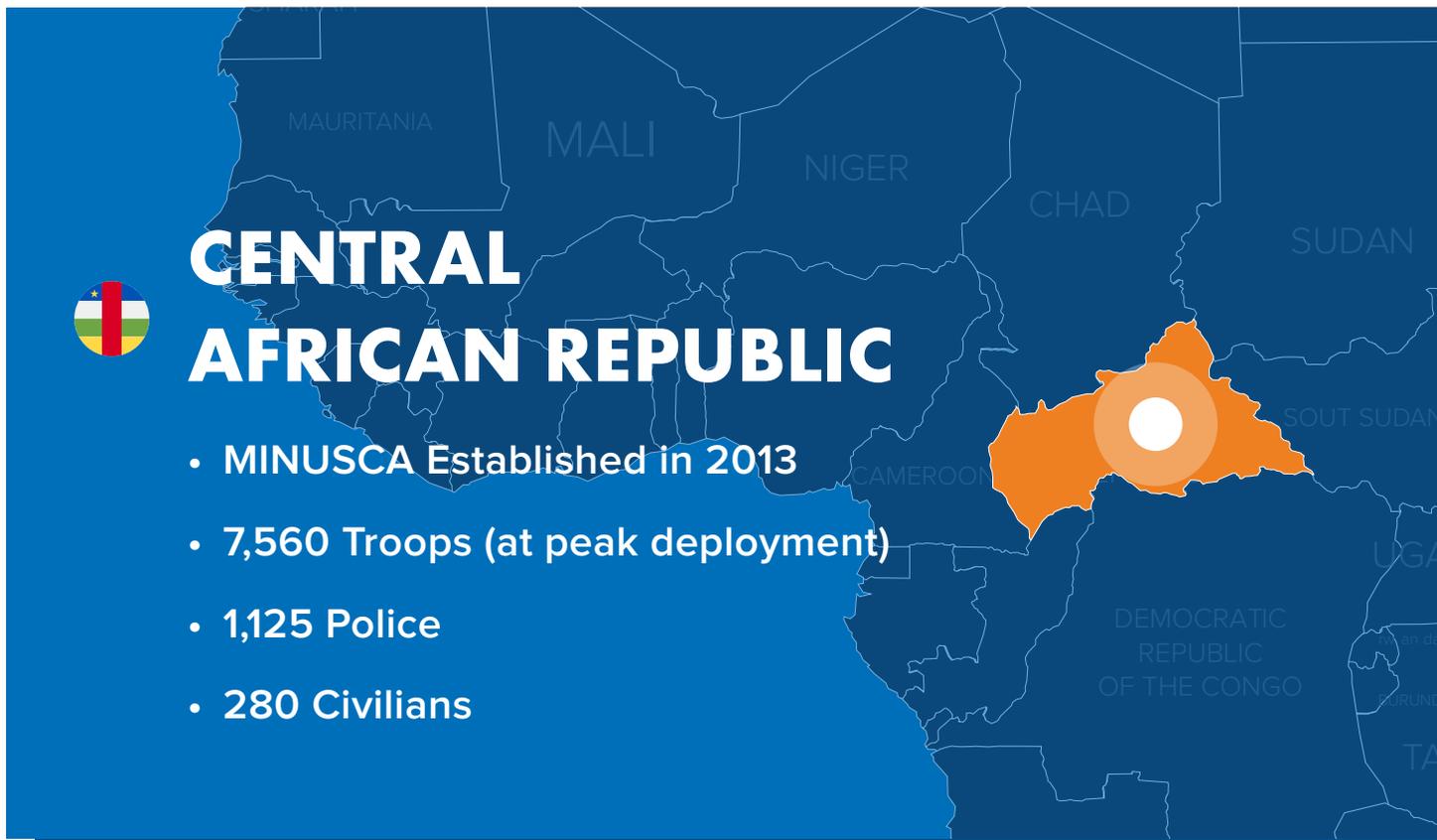
Nevertheless, serious challenges remain. While violence waned during the first half of 2016, the security situation remains precarious, and a steady drum beat of fighting has taken place in recent months between ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka in the north and northwest of the country, as well as in the capital of Bangui. The humanitarian situation is also quite grave, with nearly 2.3 million Central Africans out of a total population of 4.8 million dependent on aid.



Thailand peacekeepers showing refugee children from the Central African Republic (CAR) how to greet according to Thai tradition. © UNAMID/Albert Farran

## FORCED DISPLACEMENT LEVELS

In January 2014, at the height of the crisis, over one million Central Africans were displaced by violence: 235,000 as refugees and 825,000 IDPs. The improved security situation in country has reduced the numbers fleeing, but displacement levels in CAR are still high. As of the beginning of October 2016 that number was just over 850,000, with 466,000 refugees and 385,000 IDPs. The bulk of the country's Muslim population, nearly 80% of whom were driven out of the country during the crisis, remains displaced. Ongoing fear of attacks continues to prevent most Central Africans from returning to areas of the country that were subject to severe communal violence, as has the recent uptick in insecurity, along with the decision of the French to remove almost all of its peacekeepers.



## DISPLACEMENT LEVELS AT HEIGHT OF CRISIS VS. 2016

One person amounts to 25,000 refugees and IDPs. Source: UNHCR



# SOUTH SUDAN

## ROLE OF UNMISS

While the prior examples offer optimism regarding the impact of UN peacekeeping operations on forced displacement, the ongoing violence and instability in South Sudan reminds us of the challenges in select countries and when certain conditions are absent. South Sudan, which achieved independence with great international fanfare in 2011, slipped into a brutal civil war in December 2013. Virtually overnight, the UN peacekeeping operation in South Sudan (UNMISS), on the ground in the country since 2011, was forced to revamp its mission almost entirely, shifting its focus from state-building and support for development to civilian protection.

In an unprecedented move, UNMISS opened the gates of its bases to those fleeing the violence, and soon tens of thousands of South Sudanese descended on its compounds in Juba. As fighting spread outside of the capital, several other UNMISS bases likewise became de facto IDP camps, referred to as Protection of Civilians (POC) sites. Currently, UNMISS is providing physical protection to over 200,000 civilians at six POC sites around the country. This has saved the lives of many people who would have been directly targeted by parties to the conflict and reduced the numbers who would have had to flee the country.

Despite the importance of these civilian protection measures, however, they are inadequate to deal with the scope of the challenges at hand. Since fighting broke out nearly three years ago, tens of thousands of South Sudanese have been killed. Currently, the humanitarian situation within the country is dire, with more than 5 million people—nearly half the population—in need of assistance. In short, while the situation for South Sudan’s people—especially the 200,000 civilians currently receiving direct protection from the UN—would be worse without the mission’s presence, the mission has struggled

mightily to protect beyond its bases, with the feeble response to July’s attack by South Sudanese soldiers on the Terrain hotel being [the most recent example](#).<sup>20</sup>

The primary impediments to the UN’s work in South Sudan, as noted by U.S.-UN Ambassador Samantha Power during a September Security Council visit, is the South Sudanese government itself.<sup>21</sup> Since the beginning of the civil war, the Government of South Sudan has imposed severe restrictions on peacekeepers’ freedom of movement. To be clear, the Status of Forces Agreement signed by UNMISS and the government gives peacekeepers the right to move and patrol throughout the country unhindered. In practice, however, the government routinely violates these understandings, putting up roadblocks to impede UN patrols, requiring the mission to obtain permission to fly its own helicopters or risk these aircraft coming under fire, and harassing, intimidating, or even physically assaulting UNMISS civilian staff. In addition to movement restrictions, the South Sudanese government has repeatedly rejected requests from UNMISS to bring in certain types of technology that could improve the mission’s effectiveness, including surveillance drones, communications equipment, and some types of weapons.



Members of the Indian Battalion at UNMISS assisting displaced persons who have fled their homes and are seeking safety and help from the UN. © UN Photo/UNMISS

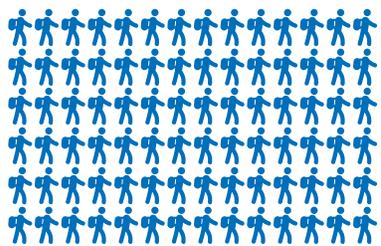
## FORCED DISPLACEMENT LEVELS

In October 2014, there were two million displaced - 1.4 million IDPs and 600,000 refugees. The government obstructions listed above seriously hampered the mission's day-to-day operations and placed the safety of UN personnel at unnecessary risk, making it difficult for UNMISS to project force outside of their bases and provide protection to the hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians not currently living in UN-administered POC sites. This, along with government and opposition forces in active conflict, has contributed to a displacement crisis that is actually worsening. In November of this year, the numbers of those displaced had climbed to 2.75 million with 1.6 million IDPs and 1.1 million refugees. Thus, South Sudan joins Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia as the only countries which have produced more than a million refugees.

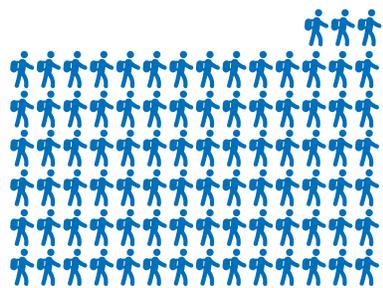


## DISPLACEMENT LEVELS AT BEGINNING OF CRISIS VS. 2016

One person amounts to 25,000 refugees and IDPs. Source: UNHCR



December 2013:  
**2,000,000 refugees and IDPs**



November 2016:  
**2,075,000 million refugees and IDPs**

# CONCLUSION

The purpose of this document was to examine the nexus between UN peacekeeping activities and the mitigation of forced displacement in select missions marked by armed conflict.

According to [UNHCR](#), a historic number of people around the world—nearly 24 every minute in 2015—have fled their homes due to armed conflict, persecution, generalized violence, or human rights violations. In light of the fact that UN peacekeeping operations are mandated to stabilize conflict zones, protect civilians under threat of violence, facilitate humanitarian assistance, and undertake other measures that help reduce violence and secure peaceful transitions, UN peacekeeping missions mitigate some of the factors that force people to flee their homes in the first place. By their presence, as noted by UNHCR, they also hasten the return of those who have fled.

Looking at the missions specifically, long-running UN operations in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire have made a demonstrably positive impact on security in both countries in recent years, and both are now in the process of drawing down. During that period, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire have also witnessed a reduction in forced displacement originally wrought by their respective civil conflicts, resulting from the stability brought, in significant part, by UN peacekeepers. These missions do illustrate that any UN peacekeeping mission in and of itself is not a panacea. Liberia is a good example of this - the small mission of the 1990's had little impact, while the much larger, better financed and equipped mission of the 2000's did, which helped ensure the return of hundreds of thousands of its citizens. In Cote d'Ivoire - a well-armed mission with strong initial backing by French forces - an improvement in security has also meant hundreds of thousands could return.

In the Central African Republic, however, while peacekeeping has unquestionably helped, the security situation remains volatile, thus displacement levels have reduced from their peak but still remain high. The country appears to be at a critical inflection point: while gains have undoubtedly been made, widespread mass violence could certainly return. Continued vigilance and engagement by the international community, including through support for UN peacekeeping activities in the country, is therefore crucial.



Meanwhile, in South Sudan, where government forces have systematically obstructed the work of UN peacekeepers and there is little appetite on the part of parties to the conflict for resolving it, the UN's effectiveness has been seriously blunted. This is one reason why displacement levels have actually increased over the past two years. With progress on peace negotiations and cooperation from the South Sudanese government, especially around the Security Council's call for 4,000 more troops, UNMISS can help create conditions on the ground that will allow refugees and IDPs to eventually return home. Absent peace progress and cooperation from the government, UNMISS is unlikely to have much success in stabilizing security or paving the conditions for return.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted, BWC believes that the issue of UN peacekeeping and its effect on displacement deserves a more rigorous academic analysis than what we are able to provide here. However, given a cursory look at the four missions discussed above, in several of the cases, the effect of UN peacekeepers on forced displacement has been pronounced. In order to ensure peacekeeping operations can maintain current efforts, enhance operations, and pave the way for individuals to return, we recommend the following to the Trump Administration, Congress, Troop Contributing Countries and UN policymakers:

- **FULL FUNDING** - With decades of data showing that peacekeeping reduces the chance that conflicts will reignite, especially if they are adequately equipped/financed, it is essential that the U.S. pay its annual UN peacekeeping dues on-time, in-full, and without preconditions. That means fully funding dues payments via the State Department's Contributions for International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA) account and lifting the longstanding peacekeeping cap, which arbitrarily caps U.S. contributions at 25 percent. Failing to do so compromises the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping missions and reduces the willingness of UN member states to contribute troops and police.
- **BOLSTERING TCC CAPACITY** - As noted in the report *A Necessary Good: U.S. Leadership on Preventing Mass Atrocities*, strengthening the capacity of peacekeeping operations to protect civilians from mass atrocity threats is vital. This strengthening would entail the State and Defense Departments (1) exploring how to enhance the airlift/transport capabilities of potential troop contributing countries (TCCs); and (2) identifying opportunities to train forces with sufficient capacity and located in close proximity to countries identified at risk of mass atrocities and displacement.

Nevertheless, given the scale of the crisis currently unfolding around the world, it is critical that the U.S. and its international partners also continue to invest in measures that help mitigate armed conflict, currently the primary driver of forced displacement. This would include investments in the range of early prevention tools outlined in the aforementioned and recently published reports by Mercy Corps, CSIS, and the Experts Committee on Preventing Mass Violence.<sup>21</sup> This would also include support for:

- **U.S.-UN COLLABORATION** - The Trump Administration should work closely with the new UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres - who formerly led UNHCR for a decade and has expertise on the issues of refugees, migration and forced displacement. In particular, maintaining U.S. financial assistance to UNHCR, during the greatest refugee crisis in history, will be vital as the agency plays a key role in saving lives, protecting those fleeing terrorism and war, and helping stabilize areas of important strategic interest to the U.S. Cuts to UNHCR at this time would only exacerbate the crisis, placing an immense burden on refugee-hosting countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon and threatening the stability of our allies and our ability to protect our national interests, particularly in the Middle East.

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- <sup>7</sup> Surveys have shown, based on interviews with refugees, that the main reasons people flee are security related, including: (1) Extreme violence and indiscriminate killings often based on ethnic origin; (2) Extortion; (3) Rape; (4) Forced recruitment of boys and men; (5) Burning of villages, property, and livestock.  
  
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- <sup>16</sup> The government considers the country's displacement situation resolved. With no tracking system in place, it is difficult to give a comprehensive assessment of the situation of either IDPs or returnees. On IDPs, as of the end of 2014, one estimate has it at 23,000. In terms of refugees, most of the 200,000 able to return had done so. In 2012, UNHCR announced the cessation of refugee status for Liberians. However, thousands of Liberians remained in host countries in the region rather than repatriate, but since they no longer have refugee status, we haven't been able to track down how large that number is currently.
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