

Many thanks for that kind introduction Karin, and it's a real pleasure to be here. I am one of the co-organisers of today's conference and so, when there was a last minute change of plans, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on this subject.

I work for the United Nations Association of the UK. We make the case for an effective UN and act as a friend to the UN, and a friend to peacekeeping, but a friend who is not afraid to offer advice and critique where necessary. I offer these remarks in that spirit. I would like to take you through some of what we have been pushing for, why, and finish up with a little bit on how.

Last spring, I visited Goma as a guest of the UN Mission to the DRC. At that time, the mission had two primary priorities: support for the political process leading to elections, which primarily happened out of Kinshasa, and the implementation of a Protection of Civilians mandate, which I saw in Goma.

The government believed the best way to implement that mandate would be for it – the host state – to work with the mission on opposing threats to

civilians from non-state actors. This, of course, meant that the mission would not be “impartial” – it would be supporting a party to the conflict.

This is increasingly common. Indeed some missions have unequivocally taken a side in countering an insurgency – Mali being an obvious case. Now, to take any side at all – even that of an extremist group – runs contrary to the spirit of peacekeeping as traditionally understood.

To a certain extent, this is a problem of the state-centric nature of the United Nations – which is an organisation of sovereign member states. It is further exacerbated by the language and logic of the so-called “war on terror” which holds, incorrectly in my view, that violations of human rights by non-state actors are in some sense more egregious, or at very least more sanctionable, than those same violations perpetrated by a state actor.

Now, in Goma there was a widespread perception – among local and international civil society, including the mission itself – that the primary threat to civilians came from state actors. This created a direct conflict between the mission mandate and the principle of host nation consent. And this is in a

mission where relations with the host nation were relatively good at that point – in contrast to either of the Sudans, for example.

The mission's response was to view the host nation not as a monolithic entity, but as a loose collection of different and sometimes conflict interests, with fuzzy and paramilitary boundaries. So they worked with some elements of the host nation, and at least implicitly against some – a tricky balance to maintain, especially if a conflict between those factions were to arise.

And “the state” can change. When I was in Goma, the mission working out how to deal with an election and its potentially messy aftermath – where a new coalition of state and non-state actors could become the new government. It becomes even more complicated when the transfer of power is not scheduled. Last month, the UN-AU mission to Darfur, UNAMID, had to deal with two revolutions in the course of about a week.

Now, I realise that I've set out a number of problems and complexities, without proposing solutions. But I think it would be dishonest – and dangerous – to pretend there are easy solutions here. And I believe it would be a mistake for

the UN Department of Peace Operations – or missions themselves – to spend too much time trying to resolve these issues in the abstract. In the DRC, one recurring criticism of the Cruz report was that these kind of conceptual solutions don't fit in all circumstances, or indeed in the same circumstance at a different point in time. Cruz was highly influenced by his time as force commander in the DRC in 2013. But the DRC in 2013 was very different to the DRC in 2018 and indeed it is very different again today.

And there's another reason, expressed very clearly by Sir Brian Urquart, one of the architects of modern peacekeeping. In his writings on the evolution of peacekeeping, it is that it has always been a pragmatic and ad hoc exercise, carved out of the gaps and ambiguities between what different stakeholders think that it is or could be. Clarify too much and you remove those gaps within which peacekeeping does its most valuable work.

He once described peacekeeping as “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”. That description really resonates with me at the

moment, as my mother-in-law has moved in to help us take care of our newborn!

The UN is particularly well suited to such a role due to its moral authority and backing from a wide array of political, economic and military stakeholders. These stakeholders generally want different things, and – put bluntly - only support the endeavour because of their different understanding of what peacekeeping is.

So, if we accept that peacekeeping is a messy – but frequently effective – compromise, what should an advocacy campaign to “improve peacekeeping” push for?

At UNA-UK, we’ve focussed on two things. First, we seek amplify the voices of those who are underrepresented in these conversations, but who bear the brunt of the consequences: the “people” behind the HIPPO report’s demand for “people centred peacekeeping”.

We've sought to bring these voices to policy-makers, for example, by publishing, with Waging Peace, a report on Darfuri perceptions of UNAMID. I should also praise the work of our partners at Igarape and Civic do on this.

And second, we seek to mitigate the impacts of the state-centric nature of the UN – by pushing for more options for civil society to contribute to decision-making, and by expanding the opportunities for civil society engagement that agendas such as “people centred peacekeeping” provide. There are many parts of a complicated mission mandate, not least peacebuilding and capacity building, that civil society – especially local actors – are far better placed to deliver than the mission itself, and we would like to see those kind of mission-civil society partnerships evolve.

UNA-UK's new campaign, Together First, is an attempt to support that, by putting civil society at the heart of conversation on global governance reform, and peacekeeping reform, and by producing people-driven, people-centred recommendations – ahead of the UN's 75th anniversary next year, when there will be renewed pressure to reform the institution.

I just wanted to add a few thoughts on what my other panellists said ...

And finally, I thank Lord Ahmad warmly for his introduction and for his commitment to peacekeeping and peacekeeping reform. But I would be remiss if I didn't remind him of the conclusions of our discussions last year, and indeed our longstanding position: that if the UK wishes to exert influence in UN peacekeeping, it needs to lead by example and have "skin in the game". I very much hope that our new Secretary of State for Defence, who we are delighted to welcome this lunchtime, will have some positive news for us on that front, as the UK sets out its contributions to UN peacekeeping post 2020.