Report launch: Protection of civilians in transition contexts

Reducing risks post peacekeeping drawdowns in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Sudan

18 November 2026 | Wednesday | 10 – 11.45 EST
Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations, 666 Third Avenue, NY 10017, USA
Open, hybrid event

Readout

On 18 November, Nonviolent Peaceforce and ODI Global, together with the Permanent Missions of the Netherlands, Austria and the DRC, launched the report *Protection of Civilians in Transition Contexts* at the Netherlands Mission. The hybrid event brought together member states, UN entities, donors, researchers and civil society. The discussion centered on who protects civilians as peacekeeping missions draw down.

The discussion was timely for two reasons. First, member states are currently focused on implementing the recommendations of the Secretary General's 20 August Review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations (A/80/798-S/2026/600), including on transitions. The event helped inform how the Review's recommendations on the division of labour are interpreted and implemented. Second, the Security Council is approaching the renewal of MONUSCO's mandate. Co-hosts Austria and the Netherlands, and notably the DRC as a subject country of the study, emphasised that civilian protection must remain central to the renewal, supported by credible benchmarks and sustainable arrangements to preserve essential protection capacities. This message was echoed by other speakers throughout. The DRC also stressed that the success of a transition should be measured by how many civilians live in greater safety after peacekeepers leave, not by how many peacekeepers have departed.

Key takeaways

1. **Current drawdowns are driven by politics and funding, not by improved protection conditions.** Speakers agreed that transitions proceed while civilian risks persist or grow, at a time of unprecedented civilian harm in conflict. Where security, governance and protection benchmarks have not been met, a sharp drop in protection capacity is the predictable result. Austria noted the paradox that missions are winding down for many reasons that have little to do with civilians being safer. The PBF said investments can be made strategically, but with better results when drawdowns are gradual and carefully planned (ex: South Kivu and Tanganyika), When drawdowns are precipitous (like in Mali) it is much harder to identify the right window for investment.

2. **Transition planning rests on an outdated assumption**. The UN's transition process itself still assumes that missions leave because the security environment has improved. Since that is no longer the main trigger, planning needs to start earlier and the model itself needs to be revisited. Despite lessons identified since the 2013 transition policy, planning for protection responsibilities remains late and insufficiently inclusive. The Security Council is increasingly demanding early planning.
3. **Missions leave a gap that others cannot quickly fill.** Missions bring logistics, political influence and response capacity that cannot be replaced overnight. Peacekeeping resources cannot be transferred to other actors, creating a "financial cliff". Development financing moves on much longer timelines and has few instruments to accompany a transition. Withdrawal can also signal that

the UN and the international community have stopped engaging or monitoring, which itself creates an "attention cliff." In the meantime, the mission's own transition process absorbs the political capital and attention of other actors.

4. **We need to think "end state", not just "handover".** Transitions are treated as technical exercises, but communities experience them as protection crises, first and foremost. Many humanitarian and other non-mission actors invest heavily in influencing how the mission leaves, and far less in how they will cover their own gaps afterwards. Speakers urged a shift from "how can we help the mission exit well?" to "what will the protection ecosystem look like once it has left, and how do we work from there?" Transfer of responsibility should be considered for all actors, not only the host government. Transition should be understood less as an exit strategy and more as a long-term effort to sustain protection outcomes. **One suggestion was a "sustaining protection" framing, modelled on sustaining peace.** Several speakers also asked for honesty about remaining gaps, since the positive framing of transitions obscures risk.

5. **National ownership must be matched by national capacity, within a broad protection effort.** The DRC stressed that primary responsibility for protecting civilians lies with the State, that outside support is welcome but should never replace it, and that drawdowns must be gradual and conditions based. Other speakers noted that ownership does not automatically mean effective protection, since governments may lack the capacity or willingness to act, and communities may not trust them. Parliaments, civil society and affected communities all have roles, so civic space needs protecting and civil society's ability to engage with legislatures and government needs strengthening. The DRC's formulation was that a transfer of responsibility must never become a transfer of protection gaps to vulnerable populations.

6. **Communities protect themselves, but have limits that the UN can help address.** Community protection is hyper-local, immediate and works with little external presence. Examples from NP's work in eastern DRC includes:
    a. Women's groups in Kalehe de-escalating tensions between IDPs and host communities. This matters because many deaths in eastern DRC stem from the consequences of conflict (scarcity, fear, disputes over land and aid) rather than direct attacks. Such dialogue takes sustained relationship-building and does not happen spontaneously.
    b. In Kasheke, villagers built their own early warning and response system. Adults look after nearby children rather than searching for their own, safer routes and boat arrangements are agreed in advance, and warnings are cross-checked with trusted contacts before anyone flees. This spared the community unnecessary displacement at least twice between April and September.

NP, however, also highlighted clear limits of some of these community-based protection initiatives:

- Active early warning can lead to reprisals and sometimes needs a response that sits outside of a given community's own capacities. Once can raise the alarm on an incoming attach for instance and to keep people safe but might not on their own be able to stop a widespread armed incursion.
- Under armed control, political self-censorship means communities can negotiate six checkpoints but cannot publicly challenge those who run them, so the hardest protection issues can go unspoken.

7. **Political engagement is protection and is the UN's comparative advantage where it is no longer present.** Speakers argued that political engagement is too often treated as a separate track from protection. The Resident Coordinator system can give communities political cover beyond a

mission's departure. A call to a governor, army commander or armed group leadership can reduce extortion at a checkpoint, secure the release of someone detained for "collaboration", or defuse a local dispute, without exposing the community. This is low-cost and feasible when the mission is small or gone. The UN should also keep channels open, so that communities know whom to call and what they report reaches those with power to act. Underpinning this, solid humanitarian diplomacy and accountability matter, since persistent impunity will keep deepening protection challenges.

8. **Protection is broader than the peacekeeping concept, and prevention is the best protection.** Speakers called for protection to be reframed beyond the mission's security presence, and for better risk analysis and anticipation. Specific elements included locally rooted early warning and response (with realism about who can actually deliver the response), civilian harm mitigation and prevention by security forces, protection-sensitive SSR and DDR, the human rights architecture, and a nexus approach connecting humanitarian, development and peace actors. Austria also highlighted civilian resilience to hybrid threats, mis- and disinformation, and the role of strategic communications. Human rights was flagged as underrepresented in the discussion.

9. **The Peacebuilding Fund can invest strategically but cannot fill the entire gap.** Supporting transition contexts is a core PBF priority (35% of investments under its last strategy) and will feature in the new strategy now being developed. The PBF can target peacebuilding funding to areas a mission is leaving, and fund national actors to respond to early warning alerts. Transitions are dynamic rather than linear, so scenario planning matters. Scale remains the main challenge, and requires bringing in donors and international financial institutions such as the AfDB.

Food for thought from the floor and further areas of inquiry Resources

Interventions from the floor and the closing remarks pointed to several areas where the discussion could be taken further:

- **Contributions from the Human rights field to protection outcomes, incl. in transition contexts merit being highlighted more**. OHCHR argued that human rights was largely missing from the discussion. Human rights components and monitoring contribute significantly to protection, through documentation, early warning, accountability and engagement with authorities, but this contribution is often overlooked in transition planning. OHCHR noted that human rights is also the UN pillar most heavily affected by recent funding cuts, which makes the risk of losing monitoring capacity during drawdowns more acute. It urged that protection crises be framed as human rights violations, with human rights at the centre of the response, and recalled that post-conflict legal frameworks are essentially grounded in international human rights law and that protection is broader than the peacekeeping concept.
- **Re-envisioning protection beyond security presence**. OCHA called for protection to be understood beyond the withdrawal of a mission's security presence, and for holistic, early planning, noting that the Security Council is itself demanding earlier transition planning.
- **Operationalising partnership with national actors**. Belgium asked how missions can concretely implement the Review's recommendation to partner with national actors. This question was not fully answered in the session and merits further inquiry, including how partnerships can account for power dynamics and for cases where States lack the capacity or willingness to protect.
- **"Networked protection of civilians."** In closing, CIVIC proposed building on the idea of networked multilateralism and partnerships to develop a "networked protection of civilians" approach and noted that Sheila Romen's framing of transition as a long-term effort could support a "sustaining protection" agenda.

- **Further proposals for New York.** The following considerations in follow-up to the Review were suggested:
    - Dusting off the "protection support hub" – perhaps an idea to bring to the incoming SG.
    - Emphasizing Independent strategic reviews
    - Continued follow-up after withdrawal on both the situation and the UN's support, to avoid an "attention cliff"

Resources

The report Protection of Civilians in Transition Contexts: Reducing protection risks post peacekeeping missions' drawdowns in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Sudan is available here.

During the session, NP screened an example of community protection team work in Muhongoza, South Kivu. The video testimony can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qU0l.