Host Country Perspectives on Peace Operations Transitions: Preliminary Findings from the Timor-Leste Case Study

I. INTRODUCTION

The g7+ Secretariat, in collaboration with the Center on International Cooperation (CIC), and the UN Transitions Project, is documenting the lessons that the g7+ members have learned during transitions of the UN presence involving withdrawals of peace operations in their countries, with a view to strengthening future transition processes. Issues examined include the impact on the economy, delivery of services (e.g., justice and security), and impact these changes have had on the governments’ capacities in implementing initiatives critical to sustaining peace. This follows the first “Host Nation Views on UN Peace and Security Reform Proposals” presented to the UN Secretary-General in April 2018.1

The host countries of peace operations are uniquely positioned to round out our picture on UN transitions and ultimately to provide expertise and insights for the UN peacekeeping architecture and to other countries undergoing such processes, as well as to feed into the UN policy discussions.

The first field visit (out of 3 that are identified for the project) took place in Timor-Leste in fall of 2019 and focused on the impact of the 2012 withdrawal of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) on sustaining peace. The g7+, UN Transitions Project and CIC team carried out in-depth interviews with 25 respondents, including government officials; representatives from local authorities, civil society organizations, the private sector, and religious groups in Timor-Leste; and representatives of multilateral organizations including the UN and World Bank. Since 1999, Timor-Leste has had a succession of UN missions on its territory. This document summarizes key findings and recommendations on the impact of the UN transitions on sustaining peace – particularly on issues such as security, justice, and the economy.

II. KEY FINDINGS

Peace sustained after the UN mission withdrawal.

Timor-Leste has had a succession of UN missions on its territory, and the last one – UNMIT, which withdrew in December 2012 – had particularly strong mandate in terms of supporting the national police and the security sector. In stark contrast to the transition of the UN Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET) in 2006, the security situation in the country after the departure of UNMIT has remained stable without any major violent incidents. As such, UNMIT’s withdrawal was considered timely and successful. While the UN reconfiguration process from mission to a UN Country Team can sometimes create discontinuities, the transition planning was managed in an effective and forward-looking manner by focusing on building national actors’ capacities to take on some of the residual priorities, particularly with respect to the police, security sector, and local governance.

A strong State leadership for the transition

The discussion on withdrawal of UNMIT between the government of Timor-Leste and the UN started in 2009. During the transition period, the country’s political leaders – the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, and the President of the Parliament – worked closely with the SRSG to plan for and

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1 See g7+, “Host Nations Views on UN Peace and Security Reform Proposals (December 2017); available at https://cic.nyu.edu/publications/Host-Nations-Views-on-UN-Peace-and-Security-Reform-Proposals.
implement the mission withdrawal. Relevant Ministries were also involved in developing the joint transition plan. This strong and unified leadership demonstrated the country’s ownership over the transition and was an important factor identified by government representatives that contributed significantly to the success in mission transition.

**A transition planning process with a substantial lead-time**

In 2010, the High-Level Committee on Transition (HLC) composed of senior national and UNMIT leadership, was established to oversee the transition process. Shortly after its inauguration, a Joint Transition Plan (JTP) was endorsed by the HLC and covered the following focus areas: police and security; rule of law, justice and human rights; democratic governance; mission support and logistics; training of Timorese staff; and impact on the local economy. The initiation of transition planning two years in advance of the eventual mission drawdown and the consultative manner in which this planning process took place is internationally considered a good practice⁵. However, while some of the individuals interviewed during this research recognized the effectiveness of the HLC and JTP in ensuring high-level engagement and buy-in from the government, other respondents, civil society representatives in particular, felt that they were not offered with the same level of engagement in the transition planning process.

**A relatively smooth transition of the policing sector, but challenges with assets transfer**

There was consensus that the transfer of tasks from United Nations Police (UNPOL) to the national police (PNTL) was successful; no increase in unrest was registered throughout the country. As part of the transition plan, emphasis was placed on capacity building efforts and a phased and gradual UNPOL drawdown in the districts. A particular strength of the process was the establishment of Joint Field Assessment Team (JFAT) between the national government, the PNTL and the UN mission. The JFAT assessed the capacity of the Timorese police in each district to determine the PNTL’s readiness to resume all aspects of police functions from UNPOL to PNTL. However, the main weakness identified by the respondents was the handover of assets. UNMIT provided the government with UN assets and worked closely with the government on the asset registration and transfer, under the leadership of the Minister of Finance as the designated government focal point, and built the government’s capacity for asset maintenance. Some respondents, however, still highlighted the issues of unequal internal distribution of assets. As a result, police units in the districts found themselves with a shortage of equipment, including vehicles – which hindered them from patrolling – and generators.

**Impacts on a fragile justice system**

The impact of the mission withdrawal on the justice sector is difficult to ascertain. Interviewees reflected that since the departure of UNMIT, the access to the justice system remained very limited, and many challenges remain today, particularly on accessing the justice system in remote areas. In addition, some interviewees reported that the official language of the legal system is Portuguese, which hinders many Timorese from working in this field. While some interviewees perceived a negative impact of the withdrawal on access to justice, others reported that it was mitigated by UN agencies, and the country’s heavy reliance on bilateral assistance in the justice sector. In addition, the fragility assessment conducted in 2015 shows that Justice as PSG (Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals) of New Deal was in the second stage (Build and reform) of the Fragility Spectrum. The five stages identified in the spectrum are 1. Crisis 2. Rebuild and Reform 3. Transition 4. Transformation and 5. Resilience.

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⁵See for instance UNDP, DPKO-DFS, “UNDP/DPKO-DFS joint lessons learned report on the medium-term impact of UNMIT’s transition”
**Various perspectives on economic impact**

The JTP included an economic impact assessment of UNMIT’s withdrawal. This assessment estimated that given the gradual drawdown of the UN’s mission presence, the UN’s departure would only have a minor macro-economic impact, mostly localized to the capital region. In addition, given the country’s rich oil supply, it was argued that any negative impact could be compensated by the government. Yet, the UN mission withdrawal did have an effect on the country’s local economy, even though its magnitude is unclear. In 2012, the country’s GDP per capita declined dramatically. Yet, it should be noted that GDP of Timor-Leste, being a highly oil-dependent country, closely follows the global oil price which peaked at the time of UNMIT’s withdrawal but has followed a downwards trend since UNMIT’s exit may have exacerbated the impact of this economic decline on the local economy.

In addition, an important criticism from the host country perspective was the lack of use of locally procured services and equipment by the UN, which resulted in missed opportunities to engage and develop the local private sector through the mission’s presence. Additionally, the withdrawal of the mission was perceived as having a negative impact on the local economy: the purchasing power of the UN mission staff vanished and some local UN staff found themselves unemployed – particularly in remote areas where similar jobs were not available. Even though the UN reportedly provided training and accompaniment to local staff to find new jobs, the perception of interviewees was that their skills and salary expectations often were not compatible with the labour market.

**III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Host governments should develop a sustaining peace plan with the support from the UN and IFIs to mitigate the impact of the UN mission withdrawal**

Given that critical peacebuilding issues may remain after mission withdrawal, government, with support (if needed) from the UN and other stakeholders, should develop a sustaining peace plan to identify and address remaining risk factors for violence and new shocks created by the mission withdrawal. The plan should identify national priorities for peacebuilding and statebuilding, as well as include a funding mechanism. The government can for instance carry out a nationally owned Fragility Assessment (New Deal) – which was indeed conducted in Timor-Leste. The Fragility Assessment is a tool that aims, among others, at harmonizing parallel assessments usually conducted by each of the external actors. Therefore, mechanisms such as UN, the EU, and World Bank Joint Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments (RBPA) and the Joint UN-World Bank Humanitarian Development Peacebuilding and Partnership (HDPP) Facility should feed into Fragility assessment conducted by host country and should be linked to the peacebuilding priorities of the government. Under the host government’s leadership, it may be useful to engage different stakeholders including the IFIs (the World Bank, IMF, and regional development banks) in the transition planning. Each IFI brings its own comparative advantage in relation to macroeconomic issues that may be very relevant during a transition period. These include addressing issues such as reduced purchasing power, external debt, and how to finance important public goods such as security forces or the justice system.

**Consider socio-economic factors to sustain peace**

Respondents pointed to the importance of socio-economic development to maintain peace and stability after the departure of a mission. As such, the government and the UN and Security Council Member

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3 JTP, p. 30
5 “60% of conflicts in the early 2000s relapsed within five years”, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5cf669ace5274a07692466db/565_Trends_in_Violent_Conflict.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5cf669ace5274a07692466db/565_Trends_in_Violent_Conflict.pdf)
States should take socio-economic developments better into account when determining the right time for mission withdrawal. In particular, the missions should be managed in ways that produce positive impact on the national economies. Current UN rules and regulations may limit the leveraging of local capacity to provide goods and services, which are often contracted to international companies. A dedicated review of rules and regulations (e.g., financial, procurement) should therefore be carried out with a view to enhancing long-term investment in local economies affected by the transition of UN presences.

**Capacity for transition planning and implementation**

Given that the national leadership in transition processes is critical, there is a need for honest reflection from the government on how to prepare for transition planning and management, including assessing whether the required internal capacities and mechanisms for coordination and planning are in place. The UN should provide adequate support, if requested by the government, including in the establishment of a mechanism to support in strengthening the coordination and planning among different relevant government line Ministries. A discussion between the UN and the host government should be carried out to design transitions processes in a way that reflects the ability of government to meaningfully engage.

**Strengthening the national economy**

A commitment to leaving a stronger local economy and more highly skilled workforce could be a seen as a basic obligation of peace operations, in line with overall sustainable development aims. The UN should therefore seek to focus on leveraging investments made in the country envisioning an end-state which includes a higher skilled, more resilient local workforce that is better positioned to engage in the local economy, including in support of a follow-on presence. Local economy should be supported through encouraging local procurement of goods and services. However, current UN rules and regulations may limit the leveraging of local capacity to provide goods and services, which are often contracted to international companies. A dedicated review of rules and regulations (e.g., financial, procurement) should therefore be carried out with a view to enhancing long-term investment in local economies affected by the transition of UN presences. In addition, throughout their presence, missions should adopt modalities and work closely with UN agencies, IFIs and other development actors to strengthen local economic development.

**Support for a strong and unified State leadership**

Strong and unified State leadership is indispensable to ensure the smooth transition of the UN mission. Despite some political differences among State Leaders, they are expected to uphold the national interest above all, even their political/party’s interest. UN missions should respect national leadership and provide support to maintain national unity and refrain from activities that unintentionally create unnecessary political division, following the “do no harm” principle. Consultation on transition with the unified leadership in Timor-Leste is an example that can serve as good models for other countries to follow.

**Better management of handover of assets**

UNMIT and the government worked closely together to ensure that the required skills and resources were in place to repair and maintain UN assets. However, respondents reported an unequal distribution of assets among line ministries following mission withdrawal. This points to a need for more transparency and a more inclusive and consultative process to distribute the assets internally through, for example, conducting an assessment and capacity mapping to identify needs on the ground, including outside the capital.