

Bangladesh and UN Peacekeeping – Challenges and Prospects



Brig Gen
MD ABDUL HAKIM AZIZ
psc, (Retd)

BANGLADESH started participating in UN peacekeeping mission by sending 15 Peacekeepers to Iraq to join the United Nations Iraq-Iran Observer group (UNIIMOG) in the year 1988. The performance of these pioneer UNMOS created a lasting impression to the UN, as such the country is regularly receiving requests for participating in almost all the UN Peacekeeping Missions. Currently the UN is conducting 16 missions at different parts of the world where Bangladesh is the 4th largest contributing country. Over the last 29 years, many officers-men and women-contributed for the cause of world peace and I had the opportunity to work in UNIIMOG for 14 months from September 1989 to November 1990, initially, as an Observer near Baghdad, and later, as Sector Operation Officer in Northern Sector located at northern Iraq. Again I had the opportunity to lead a contingent of Bangladesh Battalion in Ivory Coast from May 2005 to July 2006. The UNIIMOG mission was an observer mission where we worked as an unarmed peacekeeper while the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (ONUCI) was a mission under chapter VII.

With the passage of time the nature of peacekeeping has also been changed. Peacekeeping is no more confined to observer missions only. When I worked for UNIIMOG, its mandate was only a single page. It had 7 tasks only. During Operation in Ivory Coast, the mandated tasks of ONUCI were 18 in 2004 and from June 2015, the mandated tasks have been increased to 30. To cite another example of complexity and challenges of ongoing mission, the UN Mission in Mali comes to the forefront. The very name of the mission signifies how complex and critical the mission is! The mission is "United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali". The Washington Post published a report on Mali captioned "The world's most dangerous UN Mission", while The New York Times termed the U.N. mission in Mali the organization's deadliest deployment in the world, with 101 casualties since 2013. Therefore, the challenges for our Peacekeepers vary from mission to mission because of different mandated tasks, different scenarios, different conflicting parties and different stake holder's interests. This article will briefly cover UN mission in Iraq (UNIIMOG), Ivory Coast (ONUCI) and Mali (MINUSMA).

UNIIMOG

The main task in UNIIMOG was to verify, confirm and supervise the ceasefire and withdrawal of all forces to internationally



recognized boundaries. To do that task one has to be physically on the ground in the forward areas of battlefield, have basic military knowledge on military hardware used by conflicting parties, have the required intellect to pick up the battle indications correctly as posed by military movement on either side, if any; have neutrality and impartiality, strong interpersonal communication and negotiating skills and must have lots of patience to mediate conflicting issues with warring parties.

An UNMO has to drive himself to carry out the tasks. Therefore, he has to be a good driver and the first challenge in UNIIMOG was to pass the driving test. If any one does not pass the driving test, he was to be repatriated. The passing of the driving test was not an easy affair, because it used to be conducted in Baghdad City in left-hand-drive vehicle with which we were not familiar and Baghdad city is a very crowded one as far as traffic is concerned. We went to UN mission during a period when there was a culture of not to drive military vehicles at home. If anyone was found driving and reported upon, his Commanding Officer would have taken hell out of him. At that moment not many people in Bangladesh army had personal cars. Only one officer I saw had a old Toyota Publica. And when I appeared for test in UNIIMOG Headquarters in Baghdad, I was just given the Key of 3600 CC Toyota Land Cruiser 4 wheel, left-hand-drive vehicle by MTO and he asked me to drive. He directed me to move to

Baghdad City Centre and I drove for more than an hour in different busy streets of Baghdad. The MTO keenly observed from the beginning of the initial drivers checks to finally parking the vehicle in the parking place. After we returned, he instantly gave me UN driving license. It was indeed a great relief for me. The story behind was, I had spent a good amount of time in Baghdad streets to physically reconnoiter the area, understand the local traffic rules and pattern of traffic behavior before I was confident of appearing before the test.

Second was to establish a positive image for Bangladeshi peacekeepers in UNIIMOG amongst international peacekeepers. Because we had to compete with peacekeepers of Western countries, all of whom were experienced in serving in a number of UN missions. Most of them were senior by age. So, we had to work very hard from the very beginning to catch the eye of Team Site Leaders and Senior Staff Officers of other nations at UNIIMOG Headquarters. We had an added advantage because Bangladesh sent best of the best officers for the initial mission who were professionally sound having excellent oral and written communication abilities in English. For example, current CAS, a sword of honor of his course, was one of them and many of them were subsequently elevated to the rank of General in their military career. As such, most team sites preferred Bangladeshi peacekeepers to write operational and other written reports for

HQs and brief senior officers during visits to team sites. It did not take much time for Bangladeshi peacekeeper to catch the eye of Mr. Goulding who was then SRSG and responsible for UNIIMOG, whom our Country Senior, Late Shabab Ashfaque, has been able to impress with our ability to lead the peacekeeping operation and approached him for the appointment of CMO from Bangladesh. By virtue of his appointment at UNIIMOG HQ in Baghdad, he had access to the Iraqi Liaison Officer, through whom he had been able to secure the consent of the host country for the topmost appointment of UNIIMOG, that is, the post of CMO for Bangladesh. Bangladesh then sent her one of the most professional, the finest and smart Brigadier to lead the UNIIMOG. He was Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, who has driven the UNIIMOG to a new height, and the implications of his efforts are quite evident now. Since then we did not have to look back and we are continuing our participation on a large scale in UN peacekeeping operations including top level leadership as Force Commanders, Sector Commanders, Contingent Commanders and Staff Officers in DPKO. And once we were the largest contributing nation to UN peacekeeping operations. Today we are the 4th largest contributor.

The third test was to moving without arms and going to the battlefield area to carry out the mandated task with another international colleague either driving myself or as a co-driver. At times we had to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3