

# **Bangladesh a Regular Feature in UN Peacekeeping**

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## **Summary**

*Bangladesh's participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions has undoubtedly boosted the country's reputation and international image. Apart from economic and professional benefits, it benefits politically and diplomatically as well. For the UN, Bangladeshi peacekeepers' professionalism, commitment, impartiality, integrity and humane attitude make them dependable contributing partners.*

## **Introduction**

The United Nations (UN) was established to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. It has largely been successful in achieving this objective since the world enjoyed a relatively peaceful environment since its inception. There was no major outbreak of war over the last couple of decades, although civil strife disrupted peace in some parts from time to time, necessitating international intervention. The UN evolved a peacekeeping mechanism to assist countries come out of conflicts. Through this unique tool, the organisation helps countries reduce escalations, establish calm and create necessary conditions for dialogue in order to achieve long term peace.

The UN dispatched its first peacekeeping mission in 1948. For over seven decades now, peacekeeping activities have remained the flagship contribution of the UN to peace, security and conflict resolution. Over time, it has evolved both in the policy and the operational domain. Unlike in the past, peacekeeping today is more challenging and more complex.

## **What are UN Peacekeeping Operations?**

In the traditional sense, UN peacekeeping operations are missions deployed by the UN to support the implementation of a ceasefire or peace agreement between conflicting parties. These operations draw the legal and political authority of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the financial authority of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), personnel and financial contributions of member states with the agreement of the conflicting parties.<sup>1</sup> It is this unique partnership that gives UN peacekeeping its legitimacy, sustainability and effectiveness. Since 1948, there have been 71 UN peacekeeping operations conducted across the four continents. Of these, 14 are still ongoing.<sup>2</sup>

One of the essential prerequisites for the deployment of peacekeeping missions is the consent of the parties to the conflict. Impartiality is crucial to obtaining the consent and securing the cooperation of the belligerents throughout the execution of the mandate. Generally, UN peacekeeping operations are supposed to be facilitatory and not

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<sup>1</sup> UN Department of Peace Operations. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-is-peacekeeping>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/un-peacekeeping-70-years-of-service-sacrifice>.

enforcement-oriented. They may use force with the authorisation of the UNSC, but only in self-defence. The peacekeepers come from different cultures and backgrounds but share a common resolve, which is to protect the communities in vulnerable situations and provide them the necessary support as they come out of conflict.

## **Challenges**

In recent years, UN peacekeeping operations have transformed, both in terms of their scale and scope. These operations are no longer mere truce supervision missions they once were. Now, peacekeepers are expected to perform multidimensional functions involving diverse rules of engagements, such as peace enforcement, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Their responsibilities have expanded further to include elements such as the establishment of rule of law, protection of human rights, support of political processes, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration and socio-economic development.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of risks, the UN peacekeeping operations now face growing unconventional and asymmetric threats from non-state actors, leading to frequent casualties and fatalities. The UN had to bring drastic changes in the mandate, deployment and composition of the missions in order to deal with these challenges. In a reflection of this, it has embraced novel concepts and commitments, such as the Action for Peacekeeping, Sustaining Peace, etc. With growing complexities and higher expectations, UN peacekeeping operations now require better synergies among all actors in various phases, starting from mandate setting and peace consolidation to draw down and exit strategy. All stakeholders, including the UNSC, troop-contributing countries and the host countries must show adaptability and prudence in forging meaningful partnerships.

The increase in UN peacekeeping operations now requires an enhanced budgetary allocation. The total budget for all peacekeeping operations has grown significantly from US\$480 million (S\$655.6 million) for the fiscal year 1998-1999 to about US\$6.51 billion (S\$8.9 billion) for the fiscal year 2019-2020.<sup>4</sup> The major financial contributors are becoming more and more impatient. They are demanding reductions of expenditure through cost-cutting and streamlining of the peacekeeping operations. For the peacekeeping missions and peacekeepers, this practically means asking them to do more with less, which is certainly a painful exercise.

## **UN Peacekeeping Operations and Bangladesh**

Bangladesh subscribes to the pre-eminent role of the UN in the maintenance of global peace and security. It is one of the few countries in the world which has recognised the UN Charter in the national constitution. Bangladesh joined the family of 'Blue-Helmets' through participation in two separate operations, namely, United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group in Iraq and the United Nations Transition Assistance Group in Namibia in 1988. Since then, it has been at the forefront of UN peacekeeping operations. It is currently the second

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<sup>3</sup> Yesmin, S (2013), "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Bangladesh: An Overview", *Journal of International Affairs*, 17 (1 & 2), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> UNGA Resolution A/C.5/73/21.

largest troop contributor in UN peacekeeping missions, with 6,434 peacekeepers deployed in 10 missions.<sup>5</sup> Till now, 170,243 Bangladeshi peacekeepers participated in 54 UN peacekeeping missions, of whom 1,803 are females.<sup>6</sup> As many as 151 peacekeepers lost their lives while 229 were injured while performing their duties.<sup>7</sup>

The footprints of Bangladeshi peacekeepers are in almost all the conflict-ridden areas of the world. They have worked in some of the world's most challenging places, including the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Mali and Darfur of Sudan.

## **Reasons for Bangladesh's Participation**

Bangladesh's participation in UN peacekeeping missions has undoubtedly boosted the country's reputation and international image. However, it is worth reflecting on the factors that motivate Bangladesh to engage with and participate in UN peacekeeping operations. Three sets of factors can be identified in this regards. They are global credibility, national interests and local undercurrents.<sup>8</sup> These three broad factors may be ascribed to three different actors of the equation as listed below.

### **For the Bangladesh Military**

Over the years, Bangladesh's military has developed into a patriotic, disciplined, hardworking and committed force. Its interest in joining UN peacekeeping can be rationalised through factors such as the fulfillment of constitutional obligations, projection of a positive image of the country and the financial incentives. It is a mixture of patriotism, loyalty and monetary remuneration that motivate the Bangladeshi military to sign up for the peacekeeping services. A few of these factors are explained as follows:

#### Building a Positive Image

The early history of military meddling into national politics and organisation of coups by some of its ambitious members and, most importantly, brutal killing of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, by some misguided army officers did not help the military's image. It needed to erase this negative image and showcase its professional excellence. UN peacekeeping offered this opportunity for it to do so.

#### Professional Benefits

The defense forces of Bangladesh benefit professionally through participation in peace keeping operations in different corners of the world. Their involvement helps them gain first-hand knowledge of the latest military doctrines, tactics and equipment. Their exposure to different systems of military management, types of conflict, etc., enhances their combat

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<sup>5</sup> UN Department of Peace Operations, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> UN Peacekeeping Journal, Vol 6, Issue 6, May 2020, p. vii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Kabir, M H, 'Global Benefits, National Motives'. <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/why-bangladesh-sends-troops-un-missions-and-how-world-benefits-such-engagement>.

capacity. Moreover, they learn to operate in an international, multi-national environment that provides them with opportunities to acquire and apply new international norms and knowledge.

### Economic Benefits

The financial rewards represent a powerful incentive for the military to take part in UN peacekeeping. Bangladesh's military is no longer an elitist organisation as may have been the case earlier, with mostly upper-middle and upper class people joining the service. Both the officers and soldiers come from diverse economic backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> The financial incentives provided by the UN appear to attract everyone in the rank and file.

### **For the Government**

There are many motivating factors for the Bangladesh government allowing its troops to participate in UN peacekeeping endeavours. Apart from projecting its image as a responsible and contributing member of the international community, Bangladesh benefits from its participation in peacekeeping politically, diplomatically and financially. These are summarised as follows:

### Constitutional Obligation

The 25<sup>th</sup> Article of Bangladesh's Constitution says that as a state, Bangladesh will work for 'promoting international peace, security, and solidarity.' By taking part in peacekeeping missions, the country fulfills its constitutional and international obligations.

### Global Responsibility

Bangladesh responds to the requests of the UN and commits troops from a sense of duty to promote international peace and stability. Dhaka, in principle, does not send troops to conflict situations or circumstances without international mandate or to take side with any party. Bangladesh also does not compromise its core values like non-aggression and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

### Global Reputation

The participation of Bangladesh in UN peacekeeping has boosted its international reputation and credibility. The world leaders have in public forums appreciated the country's contribution to peacekeeping. With the recognisable socio-economic transformation in the country, the political leadership felt the need for positive publicity. Peacekeeping provided that opportunity. Moreover, peacekeeping missions have allowed Bangladesh develop relationships with distant and conflict-afflicted regions and countries. It may count on these countries to benefit from the peace dividends and pursue its national agenda in international settings.

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<sup>9</sup> Rashed Uz Zaman and Niloy Ranjan Biswas (2014), 'Bangladesh's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions and Challenges for Civil-Military Relations: A Case for Concordance Theory', *International Peacekeeping*, 21 (3), pp. 324-344.

## Political Expedience

It is often said that increased participation of the armed forces in UN peacekeeping missions has decreased their interference in the political affairs of the country. Bangladesh has not experienced any significant military venture in national politics since 1990. The time coincided with the beginning of its engagement with the UN peacekeeping operations. The successive governments have shown political consensus in facilitating the participation of Bangladeshi troops in UN peacekeeping missions.

## Economic Benefits

The country also stands to benefit financially from peacekeeping engagements. The UN disburses troop remunerations and other financial benefits to the government in foreign currency. Moreover, the UN pays for the depreciation of the equipment used during a mission. The compensation increases the country's foreign currency stock. The compensation and foreign currency receipts directly and indirectly support the economy.

## **For the United Nations**

Bangladeshi peacekeepers excel in their professionalism, commitment, impartiality, integrity and humane attitude. The following factors may explain why the UN has found Bangladesh a dependable contributing partner in peacekeeping endeavours.

## Acceptability

Bangladesh is a small, peace-loving, and developing country. It does not have any hidden agenda in joining UN peacekeeping operations. As a result, its peacekeepers are accepted almost everywhere in the world.

## Professionalism

Bangladeshi peacekeepers are known for their excellent professionalism, sense of commitment and adherence to the UN chain of command. As a result, the UN could count on Bangladesh whenever it needed troops for its peacekeeping missions.<sup>10</sup> Force commanders of various peacekeeping missions have lauded the discipline and professionalism of the Bangladeshi peacekeepers even under challenging circumstances.<sup>11</sup> A good number of them have received UN medals of honour and some have been appointed to positions of leadership in peacekeeping missions.

## Troop Readiness

Bangladesh has never failed to respond to the UN's call to provide troops or police even on short notice. It has scrambled troops very quickly if the situation demanded a rapid response, even when many other countries have shown reluctance or unwillingness.

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<sup>10</sup> Kabir, M H, 'Global Benefits, National Motives'. <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/why-bangladesh-sends-troops-un-missions-and-how-world-benefits-such-engagement>

<sup>11</sup> 'UN force commanders praise Bangladeshi peacekeepers', *The Dhaka Tribune*, 21 June 2019.

Bangladesh has kept a few contingents on standby under the UN peacekeeping readiness system to meet the immediate UN need at any critical time. It has deployed an infantry contingent of 850 personnel in the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DR Congo as a readily deployable battalion. In addition, Bangladesh has pledged a unit for operational-level unmanned aerial surveillance in partnership with the United States.

The UN encourages the deployment of more female peacekeepers in the UN peacekeeping missions. Bangladesh has sent female peacekeepers in the all-female formed police units both in DR Congo and Haiti.<sup>12</sup> It is now sending one platoon of women with each military contingent.<sup>13</sup>

### Reputation on the Ground

Bangladeshi troops neither interfere in the domestic politics of the nations concerned nor antagonise any factions. They have a reputation for adapting to local demands easily and showing empathy towards the locals. There were instances when they shared their own rations with the needy people in their neighbourhood and provided medical assistance to them.<sup>14</sup> They had, among others, supported political processes, protected civilians, provided humanitarian assistance and raised awareness about health, hygiene and environment among the local people.

### Institutional Readiness

The Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operations was established in response to the call of the UN to train peacekeepers before deployment in conflict areas. Separate facilities were subsequently developed for the Bangladesh police. Work is underway on a peace building centre to develop specialised capacities for a range of peacebuilding activities, including electoral management, administrative, judicial and security sector reform, human rights promotion and protection, women's empowerment and socio-economic development, among others.

### Support in the Norm Setting exercise

Bangladesh has demonstrated its commitment to the UN by contributing to the norms setting exercise of UN peacekeeping, including through active participation in the Action for Peacekeeping Agenda. It follows discussions on budget allocations for peacekeeping operations in the UNGA Fifth Committee. Bangladesh also participates in the deliberations of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, commonly referred to as C34, usually on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement. Bangladesh's role in adopting the landmark resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000 as a non-permanent member of the UNSC is well-known. The country played a constructive role in the negotiations in July 2014, which led to the increase in the reimbursement rates of troop costs from the baseline of US\$1,028 (S\$1,404) by 30 per cent in the first year and 37 per cent in the fourth year for the 2014-2018 period.

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<sup>12</sup> UN Department of Peace Operations, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Armed Forces Division, PMO. <https://afd.gov.bd/un-peacekeeping/female-participation>.

<sup>14</sup> Kabir, M H, 'Global Benefits, National Motives', op. cit.

## Visits of Senior UN Officials and their Comments

Bangladesh maintains close contacts with the UN Department of Peace Operations to coordinate all related aspects of troop mobilisation and deployment. As part of this effort, it encourages regular visits by senior UN officials with a view to impress upon them its commitment, readiness and capacity to contribute to peace keeping. The successive UN Secretaries-General are on record to have spoken highly of Bangladesh's contributions to UN peacekeeping.<sup>15</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Bangladesh is keen on strengthening its partnership with the UN and other stakeholders and contributing to the maintenance of global peace and security. The country is proud of the service and sacrifices made by its peacekeepers. It remains committed to responding to the UN's call to participate in future peacekeeping missions. The UN also finds a trusted and committed partner in Bangladesh. All in all, it is a win-win venture for Bangladesh, the UN and the peace-loving world.

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<sup>15</sup> 'UN force commanders praise Bangladeshi peacekeepers', op. cit.