

Indian soldiers play “key role” in UN Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan

A Brigadier General in the Indian Army, has been reflecting on the key role played by Indian soldiers in the UN Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan, (UNMISS).

Brigadier General Karanbir Singh Brar, from Punjab, in northern India is due to leave the eastern African country after spending 12 months as an UNMISS Sector Commander but also as the military National Senior for India.

What are your responsibilities as a Sector Commander?

As Sector Commander East, based in the town of Bor on the banks of the River Nile in the east of the country, I have a number of contingents under my command from different countries including India, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka and Korea. As the Indian National Senior, I am also responsible for the approximately 2,400 Indian men and women who are deployed across the country with UNMISS.

What duties do UN peacekeepers fulfill in South Sudan?

Indian peacekeepers play a key role in UNMISS. They run hospitals in bases at Malakal and Juba and we have also veterinarians, who are able to provide services to some local herders. We have an engineering company which helps maintain the infrastructure both inside and outside bases. For example they recently repaired the runway at Malakal airport, which they did in a single night. And our troops perform patrol duties.

Generally speaking, UN peacekeeping forces are engaged in a whole range of different tasks in support of the mission’s mandate to protect civilians and build a durable peace in South Sudan.

So this includes, for example, patrolling on the ground and by air to assess the security situation, facilitating our humanitarian partners to transport and deliver aid and more broadly to build the confidence of local people, so they can remain in their communities or ultimately return home if they have been forced to flee by the ongoing conflict in the country.

There is a whole range of other duties including protecting people in the camps or Protection of Civilians (POC) sites established by the UN as well as protecting UNMISS colleagues who travel to remote areas to carry out different activities.

Can you describe what an average day is like for one of your soldiers?

Soldiering is a round-the-clock job. Not only, are there so many different tasks in this peacekeeping mission, soldiers also need to be ready to respond at any time. So, for example, we have a quick reaction force which is on a ten minute stand-by 24/7 to tackle any unforeseen contingencies. On one occasion these soldiers were called to rescue humanitarian workers who had come under fire at night.

On an average, day our Indian peacekeepers will get up at 4 to 4.30am and do physical training before breakfast if they are not going on patrol or have other duties. During the day, there may be training exercises as well as vehicle and weapon maintenance, and administrative duties.

On Sundays, those not on duty can enjoy a Bollywood film; we recently watched *Dangal*. We play competitive sports against contingents from one of the other countries. Recently our battalion in Bor won prizes in volleyball at an inter-contingent sports event. We also had the first two places in a 5 Km run.

Overall, there is a limited number of troops to carry out an extensive range of tasks so as Sector Commander I need to work with my team to ensure we use our combined military experience, to plan well and ensure high operational efficiency.

What challenges have the Indian troops faced?

One of the key challenges is that peacekeeping requires skills which are very different from regular soldiering. We are here to protect civilians and although there is no enemy, our soldiers are always under threat of being attacked especially when out on patrol.

Experience tells us that a robust and strong military posture is more effective than a softer posture, although in a peacekeeping mission we need to be able to adapt our response to a particular situation.

We always need to be mindful that we are dealing with people in difficult and distressing situations. So we must maintain a very human approach and develop an empathy with the people we are helping. Our Indian peacekeepers have generated a lot of goodwill and they are recognized for their dedication and professionalism.

South Sudan is a long way from home...what is the country like and how have you and your soldiers adapted?

The conditions here are challenging, but Indian soldiers are used to working in some of the world's toughest environments. Our soldiers have fought numerous conflicts, some conventional, some of a terrorist nature. They have dealt with many operational situations and are often deployed to remote and tough areas in jungles deserts and mountains.

As their commander here in South Sudan, I recognize they are operating in a harsh setting a long way from home and so, understandably, they can face stress, fatigue and a sense of isolation.

We celebrate a number of festivals and have a lot of communal activities which can help to mitigate the negative effects of isolation.

As soldiers, we are also well prepared by our Centre for UN Peacekeeping Operations back in India before we arrive in South Sudan for the rigours of life here and for working in a UN environment

How proud are you to have been able to represent India in this United Nations peacekeeping mission?

India prides itself as being one of the largest troop contributing countries to UN peacekeeping operations around the world. Many Indian soldiers put their lives on the line to protect the most vulnerable as their communities emerge from conflict. Some have paid the ultimate sacrifice serving under the UN flag. In South Sudan we lost seven soldiers since 2013.

Personally, it is a huge honour to be chosen from an army of 1.1 million men and women to represent my country here. It has been a unique experience working in an international organization like the UN.

I have also gained great satisfaction from being able to contribute to alleviating the suffering of the people of South Sudan, who have endured almost four years of conflict.

This deployment has definitely been a defining moment in my military career.