Force Commanders speech in the Security Council on

Operating in an Asymmetric Environment in a Peace Keeping Operation

Excellences, dear colleagues. It is a great honor to deliver a speech in this distinguished forum. The topic that I have been asked to talk about is “Operating in an Asymmetric Environment”.

As you know, I command the MINUSMA force and to answer the underlying question in the topic – is MINUSMA geared to operate in an asymmetric environment? – I would say ‘no, not really’. I possess some good assets but overall we have some major shortfalls that make us extremely vulnerable.

Since Mali is often on the agenda of the Council, I will not in detail explain the threats and challenges in the country. While we consider the Platform and the Coordination as so called compliant armed groups, it is primarily but not only the jihadist groups that are hostile against MINUSMA. Their preferred methods are Improvised Explosive Devices (IED’s), suicide attacks, laying of mines along our routes, ambushes and shelling our camps with rockets and mortars. The consequence is that MINUSMA is by far the UN mission with most fatalities among UN troops with 36 killed soldiers and more than two hundred wounded since 2013. I am deeply concerned and moved about this fact.

When doing peacekeeping in such an environment we have a robust self-defence mandate. However, we cannot and are not mandated to conduct offensive operations against the threats, we are restricted to try in the best possible way to mostly defensively protect the population and ourselves.

This requires the ability to master three main functions

- **Understand** the environment - who, when, where, how etc. – only through understanding can we prevent attacks by either influencing the leaders or by deterring the groups by being at the right spot. We also need strong situational awareness to be able to monitor a ceasefire in such a vast country,
- **Reassure and convince** the population to believe in a future without the armed groups

and while doing this we must

- **protect** ourselves.

The first function is Understand and here is the good news. In MINUSMA we have implemented a new intelligence concept – ASIFU – the All Source Information Fusion Unit. In support of this I also have at my disposal Special Operations Forces and helicopters. This is a huge step forward in the UN modus operandi – actually accepting intelligence gathering as an integrated function in our operations. I now have a number of sophisticated assets, including UAVs and I have a strong centrally placed intelligence staff that can do the assessments. We have come a long way, and definitely I am provided with good solid intelligence that helps me understand the environment.
However, if we, the UN, will continue to operate in such environments we need to exploit this concept further. We need to have more intelligence gathering assets on the lower levels and – most importantly - we need to have the staffing capacity to make better use of the intelligence. I am making a strong push for the full manning of all my HQs and importantly, with the proper skill set, Intelligence is a priority.

The next function was reassure and convince. The best way to counter the asymmetric threat is of course to get the support from the population. If the population believes in the alternative, if they believe in the peacekeeping force - then they will be reluctant to support the terrorists or other armed groups, including bandits and eventually these groups might loose their hide-away.

In the mission, we have a strong PIO section working effectively with the media, issuing communiqués, making radio-news etc. But we need what I would call an ‘information operation’ concept combining all our messaging activities in a coordinated manner. Commanders and soldiers on the ground should talk and interact more closely with the population telling what we are doing, why we are here, what is going on etc. Combining this messaging with the execution of ‘quick impact projects’ and other outreach activities we will in a coordinated manner create a positive perception of the Force and the ‘alternative to war’.

I am therefore happy to see that in the first draft of the new Mission Concept, ‘information operations’ are mentioned and that is why I have now established a small Information Operations Cell in my U-5 planning section in the Force Headquarters. We should exploit this concept further.

While operating on understanding the environment, preventing attacks, convincing and assuring the population – or in one word stabilizing the situation - we need to protect ourselves.

Anything that moves by road in such a hostile environment as Northern Mali, needs to be protected. That means protected against mines – and all units should be able to search, detect and avoid mines and IED’s. It goes without saying that 8 UN-soldiers sitting in the open air on top of a soft Landcruiser pick-up do not stand much of a chance when the vehicle is hit by a mine or an IED. The same goes for the civilian unprotected supply trucks. To put it shortly, we need to make sure that any contingent operating in a hostile environment is well equipped with protected vehicles for those of their troops that operate outside the camps. If the Troop Contributing Country is not able to bring this equipment themselves, then we must consider if we can accept such a unit at all.

We also should provide well protected camps with good living conditions. Particularly when we put up camps in contested areas, where troops conduct risky operations out of their camps on a daily basis. They need to have a safe heaven to come home to. We can never achieve full protection against everything. But our troops deserve to be well protected in their camps against shelling or suicide vehicle IEDs - which unfortunately is
not always the case. But we are working on improving this by among others the implementation of ‘indirect fire warning devices’.

The soldiers also need to have access to proper accommodation, water, energy and a basic degree of welfare. I am aware that much of this is basically a national responsibility by the Troop Contributing nation. And I basically believe that this should be assessed and certified before the contingent is allowed to deploy. But to the extent that the unit does not bring these capacities in the mission, I guess they can only be helped by the UN.

Finally, I will mention that we need robust logistics. What do I mean by that? The well proven UN system - where Mission Support delivers supplies by the use of civil contractors all over the mission area - might work in certain well established low threat missions. But it does not work in a hostile environment like in Mali. To be very specific: North of the Niger River the hostilities are so imminent and the road conditions are so poor that it is irresponsible to keep on going there with old fragile civilian trucks that are unprotected and driven by people that are not soldiers. This is one of the main reasons why we cannot sufficiently support our troops and our camps in the North. Therefore we strongly need a military logistics unit to work in the most hostile parts of the country. It is not so important who commands it – but the capacity is important. We also need requisite aviation assets to help manage the burden of supply to far off bases and we need contractors with the right equipment to be able to transport effectively along difficult supply routes.

Let me turn to training. It is of the outmost importance that before deployment, the UN forces are properly trained. Among the most important are patrol-TTPs; Basic Counter IED (search – detect – avoid); how to call for helicopters to evacuate casualties; Code of Conduct and Discipline as well as weapons training. There are other important skills as well, for instance how to conduct crowd control.

I say this because I have experienced that many of my troops are not good enough at these basic skills. And I am sorry to say that because of insufficient pre-deployment training, I believe we have had losses that could have been avoided. Above all of the skills I mentioned is counter-IED training. Every single soldier needs to be able to search, detect and avoid IED’s and mines at a basic level. This is very simple to obtain and it is not a demanding training program. Any infantry man can learn this in 3 weeks. And it will save lives.

So if we can manage to improve the pre-deployment training level, then I will promise to maintain the skills of the troops once they have arrived in mission. And did I possess the envisaged ‘mentor-teams’ the overall effectiveness of the Force would be enhanced.

I do not have the time today to go deeper into each and every of the skills that I mentioned before. I would just add that training and discipline is almost everything for surviving in an asymmetric environment.
Conclusion

So, to conclude, and to try and lift my personal experience from MINUSMA into a general recommendation: I am not in doubt that in the future there will certainly be a continuous need for peacekeeping operations in asymmetric environments. And I am not in doubt that the UN will be called to put up that kind of missions – because who else would?

But if we want to be able to do it – and do it efficiently – we need to be fully capable of facing this environment in all aspects: That means capability to face hostile armed groups hiding amongst the population and to face challenging climates, geography and infrastructure. To do that

- we must be properly trained – already before deployment,
- we must be properly equipped - among other things with protected vehicles,
- we must make a particularly big effort on how we protect ourselves against IED’s and mines,
- we must ensure we have robust logistics – and that means military logistics,
- we must ensure that we have well protected camps with good living conditions,
- we must ensure that we have proper intelligence and that means ASIFU-type organizations,
- and we need to ensure that all our staff posts are manned – and manned with skilled officers.

I know this sounds like a lot, but this is what we need if we want to be able to survive in an asymmetric environment. I know well that to achieve this, we are demanding a lot from ourselves internally in the UN, for instance from the Mission Support but also from the member states paying the bill. I am also well aware that we are fully depending on troop contributing nations providing the units who can do this.

Let me finish by assuring you that we – under the circumstances - are doing just OK, anyway. While conducting operations, we work very hard in the mission to improve capabilities and standards by stepping up the training efforts. New equipment is also coming in and I am lucky that I, in general, have brave, robust and courageous soldiers who every day faces the threat without shying away. But we need to prepare and support them better.

Thank you for your attention!