

NA's Future Peacekeeping Engagement Through a Case of Operation Lifeline in UNMISS

- *Brig Gen Madhab Thapa*

Abstract

The essay delves into Nepal's substantial involvement in UN peacekeeping, particularly examining the Nepali Army's role in Operation Lifeline within the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). It traces the historical origins of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) and its transformation into Operation Lifeline (OLL) within UNMISS, emphasizing Nepal's enduring commitment to global peace. The narrative focuses on OLL-54, where the Nepali High Readiness Company (NEPHRC) played a crucial role, exceeding agreed-upon limits to ensure the safe passage of the barge in a complex security situation. The essay underscores the operational credibility and professionalism of the Nepali contingents especially NEPHRC, suggesting it as a case for Nepal's unique contribution to future UN peacekeeping efforts. It advocates for the systematic documentation of such experiences, envisioning the development of a unique Nepali peacekeeping model for the world. In conclusion, the essay asserts that Nepal has an opportunity to showcase its commitment and achievements in international peacekeeping, reinforcing its position as a significant contributor to the evolving landscape of UN peace missions.

Nepali Army's (NA) six decades in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is a reflection of Nepal's enduring commitment to global peace and security. This is not merely a legacy or an aggregate of numbers of participation, achievements, and sacrifices. NA today carries a huge baggage of experience and knowledgebase derived from different peacekeeping environments of conflict zones across the world from as many as 44 traditional and multi-dimensional UN peacekeeping missions. Quite significantly, NA can offer the UN a Nepali peacekeeping model based on lessons

acquired through involvement and practice. From each mission and (the number of) contingents in those missions, NA has gathered tremendous lessons and learning (experience) from individuals - leaders and men alike and participating units. Yet very few attempts were made to collect those experiences and bring about inferences for its future application. The author believes that Nepal can contribute to the world with a unique outlook for future UN peacekeeping, which is always evolving. This paper, however, only attempts to discuss Operation Lifeline (OLL) of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in particular to derive lessons relevant for Nepal/NA to consider for the future.

Keywords

NEPHRC, Operation lifeline, Peacekeeping, UN

Background

The history of Operation Lifeline dates way back to 1989 when the first convoy of trucks left Nairobi on the 1st of April (Akol, 2005). No written agreement was made, but the commitment of the parties to the conflict (Government of Sudan and Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army – SPLM/A) enabled UNICEF to bring in 100,000 tons of food over six weeks by operation code-named Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) through 'Corridors of Tranquility' without a ceasefire (ibid). The aim was to feed approximately two million people in the famine-hit Southern Sudan during the initial phase of the second Sudanese civil war (1989-2005) (IRIN, 2014). Relief materials were transported via river, rail, and air with noticeable improvement in the conditions of the population affected by war-induced famine. Following the coup d'etat on 30 June 1989 in Sudan, and splitting of SPLM into different armed factions complicated the OLS relief system; finally leading to the first UN's written agreements with non-state actors (Akol, ibid). As a result, 'one of the first post-Cold War UN-led humanitarian programs' (ibid) completed several rounds of OLS, while becoming one of the most complex and largest

relief operations in the world (Macrae, 1996) to save lives in southern Sudan. Despite consistent criticism of its failure to address the root causes of the conflict by only attending to the immediate needs, OLS operated for about 16 years ending in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (IRIN, *ibid*).

Nevertheless, CPA highlights how the peace process took shape at its own pace alongside OLS. As the world sees today, CPA reached its climax with the end of Africa's longest civil war (Newswires, 2011) and the creation of South Sudan in 2011 with an overwhelming 98.83% popular vote to secede from Sudan (*ibid*) following decades of conflict-marred independence movement. South Sudan became independent on 9 July 2011. Country of a huge potential, South Sudan was largely seen as peaceful then, but not completely free from violence for obvious reasons. Therefore, the United Nations through UNSCR 1996 established UNMISS on the 8th of July - a day before South Sudan's independence - with a mandate for peace consolidation, conflict prevention, and fostering longer-term state-building (UNMISS, 2011).

Only two years after independence in 2013, South Sudan was engulfed in a nationwide conflict setting in a 6-year-long civil war killing nearly 400,000 people and displacing approximately 4 million (CWU, 2022). Consequently, the UN Security Council emergency session adopted UNSCR 2131 on 24 December 2013 increasing troop and police ceilings to support the mission's protection of civilian (POC) mandate and provisioning of humanitarian assistance (Hunt, 2020). This was an unprecedented departure from UNMISS's mandate from state-building to a POC mandate (*ibid*). Even after the review of the mandate, the security environment in South Sudan was less conducive to peace operations for the deployment of (new) peacekeeping contingents and their contingent-owned equipment (COE) as well as sustainment of UNMISS

components across the mission.²⁹ Officers and men of NA deployed during this period of civil war revealed the details during the exchange of information on the UNMISS operational environment. UNMISS again re-invented the pre-independent legacy of 'Operation Lifeline' for its sustainment operations in 2014 as a solution, albeit this time within UNMISS's area of responsibility to sustain troops based in northern Malakal.

Operation Lifeline (OLL)³⁰

Essentially, OLL is an enduring riverine sustainment operation owned by the Mission Support Division of UNMISS (UNMISS FHQ, 2022), comprising a combination of commercial Tristar (Fuel) and Esco (Rations) barges³¹ and pushers - forming a riverine convoy, that moves between Mangalla in Central Equatoria to Malakal in Upper Nile state - covering 860 kilometers across River White Nile and operating throughout the year with each operation - back and forth - taking between 45-60 days, by passing through more than 80 authorized/unauthorized checkpoints. OLL started in 2013 and had to fight through the armed elements en route.

Generally understood as 'barge operations', NA has been a premier in conducting OLL in UNMISS. Not appropriately trained in riverine operations, the Nepali framework battalion completed the first five series of operations (OLL-1 to OLL-5). These initial operations were significant in UNMISS mandate implementation by transporting UNMISS logistics stores (ration and fuel), troop-contributing countries' (TCC) COEs, and humanitarian relief materials, while also ensuring UNMISS freedom of movement

²⁹ Officers and men of NA deployed during this period of civil war revealed the details during the exchange of information on UNMISS operational environment.

³⁰ Initially transportation of UNMISS stores were launched by commercial transporters without security escorts, but after attack on barges on 24 April 2013, transporters denied to move without security escorts. Hence, OLL-1 started in July 2013

³¹ Such open and floating boats are known as barges

and confidence building, however with significant threats to the security of peacekeepers amid civil war (2013-2018).

Particular to note³² here has been OLL-3 that started from Mangala in Juba on 16 October 2014 transported 82 Indian Battalion (INDBATT) COE vehicles (escorted by Nepali Battalion - NEPBATT-2) (NEPBATT-2, 2014) and Tristar and Esco barges (escorted by Ethiopian Battalion - ETHBATT) carrying rations and fuels (ibid) to Malakal required for sustaining units and contingent operations in Upper Nile State.³³ Likewise, OLL-5 established another milestones in UNMISS³⁴ which involved 11 Nepali female peacekeepers (officers and soldiers) as part of the NEPBATT-2 escort team (NEPBATT-2, 2015) Participation of female peacekeepers in OLL-5 combat operations under dire security situation prompted the involvement of female peacekeepers in UNMISS for the future, today commonly called as 'female engagement team'. Nepali contingent continued executing OLL until a dedicated Bangladesh Force Marine Unit (BANFMU) launched OLL security operations in June 2015 (UNMISS, 2015). However, a commitment of Nepali contingents invigorated again in OLL-54

³² Author could not trace relevant information on OLL-1, OLL-2 and OLL-4

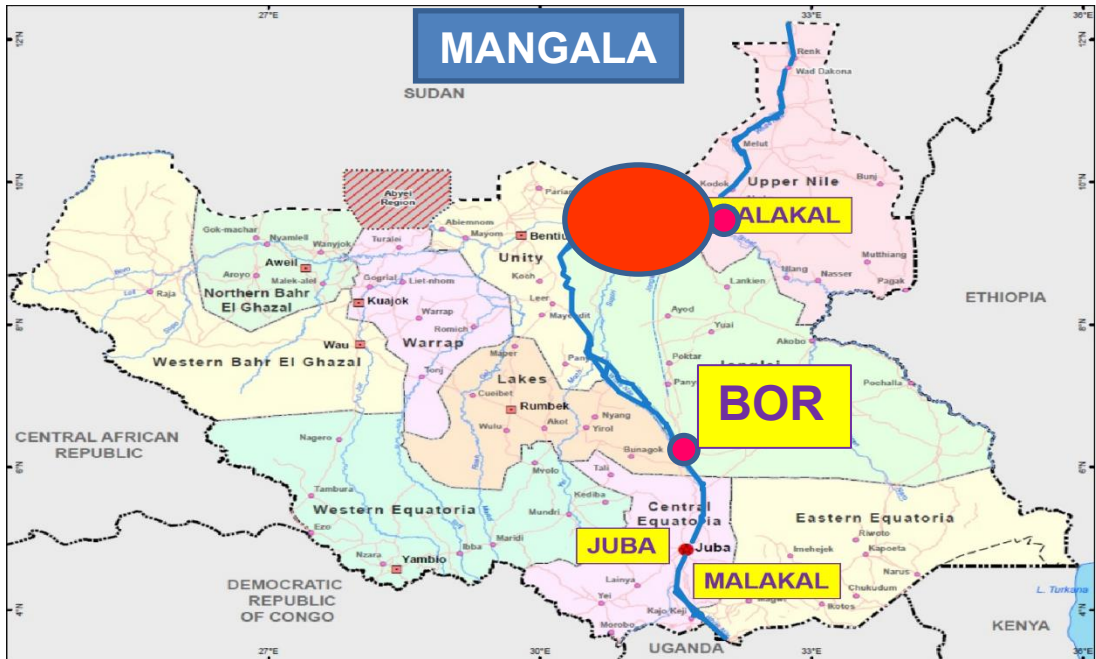
³³ Malakal is South Sudan's second largest and one of the most affected city by civil war (2013 – 2018). Following the outbreak of civil war in late 2013, the city saw heavy fighting between two rival factions of President Salva Kiir and his political opponent Rick Machar (now Vice President). Main city was completely burnt down, infrastructure was largely destroyed and thousands killed, and since then Malakal hosts one of the largest IDP camps in South Sudan with more than 200 thousand civilians, majority of which are women and children. (Reports of the Secretary-General on South Sudan – S/2014/158* dated 6 March 2014)

³⁴ OLL-5 consisted of four COE, three ESKO ration and two TRISTAR fuel barges

during the Tonga crisis, in July-September 2022, during which the author³⁵ witnessed while serving in the UNMISS Force headquarters.

Figure 1

Map showing OLL movement area from Mangala to Malakal and hotspot Tonga area



Source: UNMISS FHQ

³⁵ Author served in UNMISS Force Headquarters as Deputy Chief of Staff Support (DCOS SUP) as senior staff and member of Force Crisis Management Team (FCMT). In the capacity of DCOS SUP, he was Force HQ responsible for OLL in coordination with MSD.

OLL-54 and Nepali High Readiness Company (NEPHRC)

OLL-54³⁶ started from Mangala (Juba) on 9 August 2022 escorted by BANFMU³⁷ and halted near Amur due to deteriorating security 90 km ahead in Tonga (See map below) and again in Legno without further moves and decisions until 4 September (UNMISS FHQ, 2022). Open conflict affecting areas surrounding Tonga, and the Nile River shore amidst disagreement between Sudan People's Liberation Army In Opposition - SPLA-IO (Gen Olony faction) and Agwelek forces (led by Gen Gatwech) and subsequent involvement of SPLA IO in the fray (UNSC, 2022) impacted OLL-54's northward movement to Malakal – supposedly waiting for a window of opportunity for safe passage. No decisions were made at any level.

Figure 2

Map showing major conflict areas



Source: UNMISS FHQ

³⁶ OLL – 54 consisted 250,000kg rations, 1,146,000Ltr of diesel, 594,000 Ltrs of Jet A1 fuel, 64,000 Ltrs of petrol, 600 Ltrs Engine/ATF Oil, 2 Tons of building stores in four barges. Therefore, OLL has become UNMISS lifeline for sure since the beginning of this operation.

³⁷ BANFMU in UNMISS is specifically mandated to conduct riverine operations including OLL.

At this particular point, on the first week of September 2022, operations suddenly became urgent and erupted as a crisis for UNMISS because critical decisions had to be made on certain difficult circumstances and considerations. First of all, the Malakal base in Sector North was already short of mandatory stock-holdings of critical supplies, and there was no possibility of air supply before the end of the rainy season and maintenance of Malakal airport, whereas the air assets were already critical due to diverse commitments. Second, waiting in-situ meant the expansion of conflict between the armed factions, and the chances of the peacekeepers on barge falling into cross-fire while returning to Mangalla port or Bor would mean an unconditional delay for re-supplying Sector North. The third and the most critical one was an expression of inability by the South Sudanese authority to provide security to the movement of the barge and that the fighting parties would only listen to the orders from their own channel of communication. Effectively, this became the question of 'freedom of movement' to the UNMISS forces (which the Government of South Sudan could not assure) and sustainment of UNMISS operations in Sector North. Finally, the new Force Commander (FC) who assumed his office only a couple of days ago³⁸ had to make this time-critical decision for subsequent approval from the Principal Management Meeting (PMM) at mission headquarters.

Based on U2 (peacekeeping intelligence branch) and Joint Mission Analysis Cell (JMAC) assessments, U3 (Operations) proposed the FC with three broad options: option 1 – continue waiting until fighting subsides, thus remain indecisive, option 2 – return to Bor (Sector East) and wait for opportunity, and option 3 – sail through to Malakal (final destination) with necessary force protection. The author's impression about the FC's intent at the time was that he wanted to kick-start his tour of duty in a promising style

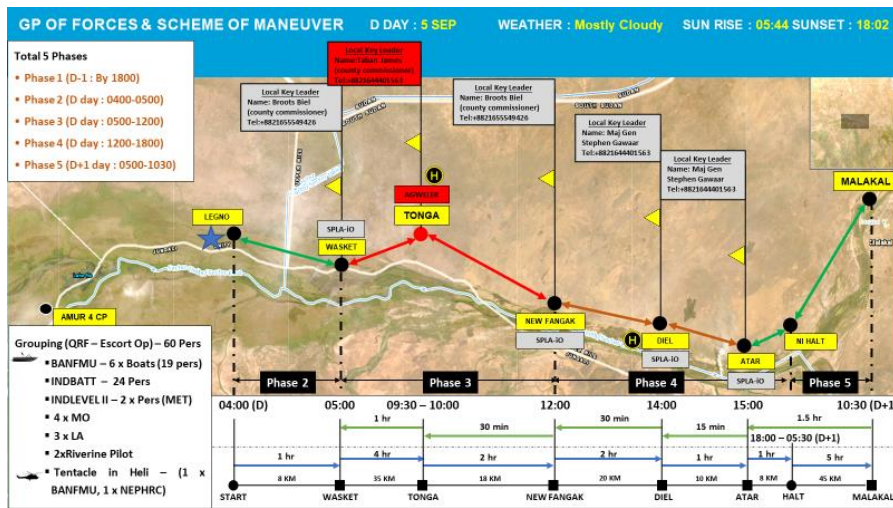
³⁸ UNMISS Force Commander Lieutenant General Mohan Subramanian from India began his tour of duty at UNMISS on 29 August 2022.

through this crisis, however was not fully substantiated by leaders and staff in force HQs, who suggested continuing indecision. The FC in his role as Force leadership also wanted to establish his authority amongst mission leadership to begin with, so was pursuant of how the third option could be implemented. At this juncture the Nepali contingent, especially Nepali High Readiness Company (NEPHRC) came into FC's scope for utilizing its operational capability, which was in a way under-utilized by the mission. However, that was the subject of the status of forces agreement (SOFA) and status of unit requirements (SUR) which allowed NEPHRC to operate only for the Juba contingency plan (JUBA CONPLAN) and deployed in the capital Juba since July 2017 in the wake of an outbreak of violence in the year 2016 (UNMISS, 2018). FC's insistence to U3 and this author finally gave shape to his intent in a very complex operation plan (See operation plan) on UNMISS standards, which included combined operations by three Sectors (Sector Juba, Sector North, and Sector Unity) led by Sector North involving ground troops, riverine forces as well as the Nepali heliborne special operating forces. NEPHRC insertion operation was pivotal for the decision-making of FC as well as PMM on 3 September and the ultimate success of OLL-54. This became possible only when the officiating NEPHRC commander³⁹ agreed to realize the FC's intent (despite SUR limitations) with their capability, mettle, and abundant peacekeeping experience. The mission leadership decided to engage the opposing forces through negotiations and simultaneously conduct military operations to secure and facilitate a protected northbound move of the barges (NEPHRC, 2022).

³⁹ The Officiating NEPHRC commander was (then) Major Saroj Nepal, who on the instructions of his commander and in consultation with the senior national officer consented to conduct this operation beyond JUBA CONPLAN. Commander NEPHRC (then) Lieutenant Colonel Saujanya Shamsheer Rana was on leave in Kathmandu who coordinated with NADPO at headquarters and received approval for the mission without any delay. NEPHRC's recce mission to all the Sector HQs as mission orientation post-the-deployment - on NEPHRC commander's own initiative was critical for his decisiveness.

Figure 3

Sector North Operation plan and scheme of maneuver



Source: UNMISS FHQ

To this end, the NEPHRC detachment completed its movement to Malakal via UNMISS special flight according to the Force HQ tasking order (UNMISS FHQ, 2022) on 3 September. The given NEPHRC mission⁴⁰ per the tasking order was to protect and provide incident support for the move of OLL-54 from Legno to Malakal upon decision by PMM (NEPHRC, 2022). NEPHRC adopted a fast rope insertion and extraction

⁴⁰ Special tasks assigned to NEPHRC to accomplish the mission was to operate under command Sector North and conduct slithering operations by one detachment (22 persons) to position themselves on the OPLL barge at Legno by Helicopter Rope Suspension operations on 3 September 2022, then provide force protection to OPLL barge on their journey from Legno to Malakal, make necessary CONPLAN in conjunction with OPLL barge with OPLL barge commander, keep six personnel in Malakal to facilitate the furthering slithering operation of QRF (INDBATT), NEPHRC Team commander to position himself in SNORTH throughout the operation, and be prepared to conduct hostage rescue operation as and when required.

system (FRIES) by improvising Rwandan Aviation (RWANAVN) MI-17 winch⁴¹ considering mission criticality vis-à-vis troop safety and completed insertion (See picture below showing NEPHRC heli-insertion) a day later on 4 September than originally planned.

Figure 4

NEPHRC conducting heli-insertion at Legno on the barge



Source: CO, NEPHRC

On the 5th of September, the reinforced/re-strengthened barge made the northward movement, only stopped by Agwelek forces in Tonga for an extended negotiation, eventually securing further northbound movement (NEPHRC, 2022). During the barge move in high-threat areas from Wasket to New Fangak, air cover was provided to the barge, whereas the dynamic air patrol (DAP) was conducted to New

⁴¹ Surprisingly, NEPHRC has to sign off declaration that NEPHRC would be responsible for any mishaps as urged by MOVCON and Malakal Airops. Point to note is that NEPHRC agreed to operate beyond its mandate for mission critical operations.

Fangak by field office Sector East represented by Sector East Commander⁴² to engage SPLA-IO local leadership (UNMISS FHQ, 2022). In the meantime, the FC engaged South Sudanese People's Defense Force (SSPDF) leadership in Juba, whereas the SSRG Nicholas Hysom engaged General Olony of Agwelek forces in Khartoum.⁴³ Finally, after successful negotiations with local leaders and an increase in force protection on the barges, the safe passage of OLL-54 was completed on 5-6 September 2022, incurring a delay of 20 days (UNMISS FHQ, 2022). This path-breaking event based on the 'whole of the mission approach' contributed significantly to the safe passage of the barge, ensured UNMISS freedom of movement, and avoided logistics criticality in Sector North. NA in the initial series of OLL accomplished this mission without proper riverine capability and training; while this time NA went beyond SUR limitations (agreed commitment) to implement UNMISS mandates. The author believes - this particular event - is only a case out of many in several missions.

Ways Forward

Agreement to Force HQ's request and eagerness to serve within its capability by even going beyond the limits of SUR is yet another example NA has demonstrated in UNMISS; this time by NEPHRC. The author believes this is the reflection of the operational credibility of one of the largest troop contributors⁴⁴ in UN peacekeeping today. This was also the demonstration of NA's professionalism as a TCC in the mission

⁴² Sector East Commander (also the Senior National Officer of Nepali contingent) was Brigadier General Dhruba Prakash Shah – who arrived only a week before and was due to his orientation brief, however he successfully negotiated with the SPLA-io local leadership in New Fangak and consented to NEPHRC's critical involvement for this mission. Himself being from Special Forces also provided him moral authority to authorize and convince NADPO.

⁴³ Author himself observed and monitored these developments when leading the Force Crisis Management Team (FCMT) at Force HQs.

⁴⁴ Nepal is the largest troop contributor in UN Peacekeeping with 6247 personnel currently deployed in as many as 12 peacekeeping missions

which goes to the mission area and operates without any caveats. Surely, many lessons were drawn from OLL-54. This particular operation (NEPHRC insertion) triggered several adjustments in UNMISS force preparedness, training, operations, peacekeeping intelligence, logistics, review of Forces SOP, the need to revise SURs, and many other dynamics of multi-dimensional peace operations such as the need for joint-ness in planning, preparation, and execution, and importance of key leader engagement to facilitate Force's operations – meaning the complementarity among different mission components. Many of them were later incorporated into mission and force planning as well as UNMISS FHQ standing operating procedure (SOP).

Much of its importance to the Nepali Army from this NEPHRC involvement in OLL-54 of UNMISS underscores while suggesting one line of national approach for NA's future peacekeeping endeavors. In a competition amongst 123 TCCs in modern-day peacekeeping (which is increasingly competitive with the participation of an increasing number of new TCCs including the permanent members like China), Nepal/NA must strive to achieve an edge through the demonstration of profound dedication, professionalism and distinction in their service under the UN flag. Going beyond SUR limitations (for mandate implementation) and above the mandate of other TCC (in this case BANFMU) in the UN's largest peacekeeping mission upon the request of Force leadership and executing it by setting a newer bench-mark for the rest exemplifies our national character and commitment for international peace and security.

Still, South Sudan awaits its first-ever general election scheduled for December 2024, yet without a conducive and convincing environment of peace and security despite more than a decade of UNMISS involvement (UNSC, September 2023). Most of the factors and root causes of conflict such as ethnic and tribal dynamics, poverty and under-development, weak governance structure, and institutional system, slow progress in state-building, humanitarian crisis and reconstruction process, insufficient progress on transitional security arrangements as well as delayed in the implementation of

Revitalized Agreement and peace process continue to haunt the youngest country and the newest member of the UN (UNSC, October 2023). Many other UN peacekeeping missions – traditional and multi-dimensional - have lived for decades without concrete resolution of the problem facing many conflict-ridden countries. Hence, a newer approach to peacekeeping is not only desirable but also deemed necessary. Now it is imperative for Nepal to contribute towards this end through NA's future peacekeeping engagement from within or beyond the framework of 'Action for Peace'.

In sum, from more than six decades of continued participation in UN peacekeeping Nepal has inscribed international peace as one of the most important foreign affairs' derivative, and NA has acquired abundant peacekeeping experience and acumen. NEPHRC's accomplishment is only another round of Nepali peacekeepers' demonstration of their will, intent, capability, and commitment toward mandate implementation in the mission area. There are many others in different missions in different periods, which certainly suffer from objective documentation. Collection of all the knowledge and experience of individuals, leaders, and units from field missions as well as UN headquarters (including mission leadership and substantive staff) in diverse operating environments definitively provides inferences and insight to prepare a Nepali model for UN peacekeeping. NA's long peacekeeping legacy and hence the achievements thus far found an opportunity and moral authority towards this end. Furthermore, this could be the best way to highlight NA's commitments and achievements most effectively.

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