



# Blue Helmet Havens: Separation and Segregation in Peacekeeping

## Kathleen Jennings

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**In peacekeeping missions, peacekeepers live separated and segregated from the local communities which they are mandated to protect. This wide gulf between the everyday lives of peacekeepers and locals has consequences for peace interventions' effectiveness and outcomes.**

A truism of international peace interventions is that peacekeepers – and international peacebuilding personnel writ large – live in the same place as local residents, but do not live in the same world. The peacekeeping world is air-conditioned, clean, and well-guarded; it consists of decent housing, generous pay, access to vehicles, domestic help, and, usually, a robust (if limited) social life that revolves around expensive restaurants, hotels, bars, and clubs. In other words, peacekeepers live, work, and socialize in what I call ‘blue helmet havens’, distinct from the spaces most locals inhabit. They are spatially, economically, culturally, and in many cases linguistically separated or segregated from the majority of the local population of the ‘peace-kept’ city. As a Goma-based source put it, peacekeepers are ‘living in Congo’ but not ‘living Congo’.

The security and safety of peacekeeping personnel and property is the dominant justification for the ‘bubble’ in which peacekeepers live. Notably, this separation is enacted not only by barriers, bunkers, and security guards, but also by various peacekeeping rules, regulations, and norms that mitigate – if not actively discourage – informal or social contact between peacekeepers and locals.

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Thus, peacekeepers' off-duty movements are circumscribed by the security perimeter zone that is established by the mission's internal security service, which delineates where peacekeepers can live, shop, and socialize and, in capitals and other urban areas, excludes vast swathes of the host cities. Even within the zone, peacekeepers are advised never to move on foot. They are required to live in gated and guarded compounds; are given black-lists of proscribed social venues; and, besides being prohibited from buying sex while in the mission area, are also strongly discouraged from having *any* intimate or sexual relationships with locals. These formal rules and regulations are reinforced by informal norms and mission cultures, which are heavily oriented towards keeping the peacekeeping bubble intact and exclusive. Cumulatively, the extremely risk-averse approach that missions take towards peacekeepers' interactions in and with their surroundings means that the contact between peacekeepers and locals is both sparse and essentially transactional. There exists a wide gulf between the everyday lives of peacekeepers and locals, and very few means to bridge it.

### **Peacekeeping-as-enterprise in the peacekeeping 'bubble'**

But why is this important? Research shows that the gap in proximity and understanding between the international and the local matters for peace interventions' effectiveness and outcomes. For example, in her book *Peaceland*, Séverine Autesserre argues that the shared everyday habits, practices, and narratives of international interveners simultaneously enable international peacebuilders to work in challenging environments, and degrade the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions. In other words, she asserts a direct link between the peacebuilding bubble and peacebuilding outcomes.

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My own [research](#) also deals with the distorting effects of the peacekeeping bubble. Using the analytical lens of the peacekeeping economy – which encompasses the services, establishments, and activities needed to allow peacekeeping and peacekeepers to function, and which to a large extent frames and contains the peacekeeping bubble – I have argued that in areas with robust peacekeeping economies, peacekeeping appears to locals more as an enterprise than protection or development. Where peacekeeping economies flourish, they are as visible and tangible to local citizens as anything else done by peacekeeping missions – maybe even more so. It is thus unsurprising that, when people look around them and see money flowing and where it flows, they conclude that, heroic narratives aside, peacekeeping is not that different after all: it is all about the money. This in turn fosters cynicism and resentment among local citizens towards the peacekeeping mission, from which it is plausible to draw a connection to subpar results. On the peacekeepers' side, meanwhile, what is striking is the extent to which their arms-length relation to the local reveals a sense of [vulnerability](#) – a perception of themselves as potential victims of exploitation, crime, or violence, thus upending the normal framing of peacekeepers as powerful, dominant protectors. On both sides, the strict separation between the peacekeepers and the local encourages, if not fosters, a lack of understanding and trust.

Taken together, then, this paints a picture of peacekeeping and peacekeepers as purposefully disconnected from the local everyday, apart from the microeconomic transactions contained by, and constitutive of, the peacekeeping economy. When it comes to how peacekeeping really works, the peacekeeping bubble is as relevant and significant as the peacekeeping mandate. Problems associated with this bubble's existence include local suspicion of missions' activities and motives; and a dearth of knowledge of,

and empathy towards, locals from peacekeepers – each of which could be reasonably conjectured to inhibit the effectiveness and transformative potential of peacekeeping.

### **Security, estrangement, and stasis in peacekeeping transformation**

An obvious implication of this contention is that international peace interventions will work better and more empathetically if the prevailing separation and segregation is lessened, such that the international and local ‘everydays’ are more enmeshed and aligned. But how would this work? Is it even possible?

There are modest proposals that missions could immediately initiate in order to promote an environment of mutual trust and more substantive formal and informal contact between peacekeepers and locals, which could eventually make peacekeeping environments safer for both peacekeepers and locals alike. For example, to mitigate the negative effects of the peacekeeping economy on the local economy and labour market, missions could:

- implement better scrutiny and oversight of subcontractors employed by missions (with respect to labour standards and protections) and of landlords the mission rents from (to ensure that ill-gotten gains are not rewarded);
- give guidance to peacekeepers on how to relate to their employees, prioritizing the rights of the employee equal to those of the peacekeeper;
- make greater efforts to procure goods and supplies locally, working with and monitoring local suppliers to forestall potential negative side-effects on local markets;
- and use of training methods and materials that do not rely on scare stories and fear to coerce obedience, thus encouraging more receptive attitudes

towards locals by peacekeepers.

The most significant obstacle to peacekeeping transformation lies in the area of security. The tendency in peacekeeping missions to take greater and greater precautions to obviate danger and avoid risk is not without reason: persuading member states to contribute troops and money to peacekeeping is significantly more challenging if the UN is perceived to be reckless, and recruiting civilian peacekeepers also becomes more difficult. But ‘security’ in peacekeeping increasingly seems to mean the elimination of risk – whether stemming from armed groups, organized or ordinary criminals, fraudsters and scam artists, or everyday activities like driving, eating out, having sex, or walking down the street. According to such a standard, peacekeeping missions will never be fully secure. Nor, for that matter, will anything else. Peacekeeping institutions (headquarters and missions) and peacekeepers surely recognize this reality, yet there is little evident willingness at any level to push back against ever-escalating security demands and regulations.

In this heavily securitised and risk-averse environment, where protection of peacekeepers is (and always has been) mandated equal to protection of civilians, separation is the path of least resistance. This implies that fundamental transformation in how peacekeeping missions situate themselves to local people and communities is unlikely. Missions’ estrangement and alienation from the local community and the local ‘everyday’ is a feature, not a bug; and thus that whatever losses may ensue – of legitimacy or effectiveness – is a price that the peacekeeping apparatus is willing to pay.

Image by UN Photo via [Flickr](#).

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