Beat: News

Reliable information ‘a matter of life and death’

UN chief tells Security Council

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Access to information is a human right, Secretary-General António Guterres told the Security Council on Tuesday, underscoring that for peacekeepers, it can be “a matter of life and death, and the difference between peace and war."

“Communications is not a side issue or an afterthought,” he said during the first-ever High-Level Debate dedicated to the importance of strategic communications, calling it “central to the success of all our work”.

He recalled his 2016 pledge when sworn in as Secretary-General, to “communicate better about what we do, in ways that everybody understands”.

“We need a substantial reform of our communications strategy, upgrading our tools and platforms to reach people around the world,” Mr. Guterres declared, noting that the Organization has since embarked on an ambitious new Global Communications Strategy.

Weapons of war

The landscape in which UN peacekeepers operate is more hazardous today than any time in recent memory; geopolitical tensions at the global level reverberate locally; conflicts are more complex and multi-layered; and international discord often translates into heightened tensions on the ground, the UN chief said.

Moreover, peacekeepers are facing terrorists, criminals, armed groups – many with access to powerful modern weapons, and “a vested interest in perpetuating chaos”, he continued.

“The weapons they wield are not just guns and explosives. Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech are increasingly being used as weapons of war” with a clear aim “to dehumanize the so-called other, threaten vulnerable communities – as well as peacekeepers themselves – and even give open license to commit atrocities”, Mr. Guterres spelled out.

Deadly disinformation

Strategic communications are critical across UN peacekeeping to achieve its multi prong mission of protecting civilians and preventing violence; securing ceasefires and safeguarding political settlements; and investigating and reporting on human rights violations – all while ensuring the safety and security of peacekeepers and the communities they serve.

“That is why strategic communications is a top priority within the Action for Peacekeeping initiative,” he explained.

“We know disinformation is not just misleading, it is dangerous and potentially deadly”, he said, fuelling violence against peacekeepers, mission staff, and UN partners, transforming “our blue flag from a symbol of security into a target for attack”.

Fake news “spreads like wildfire” he noted, obstructing UN missions from their “life saving and life changing work”.

The UN chief cited a bogus letter on Facebook in Mali that alleged peacekeepers were collaborating with armed groups.

It went viral and was picked up by national media, sparking “hostility and resentment towards our peacekeepers, making their vital task of protecting civilians that much harder”.

Evidence-based communication

Credible, "human-centred" strategic communication is one of the Organization's "best, and most cost-effective instruments to counter this threat," he told the Council.

"More than just defusing harmful lies, engaging in tailored two-way communication itself builds trust as well as political and public support…strengthens the understanding amongst the local population of our missions and mandates – and in return, strengthens our peacekeepers' understanding of the local population's concerns, grievances, expectations, and hopes".

Moreover, it can create a safe space for reconciliation and allow peacebuilding to work, as well as providing women, young people, and civil society with greater access to peace processes.

But to be effective, Mr. Guterres stressed, it must be "grounded in evidence, based on verified data, open to dialogue, rooted in storytelling, and delivered by credible messengers".

Concrete actions

To improve strategic communications in peacekeeping, he outlined six concrete actions underway, beginning with adopting "a whole of mission approach" across uniformed and civilian components for networked field communication.

Second, he said mission leaders must ensure that strategic communications are fully integrated into their planning and decision-making.

Third, guidance and training need to be provided to missions, including sharing best practices. Fourth, the best tools need to be deployed to counter misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.

Fifth, he called for continuous monitoring of UN information campaigns, to evaluate their effectiveness.

"While we live in an increasingly digital world, direct person-to-person communication often remains the most powerful way to build trust and counter false narratives," said Mr. Guterres.

Finally, he called for better strategic communications to strengthen accountability and end misconduct – including combating sexual exploitation and abuse.

International solidarity

Amidst threats and mounting challenges, we must all play our part for UN peacekeeping to succeed, said the Secretary-General.

"The United Nations must play a more deliberate role as an information actor in conflict environments…[and] seen as a trusted source by…facilitating inclusive dialogue, demanding the removal of harmful speech, calling leaders to account, and promoting the voices of peace and unity".

He closed by affirming that Member States are "crucial partners in this critical effort".

Plague of 'fake news'

The Force Commander for the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) explained that an "anti-mission sentiment" prevailed in parts of the restive country, where armed groups control large swathes of territory.

"Now, more than ever, an effective force depends on a stronger communication strategy," said Lieutenant General Marcos De Sá Affonso Da Costa.

“Fake news, diffused through messaging and social media, are difficult to distinguish from reality and will soon be virtually undetectable”.

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