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ADDRESSING ATROCITY SITES IN UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS – CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES

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Summary: *Atrocity sites such as mass grave locations and massacre scenes pose critical challenges and responsibilities for United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations. This article examines how UN peacekeepers have addressed these sites, integrating both theoretical frameworks and practical case studies from past and contemporary missions. It argues that effectively securing and investigating atrocity sites – through evidence preservation, support to justice mechanisms, and memorialization – is essential for accountability and sustainable peace.*

Keywords: *UN Peacekeeping; Atrocity Sites; Mass Graves; Transitional Justice; Accountability; Post-conflict Justice*

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts involving mass atrocities often leave behind atrocity sites – locations such as mass graves, massacre sites, and former torture or detention centers – that serve as grim evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity. These sites present both urgent practical challenges and profound moral imperatives for UN peacekeeping missions. In recent years, ongoing violence continues to reveal such sites. For example, in early 2023 UN peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) discovered mass graves containing 49 civilian bodies in Ituri province (Al Jazeera, 2023). The UN mission in DRC (MONUSCO) not only secured the sites but also supported the Congolese judicial system's investigation of the atrocities (Al Jazeera, 2023). Such instances underscore the contemporary relevance of the researched problem: how UN peacekeeping operations address atrocity sites as part of their mandate to protect civilians and uphold international law. The aim of this article is to analyze the policies, practices, and outcomes of UN peacekeeping engagement with atrocity sites, and to evaluate their effectiveness in contributing to justice and reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

The working hypothesis of the author is that proactively addressing atrocity sites – by securing them, preserving evidence, facilitating investigations, and memorializing victims – is a crucial function of modern

UN peacekeeping operations and that doing so improves accountability and long-term peace. In other words, the article hypothesizes that peacekeeping missions which actively engage with atrocity sites (in cooperation with legal authorities and communities) yield better outcomes in terms of justice and trust, whereas neglecting these sites can undermine peacebuilding efforts by allowing impunity and collective grievances to fester. To defend this hypothesis, the article adopts a qualitative research approach combining literature review and comparative case analysis. The literature review surveys academic research, UN reports, and policy documents on peacekeeping and transitional justice. It also examines differing perspectives among scholars and practitioners regarding the role of peacekeepers in addressing past atrocities. The case analysis covers both historical missions (such as UN operations in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and East Timor) and contemporary missions (such as those in DRC, Central African Republic, and South Sudan). By comparing these cases, the article identifies patterns, lessons learned, and continuing challenges. Research methods include analysis of official UN mandates and after-action reports, review of tribunal and truth commission records, and synthesis of commentary by experts.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW: PEACEKEEPING, TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND ATROCITY SITES

In international law and conflict studies literature, atrocity sites are recognized as key elements of transitional justice processes. Mass graves, for instance, are not merely tragic remnants of conflict; they are “forensic and symbolic testimony to atrocity crimes,” serving as evidence for prosecutions and as focal points for communal remembrance (Human Rights Council, 2025, p. 2). Preserving such sites and investigating them thoroughly can help establish the truth about human rights violations and pave the way for accountability. Transitional justice encompasses judicial mechanisms (criminal trials, war crimes tribunals) and non-judicial mechanisms (truth commissions, memorials, reparations) to address past atrocities. Scholars emphasize that peace processes which ignore justice and the needs of victims risk perpetuating grievances. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan famously noted, there can be no durable peace without justice, and acknowledging victims’ suffering is a prerequisite for reconciliation ((United Nations General Assembly, 2006, p. 12). In 2020, the UN Security Council held a landmark debate on transitional justice, where it was affirmed that peacekeeping operations should include support to nationally owned transitional justice initiatives as part of sustaining peace (Security Council Report, 2022, p. 2). This reflects a growing consensus in literature that UN missions, beyond stabilizing ceasefires, have a role to play in helping societies deal with legacies of atrocities.

However, the literature also documents an evolution in thought. During the Cold War and even into the 1990s, traditional peacekeeping was guided by strict principles of consent, neutrality, and non-interference in domestic affairs. Under this paradigm, missions were not expected to engage in law enforcement or war crimes investigations. Early UN peacekeeping operations often “witnessed atrocities helplessly” and were ill-equipped to respond (Raju, 2014). The traumatic failures of UN missions in Bosnia and Rwanda in 1994–95 starkly exposed the limitations of this approach. In Bosnia, UNPROFOR troops in Srebrenica could not prevent the massacre of 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in July 1995, and afterwards the site was disturbed by perpetrators trying to hide evidence (by reburying remains), while peacekeepers had no clear mandate or capacity to secure mass graves for investigators (Scherer, 1996, p. W6). Likewise, in Rwanda, UNAMIR’s inability to stop the 1994 genocide left countless massacre sites to be uncovered later by others, highlighting a gap in immediate international response. These incidents spurred intense academic and policy debates on the “peace vs. justice” dilemma: whether pursuing accountability for atrocities could undermine fragile peace negotiations (by deterring combatants from disarming) or whether justice is an essential foundation for lasting peace.

Different viewpoints emerged. Some experts cautioned that insisting on war crimes arrests during an ongoing conflict might jeopardize peace deals – this was a concern during the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement in Sierra Leone, which granted a broad amnesty to rebels for the sake of ending the war (McDonald, 2002, p. 123). Indeed, the UN initially endorsed that amnesty as part of the peace accord in 1999. Scholars like Avril McDonald (2002) note this “about-turn” in UN policy: by 2000, after the peace was again broken by rebel atrocities, the UN Security Council reversed course and decided to establish the Special Court for Sierra Leone to prosecute those “bearing the greatest responsibility” for war crimes (McDonald, 2002, pp. 122-123). This case is often cited in literature as evidence that a sequenced approach may be necessary – with peace efforts first, but justice not permanently foregone, especially if atrocities continue. On the other hand, many human rights scholars and local civil society voices argue that impunity undermines peace. As Valérie Arnould (2015) observes regarding the DRC, repeated cycles of violence were facilitated by peace agreements that integrated rebel leaders into the army without punishment, effectively encouraging impunity (Arnould, 2015). In her analysis, a strategy of co-opting perpetrators led to “de facto impunity” and further violence, whereas robust justice measures were needed to truly end the conflict (Arnould, 2015).

The evolving UN doctrine reflects these lessons. The introduction of Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandates after 1999 and the endorsement of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005 signaled that UN missions must

prevent and respond to mass atrocity crimes. Alongside protecting civilians during conflict, this includes securing atrocity sites afterwards as part of a duty to uphold international humanitarian law. Modern peacekeeping manuals explicitly instruct that in mass atrocity response operations, troops should be prepared to discover and secure mass graves or massacre sites, treat survivors, and support investigations (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 5-12). For example, the U.S. Army's peace operations field manual (ATP 3-07.6) advises units encountering mass atrocity sites to avoid disturbing the site, guard it from tampering, document the evidence with photographs, and facilitate prompt access for forensic experts and investigators. It also notes that specialized resources may be needed – "a unit may be allocated specialists to assist with the investigation of mass atrocity sites," such as military police, legal officers, or forensic teams (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 5-12). This doctrinal shift, echoed in UN training as well, represents a convergence of peacekeeping and transitional justice paradigms in the literature: peacekeepers are increasingly seen as first responders to atrocity crime scenes, bridging the gap until professional investigators (national or international) take over.

2. METHODOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

To examine the hypothesis and these literature insights in practice, this article analyzes multiple UN peacekeeping missions where atrocity sites have been a concern. The methods include qualitative analysis of mission mandates and reports, as well as comparative assessment of outcomes in each case. Key questions guiding the analysis are: How did the peacekeepers handle atrocity sites (if at all)? What resources or directives did they have for this task? What were the results in terms of accountability or reconciliation? And what challenges or controversies arose (e.g. political constraints, safety issues, evidence handling, or community relations)?

Case 1: Former Yugoslavia (Bosnia, 1992–1995 and aftermath). UNPROFOR, deployed during the Bosnian War, had no explicit mandate to collect evidence of war crimes or protect mass grave sites. After the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995 – which occurred in a UN-declared "safe area" under Dutch peacekeepers' guard – the immediate priority of the UN and NATO was ending the war. In the Dayton Peace Agreement (December 1995), no amnesty was given to war criminals, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was already prosecuting crimes. However, initially NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR) was reluctant to actively hunt war crimes suspects or secure atrocity sites, considering it outside their military mandate. This changed due to international pressure. In March 1996, IFOR announced it would expand its role in Bosnia to include guarding mass graves and detaining indicted war criminals, a notable policy shift (Scherer, 1996, p. W6). Alliance officials acknowledged that

securing these sites was necessary to assist ICTY investigations and prevent evidence tampering. Indeed, IFOR troops did provide security at exhumation sites of mass graves in Srebrenica and elsewhere in 1996–1997, enabling ICTY forensic teams to recover remains and document atrocities (ICTY Press Release, 1996, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 1996, p. 14; United States Congressional Research Service, 1998, p. CRS-3). This case demonstrates early lessons: without clear mandates, peacekeepers were hesitant to engage with atrocity sites, but the pursuit of justice eventually required peacekeeping forces to take on an evidence protection role. The legacy of Srebrenica also propelled the UN to strengthen its approach to *atrocity prevention* in later missions, aiming to never again allow peacekeepers to be passive bystanders to genocide.

Case 2: Rwanda (1993–1996). The UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) was deployed to oversee a peace accord, but when genocide against the Tutsi population began in April 1994, its Chapter VI mandate and limited troops proved tragically inadequate to stop the mass killings. After the genocide ended, there were extensive atrocity sites: churches, schools, and fields filled with victims, as well as mass graves and scattered remains of an estimated 800,000 murdered. In the aftermath, a new UN peacekeeping operation (UNAMIR II) provided humanitarian aid and some stability, but Rwanda's post-genocide government mainly took charge of exhumations and memorialization. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), established by the UN in late 1994, relied on evidence collected later by investigators; UNAMIR's role in preserving crime scenes was minimal due to the chaotic situation and its withdrawal in 1996. The Rwandan case thus underscores a failure of timely response, but it also influenced UN reforms (Berchev, 2019, pp. 67-73). The Brahimi Report (2000) on peace operations stressed that mandates must match realities on the ground, implying that missions in atrocity-risk environments need robust authority to protect civilians and address humanitarian law violations. Rwanda's legacy also influenced the establishment of international inquiry commissions that can work in tandem with peacekeeping – for example, in later crises (like Darfur in 2004–05), a UN commission of inquiry documented atrocity sites even before a peacekeeping mission was fully deployed. This suggests that a variety of UN mechanisms (tribunals, inquiries, peacekeepers) must coordinate when atrocity crimes occur.

Case 3: Sierra Leone (1999–2005). Sierra Leone's civil war was marked by widespread atrocities against civilians (massacres, mutilations, sexual violence). The Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999, as mentioned, initially included a blanket amnesty for combatants. The UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) was deployed to implement the peace. However, continued atrocities by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in 2000 led to a collapse of the accord. At this juncture, the UN and the government

agreed to seek accountability. A hybrid tribunal – the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) – was established by an agreement in 2002 to prosecute war crimes, while a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was also set up (McDonald, 2002, p. 122, 124). UNAMSIL's role evolved to support these justice efforts. Peacekeepers helped with the arrest and transfer of indictees (for example, in 2003, UNAMSIL assisted in the arrest of RUF leader Augustine Gbao and others wanted by the SCSL). They also provided security for courts and investigators in the country. The literature highlights Sierra Leone as a turning point where a UN mission successfully integrated transitional justice mechanisms during an ongoing operation (McDonald, 2002, p. 122). The results were notable: the SCSL convicted top perpetrators (including former Liberian President Charles Taylor, captured later in 2006 with UN support in Liberia) and the TRC documented victims' stories, contributing to a measure of accountability and historical record. The Sierra Leone case supports the hypothesis that peacekeeping missions can indeed facilitate justice without derailing peace – in fact, the country achieved stability and the Special Court's work is often cited as a model for hybrid justice. One challenge, however, was resource constraints: as McDonald (2002) pointed out, the Special Court initially struggled with funding, being described as a "shoestring" operation reliant on voluntary contributions (McDonald, 2002, pp. 138-139). This reflects a broader issue: justice initiatives in post-conflict settings require sustained international support, and peacekeepers alone cannot fill the gap if political will or funding wanes.

Case 4: East Timor (1999–2002). After a violent upheaval in East Timor (Timor-Leste) in 1999, in which Indonesian-backed militias committed massacres, a UN-mandated international force (INTERFET) restored order followed by the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). UNTAET was unique as a peacekeeping operation with full governance authority over the territory. It directly established mechanisms to address atrocity crimes, including Special Panels for Serious Crimes (within the Dili District Court, with international judges) to prosecute those responsible for murders, rapes, and other crimes in 1999. UN police and peacekeepers in UNTAET secured crime scenes, collected evidence, and even conducted exhumations of mass graves from the violence. They worked with forensic experts to identify remains and document cause of death for use in trials. While Indonesia refused to extradite high-level suspects, the Special Panels in East Timor did convict numerous Timorese militia members for crimes against humanity. Additionally, a Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation was created. The East Timor mission demonstrated how a UN peace operation can directly administer justice in a post-conflict society when given the mandate. A key result was a detailed record of atrocities and some accountability, though the lack of Indonesian cooperation meant many masterminds remained unpunished. Observers note

this case as an example of integrated peacebuilding, where peacekeeping, justice, and institution-building were all part of the UN's mandate from the start. The success was mixed – local capacity was built, but political trade-offs (to maintain relations with Indonesia) limited full justice. Still, East Timor's experience provided lessons for later missions about including justice components and the importance of international support for domestic courts (Reiger & Wierda, 2006).

Case 5: Democratic Republic of Congo (2000s–present). The UN mission in the DRC (MONUC, later MONUSCO) has faced ongoing atrocities in a complex conflict. Learning from prior failures, MONUC was given a Chapter VII mandate including civilian protection. It deployed human rights officers and formed Joint Protection Teams that sometimes investigate mass violence incidents. Over the years, peacekeepers in DRC have helped uncover mass graves after attacks by various armed groups. A recent example in January 2023 has already been noted: MONUSCO peacekeepers patrolled to a remote area in Ituri and found two mass grave sites with dozens of bodies, following reports of massacres by the CODECO militia (Al Jazeera, 2023). According to UN spokesperson Farhan Haq, MONUSCO immediately called for a thorough investigation and provided support to the Congolese judiciary to pursue the perpetrators (Al Jazeera, 2023). This highlights the now-standard procedure where a UN mission acts as a first responder to atrocity sites – securing the area and coordinating with national authorities and international partners for investigation. In fact, MONUSCO has a Justice Support Section that assists the DRC government in strengthening its ability to prosecute war crimes. One innovative practice in DRC has been the use of “mobile courts” with support from the UN. These are ad hoc courts that bring judges and prosecutors to remote regions to hold trials for serious crimes. Between 2017 and 2022, MONUSCO-supported mobile courts convicted 148 perpetrators of sexual violence crimes – including a landmark 2017 case (the Kavumu trial) where a provincial politician (Fred Batumike, member of Provincial Parliament) and 10 others were found guilty of crimes against humanity for raping young girls (Akilimali et al., 2025; Physicians for Human Rights, 2018). That case, conducted in a mobile court in South Kivu with UN logistical backing, was celebrated as a breakthrough for local justice: it showed that even in conflict-afflicted zones, accountability is possible when international and national efforts combine. These outcomes support the hypothesis by illustrating that a proactive stance by peacekeepers (helping to arrest suspects, secure evidence, and protect witnesses) can lead to successful prosecutions. Nonetheless, the DRC mission also reveals ongoing challenges: despite some trials, many mass atrocities in the DRC have not been fully addressed due to capacity gaps, continuing conflict, and political complexities. MONUSCO has been criticized at times for not doing enough to prevent

massacres (e.g. the 2008 Kiwanja massacre or 2016 violence in Beni), demonstrating the inherent difficulty of protecting a vast population with limited troops. Additionally, tension can arise with host-state authorities; peacekeepers must be careful to respect sovereignty, which sometimes means they cannot directly collect evidence without Congolese legal approval. Despite these issues, MONUSCO's experience overall affirms that incorporating justice and rule of law support is now a core part of peacekeeping in atrocity-affected states.

Case 6: Central African Republic (2014–present). The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) was deployed in 2014 amid sectarian conflict that saw mass killings of civilians. Atrocity sites, including mass graves, have been found in CAR's provinces during the civil war. In one incident in 2017, for example, MINUSCA peacekeepers discovered dozens of bodies after clashes in Bangassou, and worked to secure the area so that humanitarian and human rights teams could investigate (as reported by UN human rights officials). More systemically, the UN has supported the creation of the Special Criminal Court (SCC) in CAR, a hybrid tribunal embedded in the national justice system, to try serious crimes committed in the country. Established by law in 2015 with UN assistance, the SCC became operational in 2018 and has international and Central African judges (Arinze-Onyia, 2023). MINUSCA's Justice and Corrections Section has played a vital role in standing up this court – from funding and logistics to the provision of security and the arrest of suspects. Notably, MINUSCA is authorized by the Security Council to support the SCC and other efforts to combat impunity (Resolution 2149 and subsequent renewals¹). As of 2022, the SCC conducted its first trials, resulting in convictions of militia fighters for crimes against humanity. The presence of peacekeepers has provided crucial security for these proceedings, given that powerful armed actors still operate in CAR. One success was the SCC's inaugural verdict in 2022 against three members of the “3R” armed group (“Retour, réclamation, rehabilitation”), found guilty of mass murder and other crimes from a 2019 massacre – a case built in part on evidence from the crime scene secured by MINUSCA-supported investigators (Human Rights Watch, 2022, para. 2). However, MINUSCA and the SCC have faced obstacles: a major one occurred in late 2021 when a suspect, who was a government minister and former warlord, was arrested by the SCC only to be forcibly removed from custody by national gendarmes loyal to him (Arinze-Onyia, 2023). This incident, cited by Amnesty International and others, shows the fragility of political will in CAR. MINUSCA's limited executive authority meant it could not prevent the interference. The court and mission continue to press forward, and optimists

¹ For more information see: United Nations Security Council. (2014, April 10). *S/RES/2149 (2014)*. United Nations. <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/2149-%282014%29>

like some SCC officials suggest that incident is in the past, but it “significantly dampens hope” that high-ranking figures will be brought to justice soon (Arinze-Onyia, 2023). The CAR case thus illustrates both the innovative integration of peacekeeping with a hybrid justice institution and the political constraints that can frustrate accountability. It reinforces the need for sustained international commitment – MINUSCA’s funding to the SCC is crucial, as the court depends on voluntary contributions and UN support (Arinze-Onyia, 2023). Without adequate resources and security, even well-designed mechanisms may falter. From the perspective of our hypothesis, CAR’s experience partially confirms it: where peacekeepers actively enable justice (e.g., helping set up courts, protecting judges and evidence), there is progress against impunity; but the broader impact on peace is still unfolding, contingent on factors beyond the mission’s full control.

Case 7: Other Contemporary Missions (South Sudan and Kosovo brief examples). In South Sudan’s civil war (2013–2018), UNMISS faced mass atrocities by both government and rebel forces. Although a hybrid court (the Hybrid Court for South Sudan) was envisioned in a peace deal, it has yet to materialize due to political obstruction. UNMISS, however, took the extraordinary step of opening Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites in its bases, sheltering over 200,000 civilians who fled massacres. By physically safeguarding these people, UNMISS arguably prevented many atrocity sites from growing larger. The mission’s Human Rights Division also documented atrocities in real time, producing public reports that named perpetrators – effectively a form of evidence collection for future accountability (Stimson Center, Better World Campaign and Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2015). While South Sudan’s situation remains tenuous, the peacekeeping operation demonstrated a strong posture on atrocity prevention if not yet on formal justice (the mission continues to urge the establishment of the Hybrid Court, with UN ready to assist) (Center for Civilians in Conflict, n.d.). In Kosovo (after 1999), the UN Interim Administration (UNMIK) similarly had to address atrocity crimes from the war. UNMIK police and international judges handled numerous war crime cases, although with mixed results and later handed remaining cases to the EULEX mission. One critical issue there was *witness protection*, as several key witnesses in trials of Kosovo Albanian guerrilla members were intimidated or killed, undermining prosecutions (Ristic, 2016). This highlighted an operational challenge: peacekeepers and international personnel must ensure the safety of those who come forward about atrocities, otherwise justice efforts can fail. The Kosovo experience also led to innovative justice solutions later, such as a special Kosovo Relocated Tribunal (based in The Hague) to distance proceedings from local pressures – showing that sometimes addressing atrocity sites and cases might require moving outside the conflict zone entirely.

3. DISCUSSION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

The comparative analysis above reveals both common patterns and divergent approaches in how UN peacekeeping operations deal with atrocity sites. A clear trend since the 1990s is the mainstreaming of accountability in peace operations. Early missions treated war crimes issues as outside their scope, but newer missions integrate human rights and justice support components from the start (Arnould, 2015). This reflects an important shift in the international normative environment: gross violations like genocide or ethnic cleansing are no longer seen as internal matters, and there is an expectation (from the UN Security Council, Secretariat, and civil society) that peacekeepers will not turn a blind eye to atrocities. As noted in one UN policy discussion, “there is no reconciliation without justice, and no justice without truth,” underlining that missions should help societies confront the truth of atrocities rather than sweeping it under the rug (United Nations Security Council, 2019, p. 3).

At the same time, the cases highlight different mission mandates and resources that lead to different outcomes. For example, UNTAET in East Timor had an expansive mandate (including legal authority), which enabled direct action on justice, whereas UNPROFOR in Bosnia had a narrow mandate and could do little when atrocities happened until reinforced by NATO under a new mandate. This emphasizes that the UN Security Council plays a key role: it must give peacekeeping missions clear authorizations to support accountability. In recent years, many mission mandates explicitly include language on cooperating with international courts (e.g. assisting the ICC in Darfur for UNAMID, or supporting the Special Criminal Court in CAR for MINUSCA). Where such language is absent or weak, missions may hesitate to act for fear of exceeding their remit.

Differences in authors’ views often revolve around how proactive peacekeepers should be and what the limits are. Some analysts are concerned about the impartiality of UN forces – could pursuing war criminals compromise a mission’s neutrality and make peacekeepers targets of retaliation? There have been instances validating this concern: when IFOR/SFOR (NATO forces) in Bosnia began arresting indicted war criminals in 1997, they faced armed resistance from loyalists of those figures, and peacekeepers had to engage in combat operations. In the DRC, when MONUC supported Congolese army operations against militias accused of atrocities, peacekeepers were sometimes seen as taking sides in the conflict, potentially eroding local trust. Authors like Virginia Page Fortna (2008) and others writing on peacekeeping effectiveness note that a balance must be struck between robust action and consent of parties. However, the counter-argument, supported by human rights scholars, is that impunity itself breeds insecurity – if spoilers believe they will face no consequences, they

are more likely to reoffend or refuse to lay down arms (Gilder, 2021, p. 74). The presence of justice measures can deter future atrocities (at least by those who calculate the risks). The fear that justice undermines peace has not borne out in many cases: e.g., indictees in Bosnia and Croatia were arrested and peace accords remained intact; in Sierra Leone, trials proceeded while the country stabilized. Thus, the predominant view in recent literature is shifting towards “justice and peace as complementary” rather than opposed.

Another debated point is the scope of peacekeeper involvement. Should UN missions merely secure sites and hand over to others, or actively participate in investigations and tribunals? Practitioners generally agree that peacekeepers are not prosecutors or judges – their role is to facilitate, not to run judicial processes. But they can provide critical support: forensic assistance, witness escort and protection, documentation, and even expert testimony (some military officers have testified in tribunals about observations in the field). There is also a role for peacekeepers in memorialization and community engagement. For instance, UN missions have helped local communities hold remembrance ceremonies at massacre sites, in efforts to promote healing. In Cambodia, while the UN’s 1990s mission (UNTAC) did not deal with Khmer Rouge atrocities directly, later UN agencies (UNESCO) supported preserving sites like the Killing Fields as memorials. Authors writing on memory studies caution that international involvement in memorials can be sensitive – it must be led by local needs to avoid perceptions of imposed narratives (Arinze-Onyia, 2023). The case of UNESCO’s recent recognition of atrocity sites (e.g., Rwanda genocide memorials added to World Heritage List) shows growing international support for preserving such sites of conscience (Arinze-Onyia, 2023). Peacekeeping missions, during their tenure, can lay groundwork by cataloguing sites and encouraging local initiatives to protect them (for example, UNMISS documented massacre locations in South Sudan which may become future memorials).

Despite overall positive evolution, several **challenges persist**:

- **Resource and Expertise Gaps:** Investigating atrocity sites requires specialized skills (forensic anthropology, crime-scene preservation, criminal analysis). Not all missions have these experts on staff. Some larger missions (MONUSCO, MINUSCA) do include justice and corrections experts and human rights investigators, but they may be too few to cover all incidents. Missions often rely on partnerships with agencies like the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) or NGOs (e.g., the International Commission on Missing Persons) to provide technical aid. When resources are scarce, important evidence might deteriorate or be lost. For example, in some remote parts of DRC or Mali, months can pass before investigators reach a reported mass grave due to security and logistical constraints.

• **Security Risks:** Securing atrocity sites can be dangerous. Perpetrators might booby-trap mass graves or attack peacekeepers to hide their crimes. Peacekeepers themselves have been victims of violence when trying to protect civilians or evidence; for instance, militias in Darfur and Mali have targeted UN patrols. The UN must carefully assess risk – sometimes robust operations (backed by more troops or drones) are needed to open access to a suspected atrocity location.

• **Host State Cooperation:** Peacekeepers operate under the host government's sovereignty. In some cases, the government or its allies are themselves implicated in atrocities, which creates a political minefield. For example, if a host government official is suspected of war crimes, a UN mission can find itself in open conflict with the state's interests if it actively supports his prosecution. MINUSCA's experience with the minister's escape from the SCC custody exemplifies the difficulties when political will is lacking. Diplomacy by UN leadership is needed to navigate these situations, and missions may have to defer to international courts (like the ICC) if domestic justice is compromised, as seen in CAR where the ICC had ongoing cases but decided to conclude new investigations by 2022, shifting the onus to the SCC (Arinze-Onyia, 2023).

• **Coordination with International Justice:** Many peacekeeping-host countries are also situations under the jurisdiction of the ICC or other tribunals. Coordination is crucial to avoid duplication or gaps. For instance, in the DRC, MONUC helped transfer suspects to the ICC (the Congolese government surrendered figures like Thomas Lubanga and Bosco Ntaganda in part due to international pressure and logistical help from the UN (Arnould, 2015). On the other hand, if an ICC intervention is perceived as foreign or biased, peacekeepers might be viewed with suspicion by local factions. Careful communication strategies are needed to explain that pursuing war criminals is in service of long-term peace and justice, not a violation of neutrality.

• **Managing Local Expectations:** When peacekeepers involve themselves with atrocity sites, local communities often hope for justice and closure. If the process stalls (due to lengthy trials or political deals giving amnesty), this can lead to disappointment or loss of faith in the peace process. Peacekeepers must therefore manage expectations by being transparent about what they can and cannot do, and by advocating consistently for accountability. Engaging community leaders and victim associations in dialogue is part of this effort. In some missions, UN civil affairs officers facilitate memorial services or help communities mark grave sites properly, signaling respect for local mourning practices.

The comparative analysis of authors' views and case experiences shows a broad common ground: most contemporary observers agree that addressing atrocity sites is not optional but rather a necessary component of

peacekeeping in conflicts marked by mass violence. The differences lie in how to do it effectively. The consensus is that an integrated approach works best – peacekeepers partnering with judicial mechanisms, human rights experts, and local stakeholders. Ultimately, both theory and practice indicate that confronting past atrocities through truth and justice contributes to what the UN calls “sustaining peace.” By shedding light on what happened and holding perpetrators accountable, societies have a better chance to break cycles of revenge and build trust in the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to test the hypothesis that UN peacekeeping operations must actively engage with atrocity sites to foster accountability and lasting peace. The evidence from multiple missions largely supports this hypothesis. Over the past three decades, UN peacekeeping has increasingly embraced roles in preserving and investigating atrocity sites, moving from a posture of passive observance to one of active facilitation of justice. Missions where peacekeepers secured evidence and supported prosecutions – such as Bosnia (post-Dayton), Sierra Leone, East Timor, DRC, and CAR – have seen important strides in accountability: war criminals have been tried and convicted, truth about atrocities has been documented, and survivors’ voices have been heard. These outcomes contribute to deterrence of future crimes and help communities reconcile with the past. By contrast, earlier missions that were not empowered to act (e.g. in Rwanda 1994, or Bosnia pre-1995) tragically saw atrocities go unaddressed in the moment, with justice delayed until much later or delivered by others. The evolution in mandates and practice indicates a learning process: the UN now widely recognizes that peace and justice are interlinked, and that addressing atrocity sites is part of the core mandate of protecting civilians and upholding human rights.

The article’s comparative analysis also reveals that peacekeeping efforts at atrocity sites are most effective when certain conditions are met. First, the mission must have a clear mandate and resources for these tasks – including specialist personnel (legal, forensic, human rights) and robust security capabilities. Second, there should be a legal framework or mechanism (international or national) ready to take up the investigations and prosecutions; peacekeepers operate best in support of a judicial process (as seen with the ICTY, SCSL, ICC, SCC, etc.). Third, political backing from the Security Council and member states is critical, especially when powerful local actors are involved in atrocities. Without sustained international pressure and support, justice efforts can stall, as happened when political interference occurred in CAR or when establishing the South Sudan Hybrid Court was delayed. Fourth, community engagement is important: peacekeepers should work with local communities to respect and address their needs – whether that is exhuming remains for proper reburial,

preserving a site as a memorial, or simply sharing information about what is being done to achieve justice. Success is not measured only in trials conducted, but also in the trust built with the population that the peacekeeping mission serves.

Recommendations for the future: Building on these conclusions, several recommendations emerge for UN peacekeeping policy and practice:

- **Explicitly include atrocity site management in mandates:** The Security Council should continue to mandate peace operations to support efforts to investigate past atrocities and protect evidence. Language empowering missions to “assist in the investigation of violations of international humanitarian law” or to “secure sites of mass atrocities” can remove ambiguity and encourage proactive engagement by missions on the ground.

- **Enhance training and capacity:** Troop-contributing countries and UN training centers should incorporate modules on handling atrocity sites. Peacekeepers (military and police) need basic awareness of crime-scene preservation – for instance, understanding not to contaminate graves, to note details of sites, and to cordon off areas. Additional specialized units, such as forensic teams or military police, could be deployed rapidly when large atrocity sites are discovered. As some experts suggested, assigning specialists to units for mass atrocity site investigation greatly improves effectiveness (Mettraux et al., 2014). The UN could establish a standby roster of forensic investigators for surge deployments.

- **Improve inter-agency coordination:** Addressing atrocity sites spans multiple actors – peacekeepers, UN human rights officers, national authorities, NGOs, tribunals. Mechanisms for coordination (joint task forces, information-sharing protocols) should be strengthened. For example, MONUSCO’s cooperation with ICC and mobile courts in DRC has been fruitful; similar cooperation should be planned in advance in other missions. When a mission is deployed alongside an ICC intervention, there should be clear guidelines on evidence collection standards and chain of custody so that information gathered by peacekeepers can be admissible in court.

- **Strengthen victim and witness protection:** The UN and member states should ensure that peacekeeping missions have the means to protect those who come forward with information about atrocities. This may involve secure locations (even relocation abroad in extreme cases), anonymity measures, and legal protections. Donor countries could fund special witness protection programs within UN missions or host countries. Without such protection, crucial testimony may never surface, compromising justice (as seen in Kosovo’s witness intimidation issues).

- **Sustain political and financial support for justice mechanisms:** Peacekeeping missions often operate on tight budgets that prioritize immediate security tasks. However, supporting justice (courts, commissions)

is relatively inexpensive compared to military operations, and the returns in peace dividends are high. The international community should not view accountability as an “add-on” but as integral to conflict resolution. Contributions to trust funds for courts like the SCC in CAR or the planned court in South Sudan are investments in peace. The UN Department of Peace Operations and UN Development Programme (UNDP) should continue joint efforts to finance and staff hybrid courts and to build national capacity for trying atrocity crimes, even after a peacekeeping mission withdraws.

• **Learn from and disseminate best practices:** Each mission that has dealt with atrocity sites has generated lessons. The UN could create a repository of best practices – for instance, guidelines on mass grave protection (drawing on experiences in the Balkans and Iraq by agencies like the International Commission on Missing Persons) (Human Rights Council, 2025, p. 3), or on running mobile courts in insecure areas (from DRC’s experience). South-South cooperation is also useful: countries that have gone through UN-supported justice processes (like Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste) can share knowledge with others. This cross-pollination can help new missions avoid past pitfalls.

In conclusion, UN peacekeeping operations have increasingly recognized that *addressing atrocity sites is not ancillary but central* to their mission of securing peace. By protecting the dead and honoring the victims through the pursuit of truth and justice, peacekeepers help lay the foundations for reconciliation. The sight of blue helmets guarding a mass grave – once seen in Bosnia as a dramatic expansion of peacekeeper duties – is now an accepted and expected image of post-conflict response. Still, this progression is a work in progress. The international community must equip peacekeepers with the mandates, tools, and support to carry out this sensitive and vital task. Doing so will ensure that the cry of “Never again” is matched with action: atrocity crimes will be investigated, perpetrators held accountable, and survivors given a chance for justice. These efforts send a powerful message that even amid the horrors of war, the principles of humanity and accountability endure. In the final analysis, when UN peacekeeping effectively addresses atrocity sites, it not only helps to heal the wounds of the past but also guards against the recurrence of such atrocities in the future – thereby fulfilling its core promise of maintaining international peace and security.

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