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Like a mother's love – Female peacekeepers connect better with women, children

By Staff Reporter on 7th November 2016No

SIXTEEN years ago, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution (S/RES/1325) on women, peace and security, which has since come to be famously associated with the number 1325 within the UN system.

The resolution, adopted on October 31, 2000, reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. It also stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts.

Since its adoption, women have increasingly become a part of the United Nations peacekeeping operations, where female peacekeepers act as role models in the local environment, inspiring women and girls in often male-dominated societies to push for their own rights and for participation in peace processes.

Brigadier General Zewdu Kiros Gebrekidan, an Ethiopian national, was recently appointed as Deputy Force Commander of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), which was established after an agreement to demilitarise the disputed border region allowed Ethiopian troops to monitor the area.

On a recent visit to the UN headquarters in New York, **Brigadier General Gebrekidan** spoke with UN News Centre (UNNC) about her appointment, experience and priorities as Deputy Force Commander of the Interim Security Force.

UNNC: What was your first reaction when you heard you had been appointed United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) Deputy Force Commander?

Brig Gen Gebrekidan: I felt happy on this appointment because participation of women in the military and United Nations peacekeeping missions is low. I got this opportunity in a high-level position, and I am required to perform at the highest level and fulfil the requirements of the job. I am so grateful for this opportunity.

UNNC: What do you see as your key priorities in fulfilling UNISFA's mandate?

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Gebrekidan: A major priority for UNISFA is civilian protection, and civilian protection is one of the main mandates of UNISFA. We protect civilians through a lot of activities, including patrolling on the ground as well as aerial patrol; day and night, 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Unfortunately some focal groups, like women, are not involved in the peace process. Women are a very important part of any peace process, and they should be participating fully.

UNNC: How does it feel to be in such a senior position in a field where top positions are mostly held by men?

Gebrekidan: Peacekeeping, in high level positions, is covered mostly by men. I did not feel good about that because women make half of the society, so exclusion of half of the population does not achieve much in any job. So, although I am happy to be in this position, I am not happy that half of the society has been left out for far too long.

UNNC: Can you describe your experience in the Ethiopian army and how you were perceived as a female officer?

Gebrekidan: I have almost 30 years of experience in the military. I have led troops, from platoon leader, up to the level of army commander. This long chain of command gave me experience on how to lead the army, how to manage, how to build strategies, how to prepare for every military situation. A military career involves war and peace, and one has to know how to manage, how to lead, and how to prepare for any military scenario.

In Ethiopia the army is composed of females and males, and I led both genders. One unit was composed of both female and male soldiers, and I led and treated them equally: both were given the same mission, or assigned to any mission. From the lower ranks up the ladder, they would build their capacity. I would encourage females in any situation or any duties they take on, to strongly perform and compete with the men.

UNNC: Based on your experience – as a woman serving in the Ethiopian army, and now to UNISFA’s leadership – what do you project your contribution to UNISFA to be?

Gebrekidan: First of all, I can contribute greatly to its leadership. The military leadership is supposed to give guidance and engage the troops, and to implement the Mission’s mandate by proper planning. So I can contribute to effective planning. If the main plan does not succeed, you sit down and prepare a contingency plan. All commanders are

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supposed to be aware of how to implement the Mission's plan, and this is strongly controlled by a chain of command or command control system.

The leadership is also supposed to step up before any incidents happen, to protect civilians. This way, we would fulfil our primary mandate of protecting civilians. I can contribute by helping to strengthen those aspects of the Mission.

UNNC: How important is it for women to take part in UN peacekeeping?

Gebrekidan: Women have their own part in any job, so they should not be denied a chance to play their part. They should play their part strongly, and perform well. They should develop their confidence and build their capacity to compete with men.

UNNC: What is your message to women in the military who are interested in pursuing a career such as yours?

Gebrekidan: Women have the right to participate in all jobs. They must know their part and right to participate in every job. They must build their capacity, to compete in any job, and they must perform their job effectively and strongly. This is very important.

UNNC: Do you think protection of women in conflict situations or in peacekeeping would be better if we had more women peacekeepers?

Gebrekidan: Yes, of course. Women in peacekeeping are very important, because in field missions and conflict areas, the most vulnerable people are women and children. Female soldiers are close to women and children, so in many missions the female soldiers protect these groups because they easily understand the female victims' problems, and children's challenges too. After understanding their problems easily, they communicate with women and help them.

In some areas, especially Islamic areas, or in Islamic communities, women cannot communicate directly with men. They communicate and interact with female soldiers with whom they have a close relationship, and so they can communicate about their problems. So, female soldiers in missions have a great role: to help the victims, especially women and children.

UNNC: What challenges does UNISFA face now in the execution of its mandate?

Gebrekidan: UNISFA has a lot of challenges. The main challenge is lack of political progress. This affects our mandate because we have no administration, no police; nothing

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on both sides of Abyei. There is no development on the political front. The second one is an operational matter, which has to do with logistics.

Security is another challenge, because of unknown irregular armed groups that enter villages to attack and kill civilians. Weather conditions also pose another challenge. In dry seasons, it gets very hot, and in rainy seasons it gets very muddy, and there's no movement. This restricted movement during rainy seasons affects our operational capacity.

The other challenge is infrastructure; there is no main support road and the rainy season means closed roads. Only one main supply road remains functional, for the North (Sudan). There are many challenges in the Mission.