



Germany in the United Nations



Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations in New York



United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect



CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT
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STIMSON

Addressing the Impact of Mis-/Disinformation and Hate Speech on Civilians EVOLVING POLICIES AND PRACTICES FROM PEACEKEEPING AND HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Side Event during PoC Week (20-24 May 2024)

Thursday, 23 May 2024

15:00 – 17:00 EDT | 21:00 – 23:00 CEST

Hybrid | Expert-level

*Location: Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations
871 United Nations Plaza*

Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM), also categorized as “harmful information”, and hate speech pose a direct threat to civilians in situations of armed conflict and other humanitarian crises. MDM and hate speech affect conflict dynamics and exploit societal divisions by increasing mistrust, exacerbating polarization, and contributing to physical, political, economic, and gendered harms. Hate speech in particular can be a potential risk factor and trigger of violence, conflict, and violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL).

Persons in conflict zones, including displaced and stateless persons, journalists, human rights defenders, civil society members, youth, and those with marginalized identities, are especially vulnerable to these phenomena. For instance, women and girls are more likely to receive information by word of mouth in conflict environments, and to therefore face greater challenges in verifying news and identifying harmful information. Increased vulnerability also occurs because established systems and structures and potential safeguards are often paralyzed, dysfunctional, or inexistent in conflict settings. MDM and hate speech can replicate and intensify negative social norms including gender stereotypes, inciting violence and undermining the meaningful participation of diverse groups in political and peace processes, as well as in digital spaces.

Disinformation actors or spoilers often exploit authentic grievances and create confusion around the role and intent of peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts. This can significantly hinder the ability of peacekeeping missions and humanitarians to operate safely and efficiently within conflict zones. More specifically, it can impede the delivery of critical aid, such as food, water, medical supplies, and shelter, thereby exacerbating conflict tensions and fueling hate speech and violence between different groups. In some peacekeeping settings, the hostility stirred in mission areas by mis-/dis-/malinformation has led to a diminishing level of consent from local communities. Resulting opposition can manifest as restrictions on freedom of movement, targeted demonstrations, and even direct attacks on individuals and convoys. Moreover, by undermining the legitimacy of UN peacekeeping and the UN system more broadly, MDM and hate speech pose a severe threat to political settlements, reconciliation processes and/or peace talks, which are central to ending threats to civilians.

In response to rising MDM and hate speech in situations of armed conflict and other humanitarian crises, peacekeeping and humanitarian practitioners have been building new types of partnerships and testing out strategies and practical approaches to prevent and counter these harmful phenomena, including as relates to strategic communications. Both global standards and local approaches are needed. And while there is no absolute prohibition on publishing or sharing harmful information during armed conflict under IHL, IHRL or other international legal norms, these legal frameworks do impose limits on certain forms of harmful information. Continued dialogue and collaboration are thus critical for assessing progress and refining the available tools, skills, and capacities for response by the UN, its member states, technology companies, and civil society, as well as strengthening the ability and agency of vulnerable and affected communities to respond effectively.

On 23 May 2024, the Permanent Missions of Brazil, Germany, and Morocco to the United Nations, the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Stimson Center, and Center for Civilians in Conflict will convene an expert-level event on “Addressing the Impact of Mis-/Disinformation and Hate Speech on Civilians: Evolving Policies and Practices from Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Actors”. This dialogue will be organized in a hybrid format as part of the “PoC Week” on the margins of the annual UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

Serving as a follow up to the 2023 PoC Week side event on mis-/disinformation and hate speech, this event seeks to provide an update on efforts by UN peacekeeping, humanitarians, and researchers over the last year. Specifically, it aims to generate a dynamic discussion between these expert communities on improving understanding of these phenomena in conflict and humanitarian settings, centering responses around affected communities, and creating informed policy and guidance.

Registration

If you are interested in participating in this event, please RSVP at your earliest convenience to pol-s2-vn@newy.auswaertiges-amt.de by **Tuesday 21 May**. In-person attendance is subject to confirmation by the organizers due to limited capacity at the German House.

Virtual participation through Zoom will also be possible. A link will be shared subsequently.

See following page for guiding discussion questions.

Guiding Questions

Strengthening Understanding

- What do peacekeeping, humanitarian, and civil society actors now better understand about the impact of mis-/dis-/malinformation (MDM) and hate speech on civilians in situations of armed conflict and humanitarian crises? What is less known about the causal links between harmful information and real-world effects?
- How does the increased usage of terms like misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and harmful information improve understanding and responses to these phenomena? What risks (if any) does this pose for ensuring a coordinated response?
- How does MDM and hate speech replicate negative social norms and gender stereotypes? What unique threats are refugees, stateless, and displaced people having to navigate?
- What opportunities and risks do emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, pose in preventing and mitigating MDM and hate speech?

Putting People at the Center

- How can the perspectives and concerns of communities most impacted by MDM and hate speech be further taken into account in policy and practitioner responses? What mechanisms could help address evolving information needs in situations of armed conflict and humanitarian crises?
- During periods of heightened risks, how can preventive and mitigating interventions on MDM and hate speech be adapted to the pace, scale and type of threats facing civilians?
- What do communities need from the UN and the international community to assist them in strengthening their ability and agency to respond to harmful information on digital channels?

Building Policy and Partnerships

- How is UN policy and guidance responding to the challenges and exacerbating effects of MDM and hate speech? Beyond strategic communications, how can relevant guidance be better integrated within programmatic and operational efforts to address the root causes and drivers of such trends?
- What are the obligations and commitments made by member states to prevent and mitigate MDM and hate speech on civilians in conflict contexts?
- How can efforts to tackle MDM and hate speech be further coordinated across multilateral, national, and sub-national levels? What types of partnerships and initiatives are being piloted, including with new and traditional media?
- What actions can the private sector, including technology and social media companies, take to help prevent and mitigate MDM and hate speech in conflict and humanitarian crises? How can these efforts be pursued without affecting freedom of expression?

Agenda

15:00	<p><u>Opening Remarks</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• H.E. Thomas Zahneisen, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Federal Republic of Germany to the United Nations• H.E. Omar Hilale, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations• Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, President, International Committee of the Red Cross
15:15	<p><u>Video Contributions from Civil Society Partners</u></p>
15:20	<p><u>Interactive Panel Discussion</u></p> <p>Moderation by Lisa Sharland, Senior Fellow and Director of the Protecting Civilians and Human Security Program, Stimson Center</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Naomi Miyashita, Team Leader, Information Integrity / Addressing Mis/Disinformation and Hate Speech in Peacekeeping Settings, United Nations Department of Peace Operations• Gisella Lomax, Senior Advisor on Information Integrity (Mis-/Disinformation and Hate Speech), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees• Simona Cruciani, Senior Political Affairs Officer, United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide• Lauren Spink, Senior Research Advisor, Center for Civilians in Conflict
16:20	<p><u>Participant Discussion and Q&A</u></p> <p>Moderation by Lisa Sharland, Senior Fellow and Director of the Protecting Civilians and Human Security Program, Stimson Center</p>
16:55	<p><u>Closing Remarks</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• H.E. Sérgio França Danese, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations