

A VETERAN'S JOURNEY -

**Reflecting on the Impacts of Complex
Peace Operations Involving Children:
A Call for Reflection, Reaction and
Proactive Responses**

By Colonel (ret'd) Roberto Gil
& Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi

Editors' Note: Publishing commentaries reflects our commitment to methodological pluralism and the importance of experiential knowledge. This commentary captures a conversation between Colonel (ret'd) Roberto Gil of the Uruguayan Army and Presidency Advisor to the International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centres (IAPTC), and Dr. Catherine Baillie Abidi, a professor in Child & Youth Study at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The commentary touches on many complex issues in peace and security and is intended to spark reflection and discussion.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Roberto, thank you for meeting with me to discuss your experiences encountering children during your deployments. Your perspective from your years of service is so important to guide peace support and stabilization work into the future. You are leading the way. Thanks for spending time with me to share your story.

ROBERTO GIL

I am ready and pleased to convey my experience if I know that it will go to good hands, good eyes, and good ears.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Can you tell me about your peacekeeping experiences. Where were you deployed?

ROBERTO GIL

I have been in peacekeeping operations for many years. The first deployment was with the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) at the border between Egypt and Israel in the Sinai peninsula. Then at the rank of Captain, at 34 years old, I joined my first peacekeeping mission with the UN in Cambodia. It was my second mission but my first with the UN. After that I deployed on several international peace operations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

How prepared were you and your colleagues for these operations?

ROBERTO GIL

My earlier UN peace operations were very challenging although I had received pre-deployment training in the Army of my country, Uruguay. The genocide by the Khmer Rouge, I did not see that with my eyes, I saw the outcome of that. But when I offered myself to go to West Africa, I was challenging myself. I was young, powerful, and eager to learn. I am not sure if I would have gone for that assignment if I was home, but from Cambodia I was eager for a new experience. I did not take the necessary precaution and preparation before going. At that time, in 1993, all the means of communication we

have nowadays were not in existence. We went there almost without information. We got some paper information about the peace process and the regional force, but I was not well prepared to face the new situation. The regional organization was responsible for the response in terms of security, but they were having internal problems. Before the Peace Agreement, the members of the regional force were battling against the rebel forces and supporting the government of the country. These people who became peacekeepers one day, the day before they were fighters, against those with whom they were supposed to work for peace in the morning after. How could we believe in that reconversion of them, and trust that they could protect us?

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

As you have begun to describe, peace support operations take place in complex contexts and often under significant duress. Were you prepared to encounter children during your missions?

ROBERTO GIL

In West Africa we saw the atrocities. Going on patrol every day, knowing the violence of the people, and meeting very young combatants, was a challenge. It was not easy for mature people like us to treat them [children] as adult people because they are not. But because of the experience they had during a time of crises, they were full of information, important information that we needed. So how do we deal with them? Should we treat them as children or as combatants? We were always in doubt on how to proceed.

When we talk about vulnerable children - yes, they are vulnerable. But at that time, they [children] became, for me, unpredictable and always dangerous. I remember a time when children were playing with a cluster bomb. Can you imagine the mentality of those young people to do this? They were not yet engaged in the rebel groups, but they were likely to be recruited right after they got the force to sustain a rifle. Meanwhile they played with danger. That was an impact in my life. What do we do with these children if we fail the peace process? I was permanently brainstorming and scared about taking a wrong decision. I felt the loss of context in terms of geographic space and time.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

These are certainly very challenging contexts to work in. During your deployments did you encounter children who were recruited and used in the violence?

ROBERTO GIL

Yes. One operation that affected me hard was when I was kidnapped by young people in 1993. We arrived in the country four days after a ceasefire agreement. My first impression was seeing the remains of human bodies in the streets, and around them, some predator animals were looking for their opportunity. We were only 10 military observers, and

we were unarmed. This was the first mission in the history of the UN that was agreed to by using Chapter VIII of the Charter. That means the regional organization is the one to provide the reaction and perform the duties on behalf of the UN. Four months after the signature of the peace agreement, the DDR process was about to begin. The commanding officer of the Regional Force decided to inspect the rural area within his sector of responsibility where the delivery of weapons by the rebel forces should soon begin. In a convoy of many armed soldiers and armored personnel carriers, we entered the area dominated by the rebel forces. I was not alone. I was with a human rights officer from the UN mission. At that time, we did not have the colour of the UN on our vehicle; the mission was just renting cars and placing the emblem of the UN on the doors and the hood of the car. The General [Regional Force commanding officer] did not like what he saw on the inspection and decided to stay in the area, but I felt that we could not stay, and the General gave me permission to go back to the capital. When we got to the last checkpoint, going out of the area controlled by the rebels, we were detained and taken by force, beaten, and the car was completely ransacked in a few minutes. I did not realize who they were until we were brought into a tiny house where we spent two and a half days, and the treatment was very hard. My colleague, the UN civilian, became gone [mentally withdrawn]. He became static in the corner of the room, not talking, not eating, not going to the tree for excretion. That was my first problem – what can I do with him? In my mind I had so many options for doing or not doing. But, if I do something, what will happen to him? And if I don't do anything, what will be the situation for him? All of our captors were children – heavily armed – conscious of the power they had. In particular, the guy who was taking care of me [punching] was called Captain 2-1-2. He was 12 years old. Why 2-1-2? He was promoted to the rank of “Captain” after killing 212 people. We stayed in this dreadful situation for two and a half days. Many things happened to me during those endless hours.

I felt fear. Lack of courage. Sometimes the crazy idea of getting a weapon and killing them as much as possible. But I was 33-34 years old, and I said to myself, ‘no this is not the best’. So, what to do? The definition of detention is “the temporary state of being kept,” but for us, for how long would we be there? We were not in position to predict for how long. I think that mentally, I betrayed myself. I did not consider them children. They were my captors, and I was their hostage. Perhaps in the case that the situation was over, I could go back and consider them children. But I lost consciousness at that time that they were children. They were treating us very badly. We were not aware of their true age. With the time passing we learned a lot. I had many doubts about my behavior and my partner [UN civilian staff]. I was wondering what to do with or without him. I was thinking about my survival, but this could mean the end of his life. That was a real time for reflection for me.

Before facing this situation, I was a witness of this [violence]. But then, in this case, I became an actor of the drama. As a military observer, we are trained without weapons, we are deployed and operate unarmed. We are prepared to perform our duties based on observation and talking, making liaisons, and negotiations, etc., but in this case all my exercise was not for the mission goal, it was for my own survival and that of my colleague. I chose to resist, this was my final decision, for myself and for my colleague who was there and was suffering much more than me because he was not prepared at all for this. I prayed at all times for somebody to come for us. For those with whom we had begun the task of verification, those who had “authorized” us to return alone, without custody; those who perhaps knew we were “lost.”

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Roberto, thank you for sharing this challenging situation. Reflecting on your experience and recognizing your current leadership role within peace support, how do you think people should prepare to engage with children in conflict contexts?

ROBERTO GIL

In our preparation for operations where we know that there are children forcibly recruited and used as soldiers, we must basically consider two possibilities of meeting these human beings undergoing critical situations. The first and most common is when they appear as fighters and behave like “warriors” in front of us, seeking to give us that impression of being powerful and fearless, this happens at road checkpoints, and in the first positions in rebel camps. Another visibly different situation occurs in the interior areas under rebel domain, when girls and boys appear and behave as victims of their captors. In all cases our first consideration should be that everyone is a child, and everyone is a victim, but every situation is going to be different.

It is important to know real stories and to see images. Like we do in our national training center in Uruguay. We show a video and ask, ‘ok, if you are the one there, what do you do?’ Of course, the adrenaline we feel in the field cannot be replicated with the same intensity in training. And it is challenging today to simulate training that is real because of media and public pressure. But it is important for people not to be caught by surprise and to be ready for the unexpected - for the unforeseen situations. While training our peacekeepers we get surprised. When I was the director of the national training centre some years ago, we really used force. We kept people hostage. Yeah, sure they knew they were in a training setting, but when they faced the situation of communicating to their families, telling them that they were not sure about the date and time to return home, they felt they were not anymore in control of the situation. This is important. This is useful for the personnel that will deploy in hazardous mission areas. Training and preparation should be common to all peacekeepers being deployed but the process is internal in each

person. I cannot imagine if the hostage situation I experienced would have happened to a woman. I am not saying that women are feeble but that there needs to be consciousness that the situation for them will be different.

It is also important to know what is behind us in our country. At the time of my earlier missions, I was not a father, and I was not having a permanent relationship with any woman. My parents were older. My mind was in my profession and fully in the field. I remember one time when a fellow mission member asked me what my reason was for being there for “a few dollars.” He really questioned me, and I was hesitant in my answer. I was a naive young Captain and my colleagues were not so naive and perhaps not so young. There were very clear differences between us. My colleague was counting the 90 days to the end of the contract, but I was eager to stay. I even secured an extension to stay six more months. It is important to recognize that what is behind us and who is behind us influences our responses.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

What is needed to ensure that effective training and preparation to encounter children happens? What kind of policy or mandate needs to be around that training and preparation to make sure each person is coming into the situation aware and having the skills to perform?

ROBERTO GIL

You are aware from the United Nations Headquarters, working for the Department of Peace Operations and Department of Operational Support, there is a system that is for training. In that environment there is a lot of experience from all the years and all the missions of the UN. In terms of basic modules for training and specialized training modules – all these issues are considered. However, the consistency of operational procedures in the mission area can be adversely affected when the personnel of the contributing countries, having all the same rules and training materials, exercise skill with different interpretations, modalities, and level of realism. Then it can happen that in the same multinational team or unit, serious differences arise in the application of rules, tactics, and operational techniques. This happens mostly with very sensitive matters such as the treatment to be given to child soldiers. We must be aware about unexpected changes on the ground. We may go to a place like Haiti and assume the peace process is secure, but we need to be ready for the unexpected because one day it may happen. Live training, perhaps using personnel as role players who are not known by the trainees, is a good method. We ask the role players to perform that role including gunfire shots. This is an important practice to be prepared because training needs to be performed like reality. You can read books on this but until you smell what is around in the field, you cannot imagine the reality.

But there is one more thing that is important regarding training. We Uruguayans, in the Uruguayan Armed Forces, we have a lot of experience. All of our officers have 2-3 missions experience, our junior personnel as well. But we are not to believe that we know everything. Let us avoid adopting this concept that will lead us to make wrong decisions that could be bad for everyone and particularly harm our subordinates. Also, we all have our own origins and societies – if we perform our duties with Indians, with Pakistanis, with Senegalis, we are different. If we face this kind of situation [encountering children], it can be difficult because our societies are different. If possible, we have to stick to the manuals – to what we learn and what we practice before going. Even then we will be different, but training can provide a common approach. Training in the field for me is essential and bringing the people to an extreme situation is important.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Roberto, peacekeeping is fraught with potentially morally injurious experiences. Could you walk me through how you define and understand moral injury.

ROBERTO GIL

Good question. Moral injury is principles and behaviors. I am not to take advantage of somebody who is feeble. There are some key lines that I am not to go beyond. For me it is a consequence of what I do or what I do not do, based on the expectations of myself, and based on the expectations of my people, and based on the expectations of the institution I am serving. And this could be seen or processed internally. In my case it was processed internally due to the end state which was five people who compromised ourselves and were not permitted to give information on this [kidnapping] for ten years. That was not a secret, it was a decision taken to avoid wrong consequences affecting the peace process and the lives of some people who were there. After this situation of moral injury, I was given ten days for recovery. When I came back, I met the Sector Commander who took the decision to detain the leader of the rebel group that was keeping us hostage, seeking to get us released. We confessed to each other how wrong we were. Myself, I had not asked for protection to leave the dangerous area, and he was not aware that we were not armed. He shared his decision to apprehend the seventeen-year-old ‘commander’ of the rebel forces. He said he did it himself and did not task any subordinate for that. He was aware on the entity of the actions taken. He was accepting his improper decision to force a situation involving a young combatant, but feeling better for the minimal damage caused, and the successful release of hostages. I myself felt much better because I did not fail. I survived and my colleague survived. He felt guilty, I did not feel guilty.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

There were lots of people affected by this experience. Did you maintain a relationship with this Sector Commander? Did you continue to work together in the mission?

ROBERTO GIL

I will tell you a story that is very, very amazing. After more than a decade from my experience [being kidnapped by children], I received a call from a training centre in a neighbouring country. I was a Colonel in active duty and was requested to speak on negotiations in critical situations in the highest level. And who was among the participants in the classroom? A Major from country X. During my speech I referred to the Sector Commander from country X, very respectfully, but I stated that he committed mistakes. When the lecture finished, the Major asked to speak with me. The Major said, 'Sir, I know your story from the voice of my General, who is retired now. The General was my commanding officer when I was a junior Lieutenant. And in one of our training academies, the General shared lessons learned in his peacekeeping operations, and he mentioned the mistake he committed by leaving a couple of UN personnel unprotected to go through the lines of negative forces. And that they were held for three days then found a solution somehow.' This was an amazing situation.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

What a small world. And really fascinating that after all those years he continued to reflect on his learning. This was obviously a very significant experience for the General if he was communicating that to his subordinates.

ROBERTO GIL

Yes. For me, I have never had contact with my UN civilian colleague. Of course, at that time, we were not having cellular phones, only radios and normal telephones. Honestly, if I should ever meet him again, I would ask him to judge my behavior towards him. Because I did not disturb him. Two or three times a day I would explain my interest to him and encourage him to take some rice – it was not tasty, but it was food. He would only say yes or no. If I meet him again, I would say 'please judge me. How did I perform? Because you were always thinking. You were not sleeping - always observing'. But this will not happen.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

The readers who will read this journal are mostly in the peace and security world. If there are other officers who are reading your story, who are struggling with moral injury, what would you say to them?

ROBERTO GIL

First of all, I hardly ever share stories of my life. I make sure the person who is asking is really interested. And I ask what is it for? I only share stories if it could be important for people. Honestly, the concept of moral injury I have learned from the Dallaire Institute. Before that the concept was not in my mind, at all. Perhaps the collateral damage we may have that is not visible that is here [in the mind] and here [in the heart] before it was just

an experience that could not be compared with anything else. Since I have had training on children, peace, and security, and I learned from a colleague about what it was like to be a kid during the war in his country, I have a different perspective. That country was a place that I suffered a lot, and he [Dallaire Institute colleague] was a teenager at that time, suffering from the war and being part of it. So that was a time that I got perspective on how important this is in relation to children. Moral injury is not coming normally in our life everyday with children.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Thinking of audiences that have not had operational experience, perhaps they are civilians or just starting their career in peacekeeping, what would you like other community members to be thinking about in terms of preventing moral injury? And are there any nuances when considering encounters with children?

ROBERTO GIL

How to prevent health consequences or moral injury? The easiest way is preventing encountering them [children], sending others for patrol. But at the time you have to take decisions and you are not aware of the reality on the ground. I felt extreme antagonistic situations about life and survival. I had sporadic madness thinking about killing them [children] or being killed. It was possible – the situation of being killed or killing them. Most likely, they would have killed me. Many times, I was preparing for my final countdown. Always wondering how long to resist a situation or to take drastic action. And that is not easy at all. One of my dilemma's was the challenge of displaying professional performance versus being an acceptable human being.

You can choose how to write this - this is not a confession – this is a story of what happened in my own country in the 60s and 70s when we had our “internal war.” I was a very young officer facing hard situations, like being devout to the cause of my nation and my armed forces and yet somehow confronting the opposing forces that sometimes were only opposing ideas. I am part of this very recent story of my country with the terrible situation of myself in uniform, while some family members were in prison because of their ideas followed by illegal actions.

When you witness, and you are not taking part – something that is wrong – what do you? If I witness something I will do my best to get the one who is performing wrong to rethink and be aware. They may have a different perception, attitude, and behavior. This is what I can transmit to the people. We know in particular that the use of force is a very sensitive issue. When we exercise command and we order our subordinates to exhaust resources, the concept of moral should be present – must be present. When the officer performs the order, he will have his own judgement but from the side of those commanding, the issue

of morals and ethics should be – must be – included in all aspects of our activities. Even if tomorrow you and me are teaching a course and you want to favor that girl and give her a couple of extra points, I will fight you on this. I don't care about your feelings. I will be satisfied with myself because I shared with you my moral and ethics in this silly issue. Everywhere we have challenges. Everywhere you go you have the possibility of adopting decisions that involve moral and ethics in practice.

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Roberto, do you find when you are with other security personnel, and you share experiences that it is healing for you?

ROBERTO GIL

When you ask me these questions, I encounter myself, but it is ok. It depends on the subject. I like to talk about things I have experienced not what I have read. I like to talk about things that I have lived or survived. And I think it is contagious. I see in the eyes of the people how they understand and respond to my stories. I consider myself successful in teaching on these issues. My life is dedicated to teaching, to conveying the experiences I have gathered, this is my way of living .

CATHERINE BAILLIE ABIDI

Thank you very much for taking time to speak with me. I appreciate the sincerity of your intention.

ROBERTO GIL

I conveyed this personal experience and thoughts to a person who can understand this. I am feeling honoured by taking the possibility of converting this experience into something that could be useful for others. If at least one person can read and understand, I am glad. If ten, much better. If one hundred, then I will be very happy. If one thousand, then I will be crazy happy. I am eager to continue work on children, peace, and security because I am a survivor of this. Let's find a way to make this useful for the people.