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Welcome to the archives of Peacebuilding Deeply. While we paused regular publication of the site on September 1, 2018, we are happy to serve as an ongoing public resource on global peace and security. We hope you'll enjoy the reporting and analysis that was produced by our dedicated community of editors and contributors.

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We continue to produce events and special projects while we explore where the on-site journalism goes next. If you'd like to reach us with feedback or ideas for collaboration you can do so at partners@newsdeeply.com.

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Oral Testimonies Help Partition Survivors Break Taboos and Heal Old Wounds

After decades of silence, an archive of

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witness testimonies from the 1947 Partition of India is helping survivors and their families across both sides of the border confront a legacy of violence.

WRITTEN BY India Stoughton	PUBLISHED ON  May 21, 2018	READ TIME Approx. 5 minutes
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Survivor Muhammad Ashraf recounts his life before the Partition of India, when he was a student, during his interview with oral history scholar Namra Naseem for the 1947 Partition Archive. [1947 Partition Archive](#)

JASBIR BHATIA WAS 6 when historic India was divided into two countries in August 1947, marking the birth of Pakistan. Overnight, a line drawn by the British to divide Muslims from Hindus and Sikhs turned his family into outcasts.

The British Raj announced the Partition just as Britain was preparing to withdraw from India, after years of unrest and calls for an independent Muslim state. The creation of a new border triggered the



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largest mass migration in history. An estimated 15 million people were displaced. More than 1 million were killed.

Bhatia, now 77 years old and living in Florida, recalls the horror. After the announcement, his family sought shelter with his grandparents, who owned land in a village near Sialkot, a city in Pakistan. Two weeks later, they heard a rumor that a Muslim mob was about to attack the village. They fled on foot, in the middle of the night, carrying nothing but the clothes on their backs.

“Almost empty-pocketed, our people left. They thought that they’d come back soon, once it was over,” Bhatia recalled. “We spent the night outside and then we found out that the mob did attack our village and they robbed our house and burnt it down. There was nothing to come back to.”

Bhatia’s family joined a procession of an estimated 400,000 people marching for days with almost no food toward India. Thousands starved or died of exposure along the way. Others were attacked by mobs and killed. Bhatia’s family survived and managed to cross into India. After finding shelter in an abandoned mosque in the city of Amritsar in Punjab for a few days, they continued south to Ludhiana, where an uncle helped them rebuild their lives.

Bhatia’s story echoes that of millions of survivors

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from both sides whose lives were upended by Partition. More than 70 years later, he is helping others to document their experiences. Bhatia moved to the United States in 1977, where he is now the oldest volunteer working with the [1947 Partition Archive](#), a nonprofit organization that is filming oral testimonies from Partition witnesses all over the world, and opening up discussion after [decades of silence](#).

Guneeta Singh Bhalla, the archive's founder, was a teenager the first time she ever heard her own grandmother's story of witnessing the Partition. Having been raised in the U.S., Bhalla was shocked that, despite its impact on millions of people, the Partition wasn't taught in U.S. schools, unlike the Holocaust or the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While studying for a PhD in physics in 2008, Bhalla began visiting mosques and temples and asking people to share their Partition stories. In 2013, the project had grown so much that she gave up her career as a physicist and moved to New Delhi to work on the archive full time.

The [1947 Partition Archive](#) now consists of a network of hundreds of volunteers, ranging in age from 13 to 77, who have recorded more than 5,500 testimonies in 12 languages from 22 different countries. Volunteers visit the homes of survivors



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and film testimonies on their mobile phones. Each recording must meet a 24-point checklist of criteria the archive uses to maintain consistent and professional quality.

As the taboos around Partition begin to break down and the archive's reputation for being "apolitical" becomes widely known, the number of requests is increasing, according to Bhalla. Initially, witnesses were wary of sharing their stories and feared being "targeted by political parties."

An estimated 700–800 people are on the waiting list to share their stories, many of whom heard about the archive through social media or word-of-mouth, Bhalla said. They invite anyone who was at least 5 years old in 1947 to reach out.

Recording testimonies from witnesses on both sides of the border helps to emphasize that many experienced the same horrors and to "create tolerance," Bhalla says.

"I feel like my parents' generation is more biased than my grandparents' generation, who actually experienced living together with the so-called other," she says.

The project has also encouraged dialogue within families and across generations.

"At least half of the people we've interviewed, their

family did not know their story because it was so harrowing,” Bhalla says. “Then there’s a cathartic element so they start talking about it more. I’ve seen some of them come out and write memoirs ... I think people felt that nobody cared, especially in the villages. It’s very empowering to have somebody listen to their story.”

Many of the testimonies are difficult to watch. One Muslim lady describes her family’s 36-hour train journey from Delhi to Lahore. “My baby cousin’s mouth was stuffed with a cloth so that he may not make a sound,” she recalled. “Our uncle told us insurgents are sharpening swords on the platform. If we make a sound, they would massacre the entire train.”

In another testimony, a Sikh man wails, incoherent with horror and pain, as he describes witnessing his father cut off his sister’s head with a sword to prevent her from being raped.

Bhalla says her team has worked with psychologists trained in post-traumatic stress disorder to help interviewees cope. “We record their whole life story. The interview always ends with where they are today, so they’re brought ... back to how they had [the] strength to carry on,” she says.

In recent years, several other projects exploring Partition history have integrated testimonies from the archive, from plays and music performances

promoting peace between India and Pakistan, to a [BBC documentary](#). The first [museum](#) dedicated to Partition opened last year in Amritsar, as a result of increased public interest in the experiences of survivors.

“Before we did this work there were no other projects like this,” says Bhalla, adding that [social media](#) has both helped create an increased interest, and helped to empower survivors to share.

Collaborations with institutions like the [Citizens Archive of Pakistan](#) and [Stanford University](#), whose [digital library](#) includes a small collection of testimonies, ensure that the stories are accessible to a global audience. The archive recently won a grant from [Tata Trusts](#), to upload 2,000 more testimonies online and also finance a pilot project to include hard copies of the video testimonies in the libraries of three Indian universities, before expanding to other institutions across India and Pakistan.

For his part, Bhatia believes that his work recording oral testimonies at the archive helps provide crucial insights into human nature and communal violence that are missing from history books.

“This is the story of Partition in the words of the people who have suffered through it,” he says.

“Some of the stories I have witnessed, the behaviors I’ve seen, are not written anywhere in the histories of Partition.” ■

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The Gap Between Expectation and Performance on U.N.

Peacekeeping

The U.N.'s recent report on improving security for peacekeepers could actually undermine the security of both U.N. personnel and the civilians they are meant to protect, writes international lawyer Mona Ali Khalil.

WRITTEN BY Mona Ali Khalil, PassBlue	PUBLISHED ON 📅 May 21, 2018	READ TIME Approx. 3 minutes
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More than 400 members of the 17th Chinese peacekeeping force to Lebanon attend a meeting on May 7, 2018, before leaving for a United Nations peacekeeping mission. VCG/VCG via Getty Images

SINCE 1999, THE United Nations Security Council has consistently entrusted its peacekeeping operations with clear authority to use force beyond self-defense – primarily for the protection of civilians.

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To fulfill the mandate, the Council expects U.N. peacekeeping forces to take preventive as well as responsive actions; to proactively patrol the local communities; to project a strong deterrent posture; and to be robust in defending themselves and protecting civilians.

For too long, however, there has been a clear gap between expectation and performance. Despite the failures, the Council now expects U.N. forces to conduct strategic and ever more aggressive operations to help stabilize increasingly hostile environments and to neutralize insurgents in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, terrorists in Mali and government forces in South Sudan.

The rising death toll among U.N. peacekeepers is one of many consequences of U.N. engagement with such actors in such environments.

In the U.N.'s recently published Cruz report, "Improving the Security of United Nations Peacekeepers," Lt. Gen. Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz and his fellow authors note that 195 personnel have been killed by violence since 2013, "more than during any other five-year period in history" – and that 56 of them were killed in 2017 alone – "the highest number since 1994."

The authors proceed to set out concrete and comprehensive recommendations on how the U.N. can improve the security of U.N. peacekeepers. By



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Peacebuilding Should Be Central to the E.U.'s Global Strategy

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calling on U.N. peacekeepers to use “overwhelming force,” as opposed to robust defensive or protective force, the Cruz report may have gone too far, potentially undermining the security of both U.N. personnel and the civilians they are meant to protect. (A U.N. Security Council session on protecting civilians in armed conflict is scheduled for May 22.)

While U.N. peace operations must be proactive in preventing and decisive in responding to attacks on civilians and against U.N. personnel, property and premises, U.N. peacekeepers should not be called on to use overwhelming or aggressive force.

Here is why.

First, the U.N. calls on the troops of one country to fight and possibly die for the cause of peace in another country. The willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice under such circumstances is already difficult to achieve when there is no peace to keep. Calling on the troops to actively participate in warlike behavior will destroy their impartiality, hinder their peace efforts and more likely increase rather than decrease their vulnerability. Without prejudice to its inherent right of self-defense and its protection of civilian mandate, a U.N. peacekeeping operation should be more concerned about being an impartial agent of peace rather than as a successful force of war. It may therefore be far better for the



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security of U.N. personnel and civilians alike for peacekeepers to be more useful as peacemakers rather than as peace enforcers – to be more proactive in proposing peace plans and more aggressive in bringing parties to peace talks.

Second, as a legal matter, using “overwhelming force” may constitute excessive force, contravening the standard U.N. rules of engagement on the use of targeted, proportionate, graduated and minimum force necessary to achieve the authorized military objective.

Third, calling on U.N. peacekeeping operations to use overwhelming force also increases the likelihood of their becoming parties to the conflicts under international humanitarian law. The Cruz report does not take into account that, at least once, a current peacekeeping mission has become a party to the conflict. As a result of aggressive operations that its forces have conducted against the M23 militia, the U.N. mission in the Congo, called Monusco, has become a party to the conflict in the country. As such, its forces have lost their protected status and have become legitimate military targets under international humanitarian law.

By ignoring the legal consequences of using aggressive force, the Cruz report has mirrored the Security Council’s own disregard for the applicability of international humanitarian law to

Monusco. The report insists on referring to all attacks on U.N. peacekeeping operations as “war crimes,” while the Council continues to impose Chapter VII sanctions on those planning, directing or conducting such attacks.

Without prejudice to the Council’s prerogatives in this regard, and to the extent that its resolutions call on all parties to respect international humanitarian law, a clear understanding of IHL’s implications is necessary to ensure that U.N. forces are aware of the loss of their protected status under the law and that, as such, they become exposed to direct attack and thus pose a greater threat to the very civilians they are meant to protect.

Lastly, while the Cruz report calls for accountability for crimes against U.N. peacekeepers, it fails to call equally for accountability for crimes committed by U.N. peacekeepers. The lack of criminal accountability for the latter crimes – including sexual crimes – has demonstrably diminished the credibility and legitimacy of U.N. peacekeeping operations in the hearts and minds of the local populations they are supposed to protect, further increasing peacekeepers’ vulnerability to attack.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Peacebuilding Deeply.

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**PUBLIC INTERNATIONAL LAWYER
WITH 25 YEARS OF UNITED NATIONS
AND OTHER GLOBAL EXPERIENCE IN
PEACEKEEPING, SANCTIONS,
DISARMAMENT AND
COUNTERTERRORISM**

Mona Ali Khalil is an internationally recognized public international lawyer with 25 years of United Nations and other global experience in peacekeeping, sanctions, disarmament and counterterrorism. She holds a B.A. and an M.A. from Harvard University and a master’s degree in foreign service and a juris doctorate from Georgetown University. She is an affiliate of the Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict and is a former senior legal officer in the U.N. Office of the Legal Counsel. In January 2018, Khalil founded MAKLAW.ORG, an international legal advisory and consulting service, assisting governments and nongovernmental organizations to secure their rights and fulfill their legal



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