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End sexual exploitation by peacekeepers

Missteps in investigating allegations of sexual abuse in CAR underscore the UN's abiding failure to protect victims

June 5, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

On June 3, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon [launched an external probe](#) into the organization's handling of allegations of sexual abuse of children by foreign peacekeepers in the Central African Republic (CAR) and systemic issues related to abuse claims.

A year after allegations surfaced that French peacekeepers in the CAR abused 10 boys they were deployed to protect, no one has been held accountable except the whistleblower who disclosed the abuse. France sent peacekeepers to the CAR in December 2013 after violence between Muslim and Christian militias led to a humanitarian crisis and massive displacement. From December 2013 to June 2014, peacekeepers forced the boys, ages 8 to 15, to trade sex for food at a camp for displaced people in the CAR's capital, Bangui. Six of the boys recounted their trauma to U.N. investigators in May and June 2014.

On March 28 of this year, the U.N. finally sent an official copy of the investigation to French authorities, with names redacted. With its sordid colonial past in Africa, France is [sensitive to its image](#) in the continent. It launched [criminal proceedings](#) against 14 of its troops for the abuse last month. The U.N. and French authorities are now trading recriminations for the delay in the investigation.

But the slow pace and missteps in the investigation of the abuse underscore the flaws that plague all peacekeeping missions and reveal the U.N.'s [abiding failure](#) to institute safeguards to protect victims of sexual abuse by peacekeepers despite repeated promises to correct systematic deficiencies. The U.N. must

develop and implement policy and political reforms to end sexual exploitation by peacekeepers, including accountability for wrongdoers and those who fail to protect victims.

Sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers is not a new problem. A decade ago, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, now the U.N. human rights chief, penned a [scathing report](#) on the U.N.'s management of sexual abuse allegations. But resistance from troop-contributing countries thwarted real reform. Typically, troop-contributing countries seek assurances that they do not cede military authority over their personnel to a foreign government, citing cultural and geopolitical differences among various legal systems. "All military personnel working under the blue helmet are first and foremost members of their own national armies and are then seconded to work with the U.N.," [according to the U.N.](#) Peacekeeping office.

Troop-contributing countries have a legitimate interest in ensuring the fair treatment of their nationals, but that does not excuse misconduct and the lack of accountability.

And the [status of forces agreement](#) confers immunity for peacekeepers in the host countries, giving their countries exclusive authority to prosecute criminal wrongdoing. While these agreements require member states to prosecute wrongdoing by their nationals regardless of whether the peacekeepers served under the U.N. banner or a state-sponsored peacekeeping mission, the states often fail to do so. The widespread unwillingness to prosecute peacekeepers at home condemns their victims to lesser justice and fails to deter future misconduct.

The U.N. lacks the ability to prosecute peacekeepers, but that does not absolve the organization of its responsibility to act quickly and decisively, in concert with local investigators and prosecutors, when credible allegations of abuse surface. It has other tools at its disposal: In addition to political pressure, for example, the U.N. can stop contracting with countries that fail to hold their troops to account.

Despite dragging its feet in investigating the allegations of abuse in the CAR, the U.N. has [punished](#) Anders Kompass, a U.N. human rights worker, for reporting the rapes to French authorities. He leaked the report to French officials because he lacked faith that the U.N. would act quickly to protect the children. Nine months later, Hussein asked him to resign for violating strict prohibitions on sharing confidential information — the names of victims and investigators — though Kompass did not leak the information to the press. When he refused, he was suspended. A U.N. tribunal lifted [the suspension](#) last month.

In 2006 the U.N.'s then-Secretary General Kofi Annan reiterated the organization's [zero tolerance](#) policy for sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. And its [code of conduct](#) for peacekeepers focuses on prevention, but the U.N. must move toward [criminalizing exploitation](#). A 2013 [expert report](#) (PDF) revealed that the U.N. is well aware of its failures. The report covered U.N. missions to four countries — Haiti, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan — which together accounted for 85 percent of the sexual exploitation and abuse cases committed by peacekeepers. This abuse underscores the failings of the current policies, which are exacerbated by endemic poverty that create ripe conditions for transactional sex. Though the U.N. cites a decrease in complaints as evidence of progress, the CAR case shows the problem persists.

Troop-contributing countries have a legitimate interest in ensuring the fair treatment of their nationals, and peacekeepers should be honored for their sacrifices. But that does not excuse misconduct and the lack of accountability. The U.N.'s overarching mission is to advance human dignity and protect the world's most vulnerable. For countries roiled by conflict that are struggling to rebuild institutions and the rule of law, impunity for abuse committed by the organization's peacekeepers against the defenseless citizens they were sent to protect sends a terrible message.

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