Senior UN figures under investigation over alleged sexual harassment

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The [United Nations](https://www.theguardian.com/world/unitednations) is investigating two senior figures over allegations of sexual harassment.

The World Food Programme’s country director in Afghanistan, Mick Lorentzen, has been suspended while a disciplinary process is under way.

Luiz Loures, an assistant secretary general of the UN, and deputy executive director of programme at UNAids, is also the subject of an investigation. The Guardian understands that he has not been suspended.

On Thursday, the WFP announced an [overhaul of its sexual harassment policies](https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-statement-new-actions-combat-sexual-harassment), following mounting criticism over how UN agencies handle such cases.

Last week, a [Guardian investigation](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/18/sexual-assault-and-harassment-rife-at-united-nations-staff-claim) uncovered a widespread culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment and assault at the UN, with employees feeling unable to report complaints for fear of losing their jobs.

Three alleged victims said they had lost their jobs, or been threatened with termination of contract, after reporting sexual harassment or assault. Two cited concerns with investigations, and said there had been errors in transcripts, or that key witnesses had not been interviewed. Alleged perpetrators were allowed to remain in senior positions – with the power to influence proceedings – throughout investigations.

The UN said it has a [zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/21/un-is-dealing-with-sexual-harassment) and that it is taking steps to increase the support given to victims.

UNAids said that while it could not comment on individual investigations, or disclose information about them, it observed “a clear regulatory framework for all investigation processes and proceedings” based on the same regulations that govern World Health Organization staff.

Loures was appointed deputy executive director of programme at UNAids by Ban Ki-moon, the former secretary general, in [January 2013](http://www.unaids.org/en/aboutunaids/unaidsleadership/bios/luizloures).

Lorentzen, whose suspension was first reported by the Italian Insider, studied at the University of Leicester and previously served in the British armed forces, according to his WFP biography. He has worked for the UN in senior positions across Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo.

The WFP said a staff member had been suspended while an investigation of sexual harassment was launched. “The staff member concerned has been suspended while the disciplinary process is under way,” the agency said in a statement.

David Beasley, executive director of WFP, said in a letter to staff this week: “We must and will find ways to make sure that people feel confident that they will be protected when they report misconduct.”

Beasley announced a series of changes, including an end to the existing six-month time limit for reporting violations and a provision allowing the consideration of anonymous complaints, and complaints from former employees.

The revised policy will also consider the investigation of abusive conduct even if a specific victim does not come forward, and will include stronger punishment for retaliatory action against victims.

“Punishments [for retaliation] can include disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment,” said Kiko Harvey, WFP’s inspector general and director of the office of inspections and investigations. She said the office had received three alleged sexual harassment cases in 2017.

[Megan Nobert](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/megan-nobert), an international criminal and human rights lawyer, who founded [Report the Abuse](http://reporttheabuse.org/), the first organisation to challenge the silence surrounding sexual violence in the aid sector, said more detail is needed about how the policies will be implemented.

Nobert said: “I am encouraged to see that [WFP] are taking continued positive steps in the right direction to addressing internal sexual violence issues. We need to ensure that this progress continues however, and that other UN agencies follow suit.”

Last week, another UN body, Unesco, confirmed that Frank La Rue, assistant director general for communication and information at Unesco, had been “relieved of his duties until further notice” following allegations of harassment.

The UN said in a statement that not all UN entities apply the same staff rules, but added: “Secretary general [António] Guterres has engaged the heads of United Nations agencies across the system to look at the bigger picture. This means examining and improving policies, and following up on our capacity to launch investigations and to support victims in all UN agencies.

“As the head of the chief executive board of the UN, the secretary general also created last November a system-wide task force on addressing sexual harassment to review policies, investigative capacities and victims’ protection/support across the system, as well as aligning policies.”