**U.N. E-Mail Shows Early Warning of Congo Rapes**

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GOMA, Democratic Republic of the Congo —United Nations officials had been warned about rape ocurring in a remote Congolese area much earlier than officials originally said, according to an internal United Nations e-mail and a humanitarian bulletin.

The United Nations’ beleaguered peacekeeping mission in Congo, which costs more than a billion dollars a year but has failed to stop widespread violence against civilians, has been harshly criticized since the news broke 10 days ago that United Nations peacekeepers did not respond to a rebel attack in which nearly 200 women were raped.

According to an e-mail sent within United Nations agencies on July 30, as the attack was unfolding, United Nations officials knew that the rebels had infiltrated the area and that at least one woman had been raped.

“The town of Mpofi, 52 kilometers from Walikale, has just fallen into the hands of the F.D.L.R. A woman was raped there,” said the e-mail, which was sent by the United Nations’ humanitarian office in eastern Congo to several other United Nations agencies and private aid groups. “Humanitarian workers are said not to go there,” the e-mail continued.

The F.D.L.R is the abbreviation for the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, a fearsome rebel group that includes former Rwandan genocidaires who have been hiding out in Congo for years and preying upon the local population. Over the next three days, from July 30 to Aug. 2, hundreds of F.D.L.R., along with gunmen from another rebel group, raped at least 179 women. Many victims said they were assaulted in front of their families, with up to six men raping them at the same time.

United Nations peacekeepers were stationed nearby, around 30 kilometers away, but none went to the area until Aug. 2, when a patrol passed through one of the stricken villages, though according to United Nations officials, none of the villagers came forward about the rapes.

On Aug. 10, a United Nations humanitarian bulletin reported that 25 people had been raped in the Mpofi area between July 30 and Aug. 1, in a reference to the same attack.

The two documents raise questions about earlier statements made by several United Nations officials that the peacekeeping mission was unaware of the rapes until an aid organization brought it to the mission’s attention on Aug. 12.

When asked about the e-mail sent on July 30, Roger Meece, a United Nations special representative to the peacekeeping mission, said: “At the time, there was one alleged rape and no reason to believe that this was happening on a mass-scale as later reported.”

Other United Nations officials said that it was fairly common to receive reports about rebel movements and that the Rwandan rebels had been in the area on and off since 1994, when Rwanda exploded in genocide.

Still, the criticism toward the United Nations’ Congo operations seems to be spreading, the latest blow to a peacekeeping mission that, since it began in 1999, has been hampered by corruption, thickly forested terrain, morphing rebel groups, sexual abuse scandals and complaints from the Congolese people and the Congolese government, which recently began pushing the United Nations to downsize the mission.

“There is a kind of general state of incompetence, which is linked to apathy,” said Karl Steinacker, a longtime United Nations official who worked in Congo until this year. “If you realize you can’t deal with the situation, you may just decide to do nothing.”

“If you do little, you do little mistakes,” he said. “We have seen it so many times.”

The United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting last week in New York to discuss the rapes and the peacekeepers’ ability to respond to similar crises.

“We are reviewing a broad array of what we are doing,” Mr. Meece said. “We can’t do everything. We are not a government, and obviously there are always limits, especially given the vast size of the area to be covered and the difficulties of a lack of transport and communications infrastructure.”

He added, “That is not an excuse — we want and need to do better — but it is a reality.”

Analysts and some officials within the United Nations say the rapes in Mpofi area were not the first time that the United Nations mission in Congo delayed in sharing information about widespread atrocities.

The most prominent example may have been a massacre of approximately 300 villagers last December by the Lord’s Resistance Army in northeastern Congo, which was first publicized by the media in late March. According to a document on a Web site for humanitarian workers, United Nations officials were aware that the L.R.A. had killed more than 80 people in that attack, as far back as January.

As for the rapes in Mpofi, Madnoje Mounoubai, a United Nations spokesman in Congo, said the United Nations was first alerted to the attacks on Aug. 12, by International Medical Corps, a humanitarian organization working in the area.

International Medical Corps says it told the United Nations about the rapes on Aug. 6.

*Josh Kron reported from Goma and Jeffrey Gettleman from Nairobi, Kenya*