**UN Peacekeepers: Congo leads world in sex abuse allegations**

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She had been orphaned by a brutal conflict, but the 14-year-old Congolese girl found refuge in a camp protected by United Nations peacekeepers.

The camp should have been safe the day she was raped. A delegation from the U.N. was paying a visit, and her grandmother had left her in charge of her siblings. That was the day, the girl says, that a Pakistani peacekeeper slipped inside their home and assaulted her in front of the other children.

But that was not the end of her story. Even though she reported the rape, the girl never got any help from the U.N. She did become pregnant, however, and had a baby.

If the U.N. sexual abuse crisis has an epicenter, it is the Congo, where the scope of the problem first emerged 13 years ago - and where promised reforms have most clearly fallen short. Of the 2,000 sexual abuse and exploitation complaints made against U.N. peacekeepers and personnel worldwide over the past 12 years, more than 700 occurred in Congo, The Associated Press found. The embattled African nation is home to the U.N.’s largest peacekeeping force, which costs a staggering $1 billion a year.

The raped teenager’s experience is grimly emblematic of the underbelly of U.N. peacekeeping, and the organization as a whole. During a yearlong investigation, the AP found that despite promising reform for more than a decade, the U.N. failed to meet many of its pledges to stop the abuse or help victims, some of whom have been lost to a sprawling bureaucracy. Cases have disappeared or been handed off to the peacekeepers’ home countries -- which often do nothing with them.

The attack on the 14-year-old was so brazen it still haunts the U.N.’s top human rights official more than a decade after hearing the girl’s story.

“What on earth would it take for this soldier not to do it - to have all the heads of the U.N. together, and he still does it?” asked Zeid Ra’ad al Hussein, a member of the delegation that heard the girl’s testimony in 2004. One year later, he helped write a landmark report intended to curb sexual abuse and exploitation within the U.N. system.

With rare exceptions, victims interviewed by the AP received no help. Instead, many were banished from their families for having mixed-race children - who also are shunned, becoming a second generation of victims.

The AP even found a girl who was raped by two peacekeepers; she gave birth to two babies by the time she was 14.

To this day, the sexual violence by U.N. peacekeepers and personnel continues: Congo already accounts for nearly one-third of the 43 allegations made worldwide in 2017.

William L. Swing was in charge of the Congo mission between May 2003 and January 2008, a period when abuse allegations swelled in a country that has been torn by dictatorship, civil war and unrest for the last half-century.

“I take full responsibility for what happened,” Swing told the AP last week. “I knew at the time the buck stopped with me.”

Swing said the U.N. at times made it clear he should be relieved of his duties. Instead, he was named the head of the U.N.’s International Organization for Migration. Now, he sits on a new task force appointed to tackle the problem yet again. Swing insists the mistakes made during the early years of the Congo mission provided lessons that could shape new reforms.

“You can never make someone who has been sexually violated whole,” he said. “But you can give them a sense that the organization is trying to make them whole.”

The AP found that victims of car accidents involving U.N. vehicles are more likely to receive compensation than victims of rape. Why? Because those injuries were inflicted during the course of the U.N. worker’s “official duties.”

Although the U.N. has substantiated at least 41 cases of paternity worldwide since 2010, it can cite only one instance in which a paternity payment was made, according to online records of allegations. The AP independently confirmed a second paternity payment to a Haitian woman earlier this year.

Justice is even more elusive because the cases get referred to the alleged perpetrators’ home countries. Even after a U.N. investigation discovered a three-year child sex ring involving Sri Lankan peacekeepers in Haiti, Sri Lanka prosecuted no one, the AP’s investigation revealed.

Yet at the yearly U.N. General Assembly gathering in New York, Sri Lanka this week was named to the U.N.’s “circle of leadership” for the next reform effort.

Poor record-keeping has been a major obstacle to reform.

The U.N. had no record of the 14-year-old orphan who was raped on the day the top U.N. delegation visited. Officials did find another case with similar details, but said it was “unsubstantiated” at the time because the girl identified the wrong foreigner in a photo lineup. They did not know what became of the orphan.

But in just three days last month, the AP found a woman whose story closely matched the one that Zeid, the U.N. human rights official, found so unforgettable. She was inebriated and living in poverty. A relative has raised the daughter born as a result of rape as her own.

In an interview with the AP, the adoptive mother, Dorcas Zawadi, said she refuses to allow the girl near U.N. bases.

“The peacekeepers try to distract the girls with cookies, candy and milk to rape them,” she said.

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“DADDY, DADDY, IT’S MY DADDY!”

In interviews with nearly a dozen women who said they were raped by peacekeepers, patterns quickly emerged.

A woman named Blandine said she was raped as a teenager and became pregnant. Her son Michael, now 8, only knows that the man was a foreigner from one of the U.N. peacekeeping missions that have been in Congo since his mother was a little girl.

Every time the boy sees a pale-skinned man, he cries out, “Daddy, Daddy, it’s my Daddy!”

“He thinks anyone with pale skin might be his father. He’ll hug any pale-skinned foreigner,” his mother said. She and the other nine sexual abuse victims interviewed in eastern Congo asked that only their first names be used because of what they endured.

Like his mother, the boy is shunned by villagers, left to play only with the other children of peacekeepers. In the eyes of the community the children of peacekeepers are “muzungus,” a Swahili word used to describe white people. The mothers babysit for one another, sharing responsibilities and the reality of being effectively sentenced to a lifetime of poverty from a single, violent moment in their youths.

The women told the AP stories of not being able to finish their studies, of being thrown out of their homes for getting pregnant, and of not being able to find husbands because of their mixed-race children. One thing they all want is financial help to raise their kids.

The key to that is establishing paternity, which is elusive for most now that their attackers have long since gone home to their own countries.

Blandine remembers looking at a lineup in hopes of identifying the man who raped her, a peacekeeper she said came from Morocco. But the U.N. said it had no record of her case.

“The U.N. had sent investigators around 2010 to investigate our case and they had promised they would take care of our children, but nothing ever followed,” she said.

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A MOTHER OF TWO BY AGE 14

When it comes to justice or transparency, the U.N. largely is powerless to force troop-contributing countries into action. As part of its investigation, the AP contacted nearly two dozen countries. None were willing to detail how many of their troops had been accused or the punishments imposed in substantiated cases, underscoring an overall lack of accountability.

Today, the U.N. says aid is provided to young girls and women even while they are awaiting paternity results. But that’s too little, too late for young women in Congo like Bora, who was raped and exploited by two peacekeepers and bore their babies while she was a child herself.

Bora was 11 years old the first time. She didn’t know where to turn. She had no idea she could file a complaint after being raped by a peacekeeper who had offered her bread and a banana. As a result, there was no physical evidence that could have confirmed the rape.

“It was the first man who ever touched me,” she recalled.

She gave birth to a son she named John. Estranged from her family, she could no longer go to school.

Two years later, when Bora was 13, another peacekeeper took advantage of her, and she became pregnant a second time. As she talked to an AP reporter, she looked away at a concrete wall in the bare room, telling the story of her life as if it had happened to someone else.

An uncle took custody of her children after seeing how the teen was struggling. At times, Bora has gone as long as a year without being able to visit.

“I’ll never forget what happened to me,” she said. “It is lodged in my heart.”

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“I WAS AFRAID”

More than a decade after the peacekeeper scandal surfaced in 2004, the cases continued. In the Congolese village of Mavivi, about a dozen women, half of whom were minors at the time, said they had been impregnated by peacekeepers in recent years.

Among them is Noella, who sold bananas and mobile phone credit near the Tanzanians’ U.N. base after her parents could no longer afford her school fees.

Early one morning just days after her 15th birthday in December 2014, she said, a Tanzanian peacekeeper called out to her and offered her $20. She thought he wanted phone credit.

“A few minutes later, he threw himself on top of me and started to rape me,” she said. “I said nothing to my parents because I was afraid.”

In a rare move, she reported the rape and identified the peacekeeper she thought fathered her child. Tanzania went ahead and conducted DNA testing, but the test was not a match.

With no proof of paternity, Noella was kicked out of her parents’ home. Now she struggles to raise her 2-year-old child on her own.

The 14-year-old orphan who said she was raped by a Pakistani peacekeeper did not recover from her attack. Friends and relatives say she soon turned to alcohol to numb her pain. Zawadi says she whisked the child away when she still was a baby out of fear the mother would harm her.

“She only knows me as her mother, and I love her as my own child,” the woman said. “When I die, she will receive the same inheritance as my other children. They know her as my biological child, even with her pale skin.”

When Zawadi rescued the child, she gave the girl a new name, a name she prayed would give her a better life despite the circumstances of how she came into the world.

She called her Hope.