**Raped Under UN Auspices**

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Can United Nations peace keeping deliver peace? It sure failed this summer in an eastern province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where armed groups went on a spree of gang rape just 20 miles up the road from a contingent of dozens of UN blue helmets. Despite warnings of trouble, it took three days -- during which the raping of hundreds of women continued -- before a UN patrol showed up.

It took more than a week before the head of the UN's Congo peacekeeping mission, US diplomat Roger Meece, says he learned of the rapes. And it took almost three weeks before the UN special representative for ending sexual violence in conflict zones, Margot Wallstrom, says she heard about it -- from media reports.

The United Nations then responded with a ritual mea culpa. First blaming Congo authorities, a UN assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping, Atul Khare, said "Clearly we have also failed . . . We must do better."

Dream on. The United Nations is forever promising to do bet-

ter. Instead, what it mainly does is get bigger, especially in the peacekeeping department.

During the UN's first 45 years, from 1945-1990, it launched a grand total of 18 peacekeeping missions. In the 20 years since, it has initiated more than twice that number. Over the last decade, the number of UN peacekeeping personnel in the field has soared ninefold, to 124,000, involved in 16 operations, and the UN's annual peacekeeping budget has more than quadrupled, to almost $8 billion -- of which the United States supplies 27 percent, or more than $2 billion.

The record is at best one of fitful peace, punctuated by UN scandals and failure to prevent atrocities or even war and genocide. Examples abound, from Somalia to Rwanda, Srebenica, Haiti and Darfur.

Too often, the United Nations serves as a fig leaf for politicians, including American ones, while obfuscating or even perpetuating conflicts. In Lebanon, for instance, the UN has had peacekeepers in place since 1978. Under their noses the Iranian-backed terrorists of Hezbollah stockpiled weapons for the 2006 summer war with Israel. Under the gaze of a now-expanded UN peacekeeping force, Hezbollah is reportedly rearming, with deadlier weapons.

The current round of UN peacekeeping in the Congo dates back to 1999. Since then, the UN has more than tripled the number of uniformed personnel in the field, and since 2003 it has spent more than $7.5 billion on this mission. Yet the assaults, rapes and conflicts among warring factions have continued. This week, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon excused UN failures on grounds that "our resources are too limited."

The real problem is that the opaque and diplomatically immune UN is far better at catering to itself than helping those it proposes -- often unrealistically -- to protect. UN peacekeeping is a gravy train for UN bureaucrats and for governments of many of the countries providing troops (the top five currently being Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nigeria and Egypt).

With its multibillion-dollar budget, peacekeeping has been one of the most corrupt arenas of UN activity, a locus of what UN internal investigators in 2006 labeled "a culture of impunity."

In the field, including the Congo, that UN culture has led to a series of scandals since 2004 involving not just peacekeepers ignoring rape right down the road, but doing it themselves. Despite a policy of "zero tolerance," the United Nations itself reports more than 200 confirmed cases of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers since the start of 2007, with findings on another 200 or so allegations still pending, including 35 alleged instances in the first half of this year.

A UN fact sheet euphemistically notes that such abuse "continues to be a major challenge for the peacekeeping family."

This week, the United Nations announced that together with Congo government forces, its peacekeepers had captured the man suspected of orchestrating the gang rapes this summer. That's good news, but too late for those who were assaulted while UN troops failed to respond. To keep pouring billions into UN peacekeeping fuels a vehicle with a record of too many failures.

Surely, for the tormented places of the world, it's time the leaders of the 21st century came up with new coalitions and better ways to pursue and keep the peace.