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Report Calls for Punishing Peacekeepers in Sex Abuse

By Warren Hoge

UNITED NATIONS, March 24 – A report on sexual abuse by peacekeepers recommended Thursday that offending soldiers and their commanders be punished by their home countries, that payments made to them be recovered and put into a fund for victims and that the United Nations make compliance with these measures a condition for taking part in its missions.

Secretary General Kofi Annan commissioned the report from Prince Zeid Raad al Hussein, Jordan's ambassador to the United Nations, after evidence emerged that blue helmeted peacekeepers and civilian staff members had had sex with women and girls in Congo in exchange for food and money, and, in some cases, had committed rape. The report also recommended that the United Nations make counseling and medical care available to victims and provide assistance for "peacekeeper babies" left behind when the troops rotate back to their own countries.

Prince Zeid, a former military officer and civilian peacekeeper in Bosnia, said that current efforts to curb abuses were "ad hoc and inadequate" and that exploitative behavior was widespread.

In a cover letter, Mr. Annan said that while peacekeeping had brought stability to many countries over decades, the record had been damaged by acts he termed "unconscionable" and that present measures were "manifestly inadequate."

"Such abhorrent acts are a violation of the fundamental duty of care that all United Nations peacekeeping personnel owe to the local populations they serve," Mr. Annan said, adding that a "fundamental change in approach was needed."

Sarah E. Mendelson, a senior fellow in the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and a vocal critic of the United Nations's past response to the sexual abuse scandal, hailed the report as "extremely important, I would even say revolutionary."

"The idea that peacekeepers will be held responsible for paternity, that there is assistance for victims, that there is a system to incentivize and reward those who invest properly in

the program, there are a lot of things here that a lot of us have been talking about for a long time,” she said in an interview.

Some of the measures recommended in the report can be carried out by Mr. Annan, but others are subject to the approval of the 191-member General Assembly.

The report noted that the United Nations had no authority to punish violators and said that countries contributing troops should agree to hold courts-martial of their accused soldiers in the countries where the alleged abuse occurred. Those countries with national laws preventing that should consider legislation to permit it, the report said.

In addition, Prince Zeid said, the United Nations should establish independent investigative teams with experts in sex crimes, particularly those against children, and modern forensic methods of identification.

He called for expanding the policy of setting curfews, declaring areas off limits and making patrols mobile, and said that missions needed to have better recreational services for off-duty troops and subsidized telephone and Internet connections to help them stay in touch with relatives and friends.

It recommended that peacekeeping missions set up clear lines of communication to allow local people to lodge complaints and obtain emergency medical and psychological attention. It also recommended data tracking mechanisms to record complaints systematically to avoid duplication and hearsay.

In a step to make commanders responsible for the actions of their troops, Prince Zeid said in his report that those who obstruct investigations into sexual abuse should be removed and repatriated, and the secretary general should advise the head of state of the home country why the action was taken. In addition, the United Nations should recover any payments made to the commander and give the money to a fund for the victims.

Prince Zeid added that it was important to champion commanders who cooperated, and recommended that the secretary general reward such behavior with written commendations to their heads of state.

Where an investigation shows that allegations are well founded, the charges ought to be sent to the home country of the offending soldier with a recommendation that he be prosecuted. Prince Zeid said that while a decision to prosecute was a sovereign decision, the United Nations ought to insist on prior cooperation in the memorandums of understanding governing each mission.

Many of Prince Zeid’s recommendations stemmed from the fact that the United Nations has little authority of its own to punish offenders other than to send them home where they seldom face prosecution. Other offenders have often been innocently rotated out to their home countries by the time they are identified.

The United Nations has also been concerned not to discourage countries from contributing troops. According to the department of peacekeeping operations, the 10 leading nations furnishing soldiers are, in order, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia, Nepal, Ghana, Nigeria, Jordan, Uruguay and South Africa.

The United Nations is experiencing a surge in peacekeeping, with 17 missions involving 80,000 people. The report said that the United Nations in 2004 had received 25 allegations of sexual exploitation against civilians and civilian police officers and 80 against uniformed personnel. The majority of them involved sex with people under 18.

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