
RI BULLETIN

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Haiti: Sexual Exploitation by Peacekeepers Likely to be a Problem

On Friday, February 18, a radio station in Gonaïves, Haiti claimed that three members of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Haiti, MINUSTAH, had raped a young Haitian woman. By February 19, MINUSTAH had sent an investigator to Gonaïves to investigate. On February 21, MINUSTAH aired the findings to the Haitian local media at a press conference. While these speedy actions are a welcome change from the way that other UN peacekeeping missions have dealt with allegations of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers, MINUSTAH is still not adequately prepared to address and fight sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers.

The senior management at MINUSTAH has been very explicit that the sexual abuses that have plagued MONUC in the Democratic Republic of the Congo will not occur on their watch. On August 10, 2004 all members of MINUSTAH received a memo reminding them that “any act of sexual exploitation and/or abuse by MINUSTAH personnel is strictly prohibited and constitutes an act of serious misconduct.” “I am very concerned about sexual exploitation,” stated a high level military commander, “We cannot do our jobs if the population does not trust us.” “The concept that sexual exploitation is wrong needs to be drummed into people. It has to be reinforced all the time,” added a senior police official. “Everyone needs to know that there is zero tolerance for this in this mission.” Refugees International talked with peacekeepers who told us, “I would not have sex with a woman in Haiti. It is not allowed. And we know about AIDS in Haiti. We do not even take condoms that the UN gives us because we will not have sex with Haitian women.”

Despite these strong assertions of zero tolerance, many Haitians are not convinced that the UN takes the issue seriously. “The [civilian police] who patrol our neighborhood don’t do anything. They are only interested in talking to women,” said one woman who lived in Cité du Soleil. “These women are not prostitutes who talk to them but they are hungry. They will sell their bodies for money.” In Petionville, the suburb where most international personnel live, prostitutes haunt the streets every evening and hang out in many of the bars frequented by UN staff. A Haitian man told us, “The restaurants that attract you international people feed the prostitution business. The Haitian National Police will do nothing about this. They are even involved!” Twenty U.S. dollars will buy one of these young women for the evening. According to Haitian women’s groups, women are even cheaper in the poorer areas of Petionville. “We’ve seen an increase in prostitution since MINUSTAH came. In 1994, we had a lot of problems with the Multinational Forces. The [peacekeepers] bring their bad habits with them to Haiti, but they do not bring change,” complained a representative of a Haitian woman’s group.

Despite support from both the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) headquarters in New York and the Special Representative of the Secretary General, MINUSTAH has very few resources, either human or financial, to address sexual exploitation. One part of the UN’s strategy for addressing it involves prevention through training, implementing the code of conduct, and raising awareness. Other UN missions have reacted to the abuses by peacekeepers in the Congo by appointing a Code of Conduct officer who will head a unit to oversee and develop a strategy in relation to behavior and conduct. MINUSTAH is committed to hiring a Code of Conduct officer, but eight months after the mission has started, this position is still vacant.

“We are still discussing in which office the Code of Conduct officer should sit,” said one MINUSTAH employee. “They may have identified someone for the position but they have not informed us,” confirmed another MINUSTAH staff member.

At present the Focal Point on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (i.e., the person responsible for receiving complaints, raising awareness and ensuring that the mission leadership takes action on sexual exploitation) is also serving as the Gender Advisor and is expected to take on the tasks of the Code of Conduct officer. She is charged with training all incoming MINUSTAH staff on sexual exploitation and abuse but has only one staff member to assist her in training. “I would like to begin a Training of Trainer program within the military and police,” she explained. “The police and military rotate every six months. But I just don’t have the staff to be able to do all of this as well as I would like.”

Aside from the resource issues involved with having one person both mainstream gender throughout the mission and address sexual exploitation, combining the two positions limits the effectiveness of both. Sexual exploitation is not strictly a gender issue but is a disciplinary offense akin to drunk driving or stealing. While the Gender Advisor is well suited to advocate for gender issues, her advocacy can be undermined by her dual role as “watchdog” on sexual exploitation. Further, according to a recent study, “For some [peacekeepers], gender is an emotionally loaded term closely allied, perhaps, to the terms ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’. Use of the word evoked a defensive stance from [UN peacekeepers].”¹ Thus, the Gender Advisor is not well-suited to enhance the overall implementation of the Code of Conduct policies for the mission. Despite these obstacles, however, the MINUSTAH Gender Advisor has been successful in raising awareness on sexual exploitation and on gender issues.

The UN also plans to punish perpetrators, with the most severe sanctions being repatriation to the home country. “I know that I would be sent back in disgrace,” said one CIVPOL officer. “My country is counting on me, my family is counting on me, and frankly I need the extra money that the UN is paying me.” While UN personnel may understand the gravity of sanctions, MINUSTAH has not been able to clarify them to the Haitian people. In a press conference on the incident in Gonaïves, the MINUSTAH spokesperson stated that he was unable to discuss what sanctions might be imposed on peacekeepers found guilty of rape. While it is inappropriate to discuss punishment before an investigation has determined guilt, MINUSTAH and the UN need to do a better job of communicating their policies to the local community. In a country that has had a tradition of unaccountable governments that do not respect human rights, the UN must actively demonstrate that it takes violations seriously.

Therefore, Refugees International recommends that:

- UN Dept of Peacekeeping Operations expedite the hiring of MINUSTAH’s Code of Conduct officer;
- UN peacekeeping missions separate the positions of Gender Advisor and Sexual Exploitation Focal Point. If this is not possible, adequate resources, both financial and human, must be allocated to the position.
- Troop Contributing Countries increase pre-deployment training on the UN Code of Conduct in country. Contingent commanders must also ensure that all material is translated and do their own awareness raising for their troops.
- The UN follow-up on sanctions against peacekeepers found guilty of sexual exploitation and report back to local communities.
- MINUSTAH develop a public information program to explain to Haitians what the consequences of sexual exploitation are and how to access the system.

Advocates Sarah Martin and Peter Gantz just returned from a two-week assessment mission to Haiti.

¹ Paul Higate. 2004. *Gender and Peacekeeping*. Institute for Security Studies. Pretoria, South Africa.