



## **Statement on UN Peacekeepers involved in sexual abuses in Côte d'Ivoire**

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There is academic research, literature, documentaries, recently the film the Whistleblower, and most pertinently, the accounts of women in countries which experience conflict, all of which document the link between militarization and the sexual exploitation of women, including through trafficking. The UN and those who occupy on humanitarian grounds are part of this militarization and it is foreseeable that without effective regulation, investigation, prosecution and punishment, then a climate of impunity for crimes committed against women and girls will prevail.

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire it seems that the lack of these procedures has again lead to the commission of acts of serious sexual violence against women and young girls. The disclosure by Wikileaks of a US embassy cable citing sexual exploitation by troops from Benin, proves again the vital role that must be played by civil society in ensuring that the such conduct is exposed. It was civil society organizations and an international civil servant principled enough to stand up for what was right, which exposed similar crimes being committed by Moroccan Peace keepers in 2007. The outcome of that expose was an apology from the Secretary General of the UN to the Moroccan government! This time the UN has been a little more robust, but within its own lights and policies; there was a year long investigation, perpetrators were identified, some 16 soldiers, of which 10 were in command positions, were sent home in April and are barred from serving in the UN. As a UN spokesman stated, the commanders failed to maintain an environment that prevents sexual exploitation and abuse.

The question must be asked, however, as to how, given the experience of Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Liberia, Chad, Haiti, to name but a few, the ultimate sanction for those who aid, abet and commit acts of rape is simply to be repatriated. It is possible that they could face criminal charges in their home country, but how many actually do? If this had happened in time of conflict then these acts would fall to be considered as war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture. Simply by changing the nomenclature from combatant to peacekeeper, the sanction is changed from criminal to administrative with no real accountability.

A random poll of ten underage girls in Toulepleu Côte d'Ivoire by Save The Children U.K. in 2009 found that eight performed sexual acts for Benin peacekeepers on a regular basis in order to secure their most basic needs. "Eight of the ten said they had ongoing sexual relationships with Beninese soldiers in exchange for food or lodging," whilst not conclusive as to the extent of the abuse it is indicative. The UN says that there have been 42 complaints since 2007 but nothing this year but this is to cling to false indicators. Women are unlikely to make a complaint when they are dependent on those they are complaining about, its how the system works. Abuse of authority and position of power will ensure that the indicator of complaints received will never give realistic assessments as to the extent and nature of the problem.

The UN must re-think how it ensures compliance with international law. There have been strong developments under human rights law as to how that applies in situations of occupation and humanitarian crisis. The UN should embrace these and develop effective measures to ensure implementation. These should include changes to the ostensible zero tolerance policy. As to believe that this will prevent abuse without a fundamental cultural shift in how men relate to women in conflict is naïve. Change the way the UN interprets functional immunity which at present is not in accordance with international law and facilitates impunity. Demand screening of all personnel recruited and ensure that there are binding agreements with Troop Contributing Countries as to their responsibilities to train, monitor, investigate and prosecute offenders. There should also be strict reporting obligations to the UN on actions taken and the UN itself should ensure that no troops will be accepted unless measures are in place and are demonstrably adhered to.

These are small steps in real terms and would represent only a beginning, a small start to address an issue which has for far too long been considered of little import to the big picture of keeping peace between men!