

USG Guéhenno responds on sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers

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9 January 2007

The Independent (UK).

This is the text of a letter sent by Mr. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, to the newspaper The Independent (UK).

To The Editor,

The United Nations shares the concerns about sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers expressed by Philip Hensher in his opinion piece ["Who punishes the crimes of the United Nations," 9 January 2006]. It is inexcusable when those committed to protect instead cause harm. However, Mr. Hensher puts forward a number of inaccurate or misleading statements and fundamentally fails to reflect the UN's staunch determination and clear plan of action to address these painful issues in a forceful, comprehensive and fully transparent manner.

It is incorrect to assert that "the UN only acts decisively against its own failings when those failings become public." To take only the example of Sudan that Mr. Hensher cites, long before the media covered the story, the UN had put in place mandatory training programmes on conduct issues, established monthly meetings with the Juba community to facilitate reporting of conduct issues, followed up on all allegations of misconduct received, initiated thirteen investigations in 2006 alone into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving peacekeeping personnel and repatriated soldiers found guilty of misconduct.

Mr. Hensher rightly acknowledges that it was a UN report that shed harsh light on the problems in Congo in 2004. But he does not mention that since then, the UN has put in place a far-reaching reform programme to address sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeeping personnel. To begin with, in 2004 the Secretary-General appointed H.R.H. Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein, the Permanent Representative of Jordan to the UN, to act as his Adviser on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN Peacekeeping Personnel. Prince Zeid developed a comprehensive package of reforms and has greatly assisted in advocating with UN Member States to address this complex and difficult issue.

Since then we have established conduct and discipline teams and independent investigative offices in all of our largest peacekeeping operations and training on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse is now mandatory for all of our peacekeeping personnel in the field. Missions have established networks of focal points to receive complaints of this nature and premises where prostitution is known or suspected to occur are placed off-limits to our personnel and patrolled. Other measures such as curfews, "non-fraternization" policies and "hotlines" for anonymous complaints are also in place in many missions. It may be impossible to completely ensure zero incidents, but we can and do mandate zero tolerance.

Contrary to the claim that the Organisation is "keeping these allegations quiet," last month the UN organized a public, high-level conference on this subject, attended by senior officials from the Secretary-General down, Non-Governmental Organisations

(NGOs) and victim advocates. Following an open and candid debate, the leadership of both the UN family and NGOs agreed to implement ten fundamental commitments to prevent future acts of sexual exploitation and abuse by their personnel.

It is also false to assert that the UN only discusses this issue when "its failings become public – usually not through its own machinery." Since 2003, the UN has publicly issued system-wide, yearly statistics on the number of allegations and investigations relating to sexual exploitation and abuse involving UN personnel as well as action taken where such allegations are proved to be credible. This is supplemented by regular press releases by UN peacekeeping operations on sexual exploitation and abuse allegations and cases as they arise. Missions have instructions to provide information to victims and host communities on the outcome of completed investigations.

More generally, between 1 January 2004 and 21 November 2006, UN investigations into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse were completed involving 319 peacekeeping personnel in all missions, resulting in the summary dismissal of 18 civilians, repatriations home of 17 police and 144 military personnel. We continuously stress the particular responsibilities of managers and commanders in preventing misconduct, and those repatriated include senior officers sent home for failing to prevent acts of sexual exploitation and abuse by soldiers under their command.

And the UN is not only holding individuals responsible. In one case, an entire unit of UN police was repatriated after an investigation found that acts of sexual exploitation and abuse routinely went unreported. We ask the troop and police contributing countries that are ultimately responsible for the conduct and discipline of their personnel for regular updates on what action they have taken after repatriation and all peacekeeping personnel found guilty of misconduct – whether civilian, military or police – are barred from future peacekeeping service.

Mr. Hensher's proposal that the UN should create its own "army" will have to wait until the world authorizes a standing UN force. In the meantime, we are taking and will continue to take very concrete measures to address this problem today. The honorable men and women of peacekeeping -- and the literally millions of people who depend on them all over the world -- deserve nothing less.

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