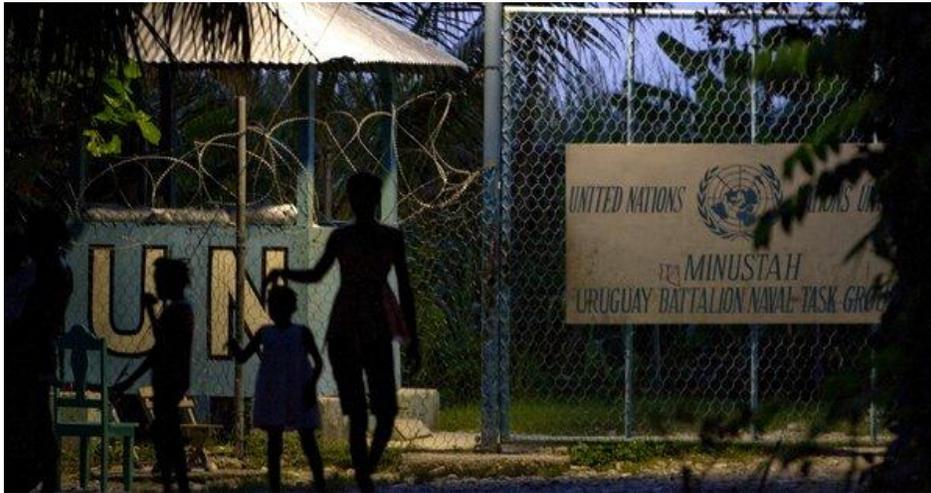


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Peacekeepers' Sex Scandals Linger, On Screen and Off

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR, 7 September 2011



Dieu Nalio Chery/Associated Press

At this United Nations base in Port Salut, Haiti, a young man says he was sexually assaulted by Uruguayan peacekeepers. The case set off a protest.

UNITED NATIONS — On screen, two senior United Nations officials in Bosnia are arguing about firing [Kathy Bolkovac](#), an American police officer battling to stop [peacekeepers](#) from both trafficking in young women and frequenting the brothels where they became indentured prostitutes.

“It is a point of honor for me that the U.N. is not remembered for raping the very people we must protect,” says Madeleine Rees, a spirited human rights advocate played by Vanessa Redgrave.

“Those girls are whores of war,” growls the male bureaucrat heading the United Nations mission. “It happens; I will not dictate for morality.”

Ms. Rees, the director of the human rights office in Sarajevo from 1998 to 2006, said that dispute in the movie “The Whistleblower,” recently released in the United States, was lifted almost verbatim from a running argument she had around 2001.

A decade later, a string of sex scandals from Bosnia to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Haiti involving peacekeeping missions has forced the United Nations to change the way it handles accusations of trafficking, rape and related crimes. But the issue still bedevils the institution — a point underscored by the skirmishing among senior United Nations officials over whether to embrace the movie or try to ignore it.

The issue has certainly not gone away. This week, hundreds of Haitians protested in support of an 18-year-old who said he was sexually assaulted by peacekeepers from Uruguay on a United Nations base, eliciting a furious rebuke from Haiti’s president and an apology from Uruguay.

The United Nations has focused serious attention on addressing sexual crimes among the more than 120,000 personnel it has deployed in 16 peacekeeping missions globally, including widespread training. But the question that diplomats, advocates and even some United Nations officials ask is why the efforts still lag in terms of investigating accusations and, most important, making sure those who send troops and contractors abroad hold them accountable.

Human rights experts and some member states fault the United Nations for leaving too much of the job of enforcing its “zero tolerance” policy announced in 2003 to the countries contributing troops. Individual cases and any disciplinary action are rarely made public.

“They never come up with actual facts; they never come up with actual cases,” Ms. Bolkovac said.



Stephen Lovekin/Getty Images
Kathy Bolkovac

She won a wrongful dismissal case in 2003 against a subsidiary of Virginia-based DynCorp International, which was contracted by the State Department to provide police officers for the United Nations peacekeeping force in Bosnia. But Ms. Bolkovac says she has never been hired by another peacekeeping mission. (DynCorp issued a statement noting that “The Whistleblower” was a work of fiction and that new owners had since enacted their own zero tolerance policy.)

United Nations officials brandish the statistics published on the organization’s [peacekeeping Web site](#) as evidence of transparency. The numbers, whose source is somewhat vague, indicate that cases dropped from 108 substantiated accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse in 2007 to 85 in 2008, then to 63 in 2009, 33 last year and just 5 so far in 2011.

But more than 200 such accusations remain unresolved, and the United Nations annual report on such crimes for 2010 noted that sexual activity with minors and nonconsensual sex represented more than half of reported accusations, little changed since 2008. Cases have come to light where peacekeepers paid children \$1 or with candy to make a rape seem like prostitution.

Finally, efforts to gather information from troop contributors about legal or disciplinary action are often ignored. The United Nations got answers roughly a quarter of the time, or 88 responses from 333 queries sent, since 2007, according to its figures.

Senior officials defend the numbers as improving, and argue that publicly shaming member states would make finding peacekeeping troops more difficult. “Going into a blame and shame approach is counterproductive because this requires a mind-set change,” said Susanna Malcorra, head of the logistics end of peacekeeping.

Activists and some diplomats condemn the United Nations as timid, with internal policing particularly weak under Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Mr. Ban waged an extended feud over hiring with the head of internal oversight before she left in 2010, leaving dozens of investigator jobs empty. Senior officials admit that its investigators have the mandate to do more to track sexual abuse cases.

The United Nations pays \$1,024 a month per soldier, making peacekeeping a profitable venture for many poorer nations. In June, member states voted themselves a bonus of roughly \$100 per soldier per month, costing \$85 million, for the coming year. The United Nations lost an opportunity by not hinging the bonuses on better cooperation, advocates contend.

“Member states are not reliable enough to do a good job on their own, especially in the early stages of a military investigation,” said Prince Zeid Raad Zeid al-Husseini, the Jordanian ambassador and the author of a damning study of sexual exploitation in peacekeeping in 2005 as special adviser on the issue under the previous secretary general. Mr. Ban never filled the post.

Member states rejected the study's recommendations to establish a coordinated, nimble investigation and discipline process. Soldiers serving the United Nations are subject to their own countries' military justice. The only wrist slap often faced by contractors is being sent home, because they enjoy immunity as United Nations employees.

Soldiers linked to crimes are often repatriated. In April, 16 peacekeepers from Benin were sent home from Ivory Coast — more than a year after Save the Children U.K. found that the soldiers traded food for sex with poor, underage girls. More than 100 troops from Sri Lanka were sent home from Haiti in 2007 because of widespread accusations of sex with minors.

In many cases, however, the final outcome remains a mystery.

"The U.N. is not even a player in the investigation, doesn't know the evidence and has no way to follow up with the way the military decides to deal with this issue," Prince Zeid said. "We, the member states, have by and large failed to do what I had hoped we would do."

The State Department's 2010 report on human trafficking criticized the United Nations, saying, "No comprehensive information is available on the number of cases of disciplinary action."

A leaked memo from the United Nations human rights office in New York reflected the divisions over openness. In a lengthy discussion about how to address "The Whistleblower," Kiyotaka Akasaka, the head of public information, and Patricia O'Brien, the top lawyer, argued for playing down the movie and certainly not screening it at the United Nations headquarters, the memo said.

But the executive director of the newly created agency U.N. Women, Michelle Bachelet, the former president of Chile, argued for a more open approach, it said, along with several others.

Mr. Ban wrote to the film's director, Larysa Kondracki, saying he had watched the movie with his senior advisers and was "pained" by it. "Your film points to one area where our work left questions behind," he said.

A public screening will be held at the United Nations soon, he told her.