

DARK SIDE OF PEACEKEEPING

It was late at night when the woman farmer came out of her house in the village of Joru in Sierra Leone to go to the lavatory. She saw a large white truck that had stopped about 50 metres from her home. It was an unusual sight, so she hid and watched what was going on. Inside were two white men and a black woman, who was yelling: "Leave me alone."

"The door was open and one of them was on top of her," recalled the farmer, "K", who is in her fifties. "The lady was really struggling. I saw that one was holding her down while the other was raping her. I was able to see because the men had opened the door to the car and the light had come on."

The two men then moved the truck further down the road and stayed about 30 minutes to rape her again. "I saw both of them have their turn on her. After they had finished, I saw one of them drag her out of the cabin and put her in the back of the big truck." They then drove off.

There is nothing surprising about rape in Sierra Leone. During the brutal civil war, which was formally declared over in January last year, it was as common as the notorious mutilations. What made this crime stand out, however, was that the alleged perpetrators were peacekeepers from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (Unamsil), which has been in the country since October 1999. With more than 16,000 troops, it is the largest peacekeeping operation in the world. "We're all a bit frightened of those Unamsil people now," said K. "We tell our girls never to get in a truck with them or the same thing might happen to them."

In Liberia, fighting between rebels closing in on the capital, Monrovia, and forces loyal to President Charles Taylor has thrown the country into chaos. As calls are made for UN peacekeepers to be sent to there, it is disturbing to learn that K's tale - told in the Human Rights Watch report, "We'll Kill You If You Cry" - is far from unique. The report also describes how a 12-year-old girl was raped in March 2001 by a Guinean peacekeeper manning a checkpoint after she asked him to help her get a ride to Freetown, the Sierra Leone capital. A soldier was charged and taken to court the same day. However, the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) dropped the case and the soldier was sent back to Guinea.

A month before, a Nigerian peacekeeper reportedly raped a 16-year-old girl in Freetown. Unamsil said the Nigerian contingent and Unamsil's Civilian Police Section had investigated and the girl had dropped the charge. In June last year, a 14-year-old boy was allegedly raped by a Bangladeshi peacekeeper near the Jui transit camp outside Freetown. He reported the assault to the SLP and a medical examination confirmed that penetration had taken place. The Unamsil Provost Marshall took over the case, but concluded that there was insufficient evidence to link the crime with the alleged perpetrator. An order of repatriation was, however, issued.

"What is particularly shocking and appalling is that those people who ought to be there protecting the local population have actually become perpetrators," said Steve Crawshaw, the London director of Human Rights Watch. "It's also very disappointing that there seems to be a deep reluctance to investigate and prosecute these very serious crimes. To turn away from a problem like that is a terrible dereliction of duty."

There are now 13 UN peacekeeping operations around the world, served by about 39,600 military personnel and civilian police. In 1993, the UN General Assembly approved a Code of Conduct in operation for all UN peacekeeping missions. Rule four states that they should "not indulge in immoral acts of sexual, physical or psychological abuse or exploitation of the local population or United Nations staff, especially women and children". Yet a report released at the end of last year by the UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) and Save the Children UK on sexual exploitation of refugee children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone listed many allegations against peacekeepers from nine countries. The report claimed that children as young as five were asked to pose naked by UN peacekeepers in exchange for biscuits, cake powder and other food.

An investigation into the report by the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services found that, of 12 cases it examined fully, none could be substantiated. The team identified and investigated another 43 cases of possible sexual exploitation. Ten were substantiated. One involved a peacekeeper (the one accused of the rape of the 14-year-old boy), who was immediately repatriated.

Brendan Paddy, spokesman for the Save the Children Fund, thinks the UN has got it wrong. "The report's conclusions cannot be invalidated by an investigation of a small number of complaints against individuals which prove to be unsubstantiable. There is a very serious problem with sexual exploitation of particularly young teenage girls, in this case in vulnerable communities, by a range of people in positions of power."

Nowhere is the problem uglier - or more embarrassing to the UN - than in Bosnia. The sex-slave industry scarcely existed here until the mid-Nineties. But when Bosnia, Croatia and Yugoslavia signed the Dayton accord in 1995 to end the civil war, a team of 50,000 predominantly male peacekeepers arrived. It was made up of about 36,000 military S-For troops, more than 2,000 UN International Police Task Force (IPTF) officers (whose job was to monitor, train and advise the local police), and many staff from other UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Hundreds of brothels appeared, many staffed by girls and women from neighbouring countries who had been kidnapped or lured by promises of respectable employment and sold into sexual slavery.

"There is virtually no dispute any more that the issue of trafficking arose predominantly with the arrival of the peacekeeping troops in 1995," says Madeleine Rees, the head of the UN Office of the High Commission of Human Rights. "This is not to say they created the market. Traffickers made sure they created the demand."

Last year, Kathryn Bolkovac, a former IPTF officer investigating human trafficking and forced prostitution, was awarded pounds 110,000 by an

employment tribunal in Southampton after she was unfairly sacked after blowing the whistle on colleagues, including British men, involved in the Bosnian sex trade.

Bolkovac revealed that UN peacekeepers went to nightclubs where girls as young as 15 were forced to dance naked and have sex with customers, and that UN personnel and international aid workers were linked to prostitution rings. Girls who refused to have sex were beaten and raped in bars by their pimps while the peacekeepers stood and watched.

Richard Monk, the former IPTF commissioner, who left the post in 1999, said one UN police officer downloaded so much pornography that he crashed the computer system. "It was deeply embarrassing to be told by a translator who interpreted in my office that she had recently visited a police station with one of my colleagues where police officers were openly complaining that an underage girl was having a sexual relationship with one of our monitors."

Monk is now the senior police adviser to the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the biggest regional security organisation in the world. He says there is not enough commitment from the countries providing staff to international organisations to take seriously the required qualities and constraints. "You must look at the quality of the people you are providing. I wouldn't have thought anyone needed to be told that you don't behave like this. So we are clearly recruiting the wrong people."

UN peacekeepers remain under the exclusive criminal jurisdiction of their own national authorities and therefore have immunity from local prosecution. If the UN Board of Inquiry finds reasonable grounds for a charge of serious misconduct, it recommends that the peacekeeper is repatriated for subsequent disciplinary action in his or her own country.

Madeleine Rees says that only 24 IPTF officers have been repatriated to their countries for misconduct. "No peacekeeper has been prosecuted," she says.

"It's outrageous that they can act with impunity. The UN has no authority to punish offenders; all it can do is try to ensure that the Code of Conduct is enforced, and that means repatriating when they offend. Proper investigations should be held and a file prepared so the accused can contest the allegations, and if it is shown that there is a prima facie case it should go back to the peacekeeper's country for further investigation and a trial, or some form of disciplinary proceeding should take place. The other option would be for the member state to waive the immunity and do it there." Peacekeepers commit such crimes, she says, "because they can get away with it".

In January, the IPTF was replaced by a 500-strong European Police Mission, with 119 IPTF officers transferring to the new unit. "They have a very strong code of conduct and a very strong mandate to combat trafficking. I would hope that they will now assist in dealing with the problem," Rees says.

Since the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo came into operation in 1999, 10 UN police officers have been involved in

disciplinary offences in connection with prostitutes. Three have been repatriated for direct offences, and the others were either reprimanded or repatriated. There are currently about 4,500 UN police officers stationed in the region as well as 27,000 K-For military personnel from 38 nations. Prostitution has been a major criminal activity involving the trafficking of women and girls, though it has declined in the past two or three years.

Kristine Brubacher set up the UN's Trafficking and Prostitution Unit in 2000. She has now left the post, but she said at the time: "The internationals have created and contributed to the problem because they bring in so much money to what was previously a very poor region. Because of the money, thousands of girls are now forced to work in prostitution."

Derek Chappell, the UN police spokesman in Kosovo, denied that peacekeepers had been a factor in the proliferation of brothels and trafficked women. He said that interviews with about 1,800 women last year showed that 70 to 80 per cent of brothel clients were locals. What of the remaining 20 to 30 per cent? "There are a great number of foreign workers here with different NGOs," he said.

Kosovo is one of the first UN missions in which the police serve as proper officers, as opposed to monitors, and there is a discipline code very similar to that of the British police force, he said. If an officer is caught in any of the 145 cafes or bars placed on the "off-limits list" - suspected of being used for prostitution or illegal activity - he is immediately sent home. "If you are sent home, if you have broken a police discipline code in Kosovo it is possible that your own force may choose to prosecute you at home," he said.

A UN spokesman said that all allegations of sexual impropriety were taken "very seriously". "It has been UN policy since the early 1990s that every allegation made to a UN peacekeeping mission is investigated," he said.

"However, for effective action to be taken we require the active co-operation of any suspect's national authorities, as our powers are limited. We provide the results of our investigation to those authorities and follow up by asking for information about what action they have taken. We have developed new procedures to follow up with national authorities on the subsequent national investigations and institution of disciplinary proceedings."

Following the UNHCR-Save the Children report and the subsequent Oversight Office investigation, the UN had taken steps to review its procedures, strengthen adherence to them and to conduct more stringent follow-up with states on disciplinary measures they have taken against repatriated peacekeepers, he said.

Anyone found guilty of misconduct would not be permitted to work in United Nations peacekeeping again. "However," he added, "it is worthy of note that acts of serious misconduct are very rare and that all but a very few peacekeepers work hard to support the mandate, the mission and the peace process."

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