

Peacekeepers, teachers prey on Liberia girls-report

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By Alphonso Toweh

MONROVIA, May 8 (Reuters) - U.N. peacekeepers, aid workers and teachers are having sex with Liberian girls as young as 8 in return for money, food or favours, threatening efforts to rebuild a nation wrecked by war, a report said on Monday.

Save the Children UK said an alarming number of girls were being sexually exploited by men in authority in refugee camps and in the wider community, sometimes for as little as a bottle of beer, a ride in an aid vehicle or watching a film.

"This cannot continue," Save the Children UK Chief Executive Jasmine Whitbread said. "Men who use positions of power to take advantage of vulnerable children must be reported and fired."

"More must be done to support children and their families to make a living without turning to this kind of desperation."

The 20-page document said local people reported sexual exploitation by peacekeepers in every location where a contingent of the UNMIL peacekeeping force was stationed, highlighting the continuing problem of sex abuse by U.N. forces.

Allegations of sexual misconduct have dogged U.N. operations in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the world body has accused members of its biggest peacekeeping force of rape, paedophilia and giving children food or money in return for sex.

The U.N. force in Liberia said in a statement eight cases of sexual exploitation and abuse involving U.N. personnel had been reported since the start of 2006. One of those had been substantiated and the member of staff suspended.

"We are appalled with any activity, the sexual exploitation or abuse by aid workers, be they international or Liberian. It's unacceptable behaviour," Jordan Ryan, U.N. humanitarian coordinator in Liberia, told BBC radio from Monrovia.

Save the Children urged Liberia's new government, U.N. agencies and donors to set up a government-led ombudsman office to ensure sex abuse allegations are investigated.

Countries which contribute troops to the U.N. force should also ensure soldiers who sexually exploited children are charged and those found guilty removed from the force, it said.

The report highlighted the relationship between food aid, poverty and sex, in particular accusations that some men involved in distributing food rations demanded sex in return.

"The World Food Programme (WFP) together with the other U.N. agencies will obviously be looking into these allegations very seriously because obviously we have zero tolerance for any sexual exploitation," WFP spokeswoman Caroline Hurford told Reuters TV in Rome.

"MAN BUSINESS"

Liberian society has been shattered by a 1989-2003 civil war which caused an estimated 250,000 deaths in a country of barely 3 million people, forcing around 1.3 million people from their homes into camps around the capital Monrovia or abroad.

Elections late last year saw Harvard-trained former World Bank economist Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf voted in as president, but her government faces a massive task to rebuild an economy and society torn apart by years of bloodshed.

The report's compilers spoke to more than 300 people in camps for displaced people and communities where people had recently returned to their pre-war localities.

"All of the respondents clearly stated that they felt that the scale of the problem affected over half of the girls in their locations," it said, adding aid workers, teachers, camp and government employees, policemen and soldiers were involved.

"The girls reportedly ranged in age from 8 to 18 years, with girls of 12 years and upwards identified as being regularly involved in 'selling sex'," it said. (Additional reporting by Alistair Thomson in Dakar, Tim Castle in London and Cristiano Corvio in Rome)