

Countries must punish UN troops for sexual abuse: US

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United Nations: The United States has urged all countries to hold soldiers accountable for sexual abuse and exploitation.

File pic of American Ambassador to UN Nikki Haley

Nikki Haley, the American Ambassador to the United Nations, said that all countries that provide troops for peacekeeping missions must take action against cases of sexual harassment.

The appeal came after she cited an investigation into a child sex ring in Haiti involving Sri Lankan peacekeepers.

She also warned that "countries that refuse to hold their soldiers accountable must recognize that this either stops or their troops will go home and their financial compensation will end."

Haley was speaking after the Security Council voted unanimously to end the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Haiti in mid-October, sending a strong signal that the international community believes the impoverished Caribbean nation is stabilizing after successful elections.

But the peacekeepers will leave with a tarnished legacy. U.N. troops from Nepal are widely blamed for introducing cholera that has killed at least 9,500 people in Haiti since 2010 and some troops have been implicated in sexual abuse.

"What do we say to these kids? Did these peacekeepers keep them safe?" Haley asked, citing the AP's investigation detailing how at least 134 Sri Lankan peacekeepers sexually abused and exploited nine Haitian children between 2004 and 2007.

Sri Lanka never jailed any soldiers implicated in the abuse yet the country was allowed to send troops to other U.N. missions.

Haley said after the vote that while the departure of the peacekeepers "is seen as a success, unfortunately it's a nightmare for many in Haiti who will never be able to forget and live with brutal scars."

Nine children in the Haiti sex ring "some as young as 12" told U.N. investigators how Sri Lankan peacekeepers offered them snacks or money for sex. One boy said he slept with as many as 100 soldiers, averaging about four per day.

The details of the sex ring were part of a larger AP investigation of U.N. missions during the past 12 years that found an estimated 2,000 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers and U.N. personnel around the world.

In Haiti, the 2,370 military personnel will gradually leave over the next six months. A new peacekeeping mission will follow for an initial period of six months, comprised of just 1,275 police to continue training the national police force and assist in developing the rule of law and promoting human rights in Haiti.

Haley said the United States and the international community are committed to Haiti's "democratic development, independence and economic growth."

"We will, however, continue to push for accountability of those troops in Haiti as well as all troop contributing countries involved in peacekeeping efforts," she said.

"We owe it to the vulnerable in these countries who desperately need peace and security," she told Security Council members. "I ask that you join me in this effort."

Former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recommended that peacekeepers accused of sexual abuse and exploitation be court martialed in the countries where the alleged incidents take place and said the U.N. would withhold payments to peacekeepers facing credible allegations.

Responding to the AP report, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric had said Wednesday: "We need to address the problem, first, for the victims, but also to ensure that the perception of peacekeeping is not a wrong one."

He stressed it is dangerous work done honorably by "the vast majority" of peacekeepers.

Mark Schuller, an academic studying what happens when international organizations leave countries like Haiti, said for Haitians, the U.N. has garnered a "love-hate" relationship, but the real issue is lack of accountability.

"The U.N. is not accountable to the Haitian government or people. That creates a culture of implied immunity," said Schuller, a professor at N. Illinois University's Department of Ethnology who spends part of his time in Haiti.

Jacqueline Nono said she was 17 when she started having sex with a Sri Lankan peacekeeper for money or gifts. She said the sex was consensual but she needed the money to pay for her two children.

"I've heard the stories about Sri Lankans abusing Haitians, but I was treated well," said the 24-year-old in Port-au-Prince.

For Jean-Marie Pascal, there is no love lost for the United Nations.

She said a U.N. peacekeeper sexually assaulted her shortly after troops arrived in 2004 to quell instability following President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's ouster. After the 2010 earthquake struck, her two cousins died from a strain of cholera linked to U.N. peacekeepers from Nepal.

"Haiti has been a playground for the United Nations," the 43-year-old shop assistant told the AP as part of its investigation.

The United Nations also suffered in Haiti, losing nearly 100 peacekeepers and personnel in the 2010 earthquake that killed as many as 300,000 people.

- With AP Inputs