# UN war on sexual abuse in Central African Republic still a shambles, internal study shows

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EXCLUSIVE: Despite years of “zero tolerance” of the sexual abuse crisis by United Nations’ peacekeepers, the U.N. peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic (CAR), which has been at the center of the worst U.N. sexual abuse scandal in years, is still a bureaucratic shambles when it comes to recording, investigating and keeping track of those crimes, as well as training its personnel to avoid them, according to a U.N. internal report.

Among other things, the 23-page document itemizes the controversial mission’s spotty and often-delayed record-keeping of sex abuse allegations, glacial follow-up on investigations, lack of “risk assessment” examinations of potential problems at more than half of its 37 operating bases where sexual abuse allegations have occurred, and other jaw-dropping issues of delay and neglect.

The leadership of the 10,700-member peacekeeping force, known by its acronym of MINUSCA, has not yet even come up with a final version of a communications campaign to encourage the battered citizens of CAR to repel and report peacekeeper sexual abuse -- or enough safe places where alleged victims of such crimes can report the abuse in private.

The main reason, the report says, is that the vital outreach program “had to be included in the mission-wide communication strategy that was still pending finalization by the MINUSCA Public Information Office.”

The snapshot provided by members of the U.N.’s watchdog Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) of MINUSCA’s sloppy and erratic efforts to handle the sexual abuse crisis go a substantial way to illustrate what U.N. critics have long called its pernicious “culture of impunity” regarding sexual abuse, which the U.N.’s top leadership has said repeatedly it intends to eradicate.

The most recent battle cry was offered by the current Secretary General, Antonio Buterres, who [launched his anti-sexual abuse campaign](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/03/10/un-declares-renewed-war-on-peacekeeping-sex-abuse-as-number-victims-rises.html) in March, little more than two months after taking office.

The OIOS probe of MINUSCA’s so-called “conduct and discipline function: includes a promise by the mission’s own top officials that the problems of lack of oversight, chronic understaffing of units supposedly battling the abuses,  and blatant neglect are supposed to be cleared up by Oct. 31, 2017.

That will be more than three years after ugly revelations of sexual exploitation of young children by non-U.N. peacekeepers in what was then a U.N.-mandated mission in CAR first detonated. It also will be nearly two years after an independent panel of experts excoriated a number of then-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s top officials for trying to cover up the scandal [and punish whistleblowers who tried to stop the abuse](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/12/18/independent-panel-blasts-u-n-for-inaction-and-cover-up-in-sex-abuse-cases.html) by stepping outside the U.N.’s closed reporting systems.

The October cleanup deadline also will be nearly eight months after Guterres launched his zero-tolerance campaign, which has involved virtually endless internal U.N. dialogue as well as discussions at two ponderous high-level international meetings.

Another of these events is yet to come:  a High-Level Meeting on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse on Sept. 18, alongside the opening session of this year’s U.N. General Assembly.

The event will feature dignitaries from countries that contribute peacekeepers who have signed a Voluntary Compact to fortify strictures against sexual abuse, and a lengthy session on “identified gaps, solutions and sustaining efforts to prevent and response to” the ugly crimes, which have so badly dented the U.N.’s blue-helmeted reputation.

Whether the paper-signing will solve anything is another matter, observes Paula Donovan, co-director of AIDS-Free World, a non-government organization whose Code Blue campaign has been at the forefront of pressing the U.N. to end its “culture of impunity” on sexual abuse.

“When asked by Member States, U.N. headquarters points to new guidelines and procedures as proof of its progress,” Donovan notes. “But policies are useless unless they’re implemented.”

All the more so, as Code Blue has argued, when disciplinary measures for sexual abuse and much of its investigation lie with the countries that supply peacekeeping troops. The gadfly organization has lobbied for an independent panel of investigators and legal experts to take over those functions, and end a U.N. conflict of interest on the sexual abuse nightmare.

The OIOS report on MINUSCA’s “conduct and discipline function” surrounding sexual abuse and other crimes offers proof that effective implementation hasn’t arrived in one of the most turbulent countries in the ravaged center of Africa, where marauding political factions and warlords  once again threaten a tissue-thin fabric of stability.

OIOS took two months to carry out its conduct and discipline audit—from September to December 2016, two years after MINUSCA became a fully-controlled U.N. peacekeeping force in September 2014.

By then, the independent panel report excoriating the U.N. for its earlier buck-passing and cover-up was nearly a year old. Concerns about continuing rampant sexual abuse in CAR, however, was still on the rise:  120 members of one Congolese peacekeeping battalion in CAR were repatriated in February 2016 on sexual abuse-related “disciplinary grounds.”

The rest of that unit is still in operation in CAR even though the top U.N. commander there has called [the troops “unable and even unwilling to fulfill operational tasks.”](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/06/09/peacekeeper-battalion-in-central-african-republic-challenges-un-war-on-sexual-abuse.html)

Bureaucratically, at least, MINUSCA’s leadership could claim to be trying to cope with the problem.  In November 2015 -- more than a year after the U.N. took over full control of peacekeeping in CAR -- a “special SEA prevention task force” was established, along with a “joint SEA prevention team” operating at the mission’s headquarters.

That was three months after then-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon fired the head of the U.N.’s peacekeeping mission in CAR and pronounced himself “angered and ashamed” by the continuing reports of sexual abuse.

In response to questions from Fox News, the U.N.’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations declared that a sample of cases reviewed by the OIOS auditors revealed “a decreasing trend in the number of reported allegations from the establishment date of these preventive measures.”

Creation of the new headquarters task force and team evidently allowed the OIOS investigators to observe blandly in the early pages of their report that MINUSCA took “preventive measures to maintain discipline among uniformed personnel.” They also said diplomatically that the mission “participated” in a program to “implement a victim assistance mechanism as part of the Organization’s strategy on remedial action to address misconduct.”

But actual communication of the program to potential victims, they revealed, is still on the waiting list. And when it comes to offering potential victims “efficient, safe, confidential, transparent and accessible mechanisms” to make allegations -- including private meeting rooms, and secure email addresses -- only two of four outposts visited by OIOS auditors actually had such things. One conduct and discipline officer used his living quarters for such confidential meetings instead.

As the report delicately put it, MINUSCA “did not prioritize the allocation” of reporting space, despite repeated requests from its own conduct and discipline team to do so.

The same attitude apparently applied to educating peacekeepers against sexual abuse.

According to the report, MINUSCA is supposed to provide “adequate and effective” training on standards of conduct, and keep records of the training. OIOS declared instead that 58 percent of MINUSCA’s military personnel and 50 percent of its civilian staff failed to attend the sessions.

When MINUSCA’s own small conduct and discipline team objected to the numbers, OIOS found that the peacekeeping mission was unable to provide attendance sheets for 54 percent of those who supposedly went to the sessions.

The same went for “risk assessments” of locations, especially troop bases, where sexual and other misconduct might occur.

According to the report, no risk assessments were carried out “on 19 of 37 operating bases where incidents of SEA [sexual exploitation and abuse] had been previously reported and investigated.”

Those bases, many apparently in far flung and conflicted areas of the country, hosted roughly 10 percent of the entire MINUSCA military force.

(One of the areas where risk assessments were skipped was a town named Bangassou --where two U.N. peacekeepers were killed last week by marauding elements. All told, according to the U.N., nine peacekeepers have been killed around the town since January.)

Moreover, even when recommendations for change were made, they were apparently ignored. According to the report, nine recommendations involving U.N. camps in three CAR towns were not implemented -- including serious security measures, such as fencing of the perimeter of troop encampments, which also serve defensive purposes.

The same difference between actions on paper and actions in the real world apparently applied to keeping track of actual allegations of sexual misconduct or other wrongdoing.

According to the OIOS inspectors, they reviewed one-third -- 40 -- of 120 cases of “serious” allegations over the two-year period, and discovered that MINUSCA “did not upload required supporting documents” to an automated tracking system-- a 40 percent rate of  neglect.

Some of the lapses were far from small:  In ten cases, the auditors noted, MINUSCA “did not record the date of receipt”-- which would be the baseline for any investigation.

Result: the tracking system was “unreliable,” as the auditors primly put it, and “there was a risk of delays in conducting investigations or allegations not being investigated due to the lack of evidence.”

(The U.N.’s [public tracking system for sexual exploitation](https://conduct.unmissions.org/table-of-allegations) and abuse so far lists 29 incidents for 2017, including nine from MINUSCA -- about one-third of the total.)

MINUSCA’s conduct and discipline officers are supposed to follow up on sexual abuse investigations every three months, or six months if the effort was being made by a troop-providing country, to make sure that the probes are expeditiously carried out. But  the OIOS report says MINUSCA had not set up a tracking system to keep the investigations in the spotlight, so in  five cases where the U.N. was investigating, any follow-up took anywhere from eight to 15 months, while in other cases it took around half a year.

When it came to reviewing actual investigation reports -- the stage when decisions about what to do next would be made -- there was similar lethargy. MINUSCA’s conduct and discipline unit managed to review four sexual abuse investigation reports within a mandated 15 days; another eight took an average of 42 days each.

[CLICK HERE FOR THE MINUSCA REPORT](http://www.foxnews.com/world/interactive/2017/07/27/minusa-audit.html)

In its defense, MINUSCA’s managers noted that they were under-budgeted for their conduct and discipline functions in 2014-2015, when the sexual abuse scandal in CAR began its most furious boil, and declared that the resultant understaffing was a substantial part of the problem.

The budget was hiked from $1.3 million to $4 million the following year (U.N. peacekeeping budgets extend from mid-year to mid-year], and its discipline staff apparently is more than doubling, from 7 to 16.

The peacekeeping mission’s management noted that a full-time “dedicated reporting officer,” responsible for keeping track of SEA  allegations, was also appointed in October 2016 -- which, as it happens, was about a month after the OIOS inspectors started their examination of how MINUSCA was faring.

What none of the management defenses note, however, is why grave and reputation-damaging crimes such as sexual abuse, including the rape of children, had to wait on the slow grinding of the U.N. budgetary cycle rather than get immediate emergency financial attention.

In response to questions from Fox News, U.N. peacekeeping officials indicated in carefully worded general terms that the kind of lapses, delays and bizarre lack of attention spotlighted in the watchdog OIOS report  on MINUSCA were not happening at  the other 15 U.N. peacekeeping missions around the world.

As their response put it:  “All finalized OIOS internal audit reports on Conduct and Discipline are in line with the implementation of our . . . strategy, including public outreach activities. There are no audits of Conduct and Discipline in progress.”