WHO employees took part in Congo sex abuses in Ebola crisis, report says

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By Reuters

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<https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/28/africa/who-aid-workers-sexual-abuse-congo-intl/index.html>

More than 80 aid workers including some employed by the World Health Organization (WHO) were involved in incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation during an Ebola crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, an independent commission said on Tuesday.

The probe was prompted by an investigation last year by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and The New Humanitarian in which more than 50 women accused aid workers from the WHO and other charities of demanding sex in exchange for jobs between 2018-2020.

In its long-awaited report, the commission found that some 21 of 83 alleged perpetrators were employed by the WHO, and that the abuses, which included nine allegations of rape, were committed by both national and international staff.

"The review team has established that the presumed victims were promised jobs in exchange for sexual relations or in order to keep their jobs," commission member Malick Coulibaly told a press briefing. Many of the male perpetrators refused to use a condom and 29 of the women became pregnant and some were forced to later abort by their abusers, he added.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who has pledged zero tolerance on sexual abuse and is said to be seeking a second term at the United Nations health body, said the report made "harrowing reading" and apologized to the victims.

"What happened to you should never happen to anyone. It is inexcusable. It is my top priority to ensure that the perpetrators are not excused but are held to account," he said, promising further steps.

Regional director Matshidiso Moeti said the health body was "humbled, horrified and heartbroken" by the findings.

The known perpetrators have been banned from future WHO employment while the contracts of the four remaining people employed by the body have been terminated, officials said.

One girl, a 14-year-old named as "Jolianne" in the report, told the commission she was selling phone recharge cards on the side of the road in April 2019 in Mangina when a WHO driver offered her a ride home. Instead he took her to a hotel where she says he raped her and later gave birth to his child.

Some women, who indicated that they were already employed, told the review team that they continued to be sexually harassed by men in supervisory positions who forced them to have sex to keep their jobs, get paid or get a better paid position.

Some said they had been dismissed for refusing to have sex while others did not get the jobs they wanted even after having sexual relations.

Alleged victims "were not provided with the necessary support and assistance required for such degrading experiences," the report said.

In June last year Congo's government announced the end of the two-year outbreak that killed more than 2,200 people - the second-largest Ebola outbreak since the virus was identified in 1976. Congo and other aid agencies have also pledged investigations into the incidents of sex abuse.

Congo's minister of human rights did not immediately respond to a request for comment.