

Statement by Ambassador Isobel Coleman

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Wednesday, April 13, 2016

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cardin and distinguished members of the Committee for inviting me to testify today on the urgent, and shameful, issue of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN Peacekeepers.

Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to travel with Ambassador Power to the Central African Republic to witness the peaceful handover of power to the country's newly-elected leader, President Touadera. In many ways, the trip underscored both the best, and the very worst, of United Nations peacekeeping operations. The presence of UN peacekeepers has been crucial in stanching the ethnic violence that has wracked the Central African Republic, which has resulted in thousands of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Today, the UN's peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, is not only keeping a fragile peace, but working with the new government to extend state authority, prepare for the demobilization and disarmament of militias, and build local capacity so that CAR can begin the long process of standing on its own feet.

Yet as we all know, some MINUSCA troops have also been implicated in allegations of horrific sexual abuses, preying on the very people they have been sent to protect. During my time in CAR, Ambassador Power and I traveled to Bambari and visited with the families of some of the victims of that abuse. Their descriptions of the violence their loved ones have experienced at the hands of peacekeepers were powerful personal accounts that, for me, cut through all the statistics, the handwringing and frankly, the excuses about why this scourge has continued to happen. On that very same day, a host of additional allegations from the 2013 – 2015 time period came to light of abuses in Kemo prefecture – allegations that can only be described as gut-wrenching and sickening.

Sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers is not a new problem. It has plagued missions from Bosnia to Haiti, to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the Central African Republic. Let me read to you just one passage from an internal UN report documenting sexual abuse among peacekeepers:

“Sexual exploitation and abuse mostly involves the exchange of sex for money (on average \$1-\$3 per encounter), or for food (the report notes as little as two eggs from a soldier's rations)... Some young girls talked of “rape disguised as prostitution”, in which they said they were raped and given money or food afterwards to give the rape the appearance of a consensual transaction.” These words, I'm sorry to say, are from the Zeid Report, published by the UN in 2005. We know from the scope of current allegations that now, more than a decade later, these

very same offenses are still occurring. Despite years of UN leaders insisting on “zero tolerance,” a culture of impunity has been allowed to fester.

When Ambassador Power asked me last year to lead our mission’s efforts in helping to establish a new paradigm for tackling this scourge, it was clear that an unacceptable lack of transparency and accountability were at the heart of the problem. Yes, the UN published an annual report tallying the numbers and types of SEA incidents by peacekeeping mission, but under pressure from the troop contributing countries themselves, it withheld the nationality of alleged perpetrators. That made it difficult for Member States to take collective action on tracking the status of investigations and the outcome of disciplinary action or other actions to hold perpetrators to account, and assessing the appropriateness of steps taken by the UN to address the issue. In short, without transparency, real accountability was at best, inconsistent. But that, finally, is changing.

Last year, USUN led negotiations in the General Assembly for a breakthrough on transparency, gaining consensus among Member States to support the Secretary General in his intent to name countries in his annual SEA report – a long-overdue step. As of March, the UN now posts credible allegations on its website, along with the nationality of the alleged perpetrators. With this information, we are pursuing a comprehensive approach as outlined earlier by PDAS Jacobson, to track individual cases and follow up with the appropriate authorities, including through engagement in capitals, to determine the status of investigations and encourage effective judicial proceedings where appropriate. This is part of our broader interagency effort to improve peacekeeping performance and accountability per the Presidential Policy Memorandum on U.S. Support to UN Peace Operations.

In March, in an effort to broaden responsibility within the UN, USUN brought the issue of SEA to the Security Council, which adopted UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2272 – another significant step forward for accountability. The resolution endorses the Secretary General’s decision to repatriate peacekeeping units that have demonstrated a pattern of abuse – which is a clear indication of insufficient command and control. Going further, UNSCR 2272 empowers the Secretary General to repatriate *all* troops from a mission from a particular TCC or PCC whose personnel are the subject of an allegation if that TCC or PCC is not taking appropriate steps to investigate SEA allegations against its personnel or, when warranted, has not held the perpetrators accountable or has not informed the Secretary General of the progress of its investigations or of other actions taken. In such situations, it requests the Secretary-General to seek replacement of those troops or police with personnel from another contributing country.

Our goal is to see UNSCR 2272 implemented fully as a means of powerful prevention by ending once and for all the culture of impunity for SEA in peacekeeping that has persisted for too long. Already, we are seeing positive signs of change, with the UN having repatriated military units from MINUSCA for SEA. It has alerted the relevant contributing countries that the UN is

conducting its review of these most recent additional allegations against UN peacekeepers in CAR to repatriate peacekeepers if there is a pattern of abuse.

The other part of this strategy, as also noted earlier, is to increase the overall supply of peacekeepers such that when military units or contingents are repatriated, others that are well trained and vetted are available to deploy quickly to take their place. President Obama's Peacekeeping Summit at the UN last September resulted in new pledges to peacekeeping of over 40,000 military and police personnel – an increase in supply that over time will allow the UN to more aggressively address a broad range of performance and peacekeeping issues, in addition to SEA.

The UN has come a long way in recent years in responding to the scourge of SEA, with strong support from the United States. It has built up its investigative capabilities, increased training and vetting of troops, implemented greater community outreach to increase awareness about SEA and reporting mechanisms, instituted penalties for offenders, and is improving victim's assistance. Clearly, given the shocking scale and gravity of the SEA incidents being reported from CAR and other missions, these actions are necessary but by themselves are not sufficient to address the crisis. The UN's recent commitments to greater transparency and accountability must result in a long-overdue sea change that ends impunity. Our work is not done. We continue to make it our highest priority both in New York at the UN and bilaterally to see perpetrators held to account and sorely lacking integrity restored to peacekeeping.