UN sexual abuse: more allegations, more bureaucratic process in Ban's latest report

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United Nations personnel, including peacekeepers in 10 UN missions around the world, were embroiled in 99 new allegations of sexual exploitation and/or abuse last year—nearly one-quarter more than in 2014, according to the latest edition of an annual report  on the ugly issue unveiled by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

The substantial uptick after years of a Ban-led “zero tolerance”  campaign against the crimes means, the report blandly states, “that more needs to be done to reduce the number of allegations, and more importantly, the number of victims affected” -- though the full victim tally is not presented in the 38-page document.

That conclusion will hardly come as a surprise to a growing array of critics that has included some of the UN’s own internal investigators, and an independent panel that last December castigated specific UN senior officials for their [inaction and even coverup of sexual abuse allegations](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/12/18/independent-panel-blasts-u-n-for-inaction-and-cover-up-in-sex-abuse-cases.html) against non-UN troops under a Security Council mandate in the Central African Republic.

Ban’s latest document decorously says that  the Central African Republic review is “outside the scope of the present report ,” which means, among other things, that the lapses by UN officials are not discussed. Neither is the main thrust of the review, which is that sexual abuse in such circumstances—and the reviewers included the UN in this situation—should be considered a human rights abuse demanding immediate action, rather than a possible criminal matter, subject to the UN’s lengthy and stifling internal justice process.

Time and again the critics have decried a “culture of silence” within the world organization over the sexual abuse issue and raised loud demands for reform that so far have never come to fruition.

 Whether they will be any happier this time is a good question. Ban’s report, as it has in the past, notes that only a handful of the cases have been substantiated—which critics blame on the fact that  the UN itself, or the peacekeepers and the countries that supply them, do most of the investigating.

 Nonetheless, Ban’s document does go to new lengths—bold by previous UN standards-- to identify the nationalities of  peacekeepers and police alleged to have committed offenses—the most frequently mentioned nation is the Democratic Republic of Congo, followed by Morocco and South Africa. The report says that the name-and-shame details will soon also be available on a UN website.

Last month the UN announced that it was sending home about 120 of its Democratic Republic of Congo peacekeepers from the Central African Republic.

The UN Secretariat also claims to be accelerating efforts at training  programs to combat sexual abuse; push the screening of peacekeepers and others for evidence of past abuse charges; working hard to install “immediate” response” units  among peacekeeping missions to collect evidence; and pushing to make countries that supply peacekeeping troops move faster  at investigating allegations against their forces or hand the job back to the UN itself.

It further hails a measure Ban has already taken, the appointment of a  temporary special coordinator to improve the UN’s  performance on dealing with sexual abuse.

The same Ban report , however, reveals that even the more aggressive reforms that it claims focus on “accountability and transparency” in dealing with sexual abuse problems are still often caught up in bureaucratic procedures and lengthy consensus building, require elaborate consent and action by UN member states, and also are short of money, especially when it comes to helping  the usually poor and powerless victims, many of them under-age.

 Examples:

* A “Secretariat-wide communications and public information strategy” to broadcast the UN’s zero-tolerance  message was “developed” in 2015, but it is still in unspecified “final stages of completion”
* UN “technical means” for vetting large numbers of peacekeepers and police for prior sexual abuse offense was developed in 2015 but the report only says full operation will “commence” in first-quarter 2016. The UN currently has more than 100,000 military and policy personnel on peacekeeping duty.
* “Guidelines” to monitor accountability for sexual abuse allegations “are being developed,” to be “finalized” this year, with nothing said about implementation

Indeed, the report tails off sharply in describing UN efforts to establish what it opaquely calls “complaint reception mechanisms,” i.e., ways for abused victims to report assaults  to the UN missions where the victimizers may still be working.

As Ban’s report opaquely puts it,  the UN has provided a “framework” to “support missions in establishing such channels of complaint. But “missions have identified common challenges, including a lack of knowledge of reporting mechanisms, difficulties reaching communities for outreach efforts, and reluctance to report transactional sex. The [UN] Department of Field Support will continue to monitor progress.”

The lack of security for victims in reporting sex crimes and abuse is one major reason why many critics charge that the sexual abuse issue is still vastly under-reported in the UN’s world, and the number of  allegations that make it through the substantiation process remains dramatically low.

 In addition, “transactional sex,” i.e. sex in exchange for money, food, or even more basic necessities such as water, is one of the most omnipresent temptations to abuse in the strife-battered countries where UN peacekeepers and other officials operate; according to UN protocols, “transactional sex” with minors is automatically supposed to be considered as rape.

 In other words, “reluctance to report transactional sex”  can be exactly  part of the “culture of silence” that UN critics are  condemning.

 Just as often, Ban’s report kicks back to UN member states the responsibility to police the peacekeepers—which is logical since most troop-supplying nations insist on that right, but often do little about it, whereas the victims in countries where the UN works have no legal redress.

 As the report puts it, “there is therefore a need for member states to explore alternative means to achieve accountability, including extraterritorial jurisdiction for United Nations personnel who commit sex crimes.”

As a result of those paradoxes, one of the most vocal of the UN critics has [already proposed taking away entirely from the UN the investigation of all sex crime or abuse allegations against its personnel](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/01/27/radical-solution-proposed-for-un-sex-abuse-crisis.html), and put them in the hands of an independent high-level board.

 The organization, AIDS-Free World, through a campaign known as Code Blue, has also had savage things to say about Ban’s latest report, which it obtained in advance of the U.N.’s publication.

 Among other things, it calls the document “inertia masquerading as action,” and asserts that “nothing in the report suggests the kind of change that needs to happen to extirpate peacekeeping sexual exploitation and abuse, once and for all.”

 AIDS-Free World co-director Paula Donovan told Fox News, “civilians can’t wait any longer for the UN to put incremental changes in place.”

 Ban’s report, on the other hand, says they will.