‘Peacekeeper Babies’ an Unintended Consequence of Sending in the United Nations

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The U.N. peacekeepers arrive; months later, some leave infants behind. Now the United Nations has quietly started to offer DNA testing to help prove paternity claims and ensure support for the so-called “peacekeeper babies.”

It’s a delicate step, as countries that contribute U.N. troops might not welcome a practice that could prove not only fatherhood but wrongdoing. Of the dozen paternity claims received last year, four were associated with alleged sexual abuse of a minor.

The new effort comes a decade after a groundbreaking report on sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers suggested that the U.N. secretary-general be authorized to “require DNA and other tests to establish paternity” so peacekeepers would be pressured to support the children they “father and abandon.”

Many of the children are in a desperate financial situation, said the report by Zeid Raad al-Hussein, now the U.N.’s human rights chief and a former peacekeeper himself.

No one knows how many children have been fathered by U.N. peacekeepers over the decades in some of the world’s most troubled places. About 125,000 peacekeepers are deployed in 16 locations, almost all in Africa or the Middle East. Sexual abuse and exploitation remains a problem, with little support available for victims.

While the U.N. has worked with member states before on paternity claims, it only started offering a DNA collection protocol, and testing kits, last year.

But it doesn’t go as far as the action urged by a U.N.-commissioned report that was leaked publicly this spring. A “DNA data bank for all troops would be the most foolproof method” for tackling paternity claims, it said.

Instead, the U.N., which has no standing army, is allowing troop-contributing countries to decide how much of an effort to make to pursue paternity claims.

It began with a cable that the peacekeeping office sent to its missions in January 2014. A U.N. report obtained this month by The Associated Press described the cable as offering “guidance on assistance in instances of paternity claims involving current or former members of peacekeeping missions in terms of DNA testing.”

On Friday, U.N. officials explained how it works: A member state is asked if they are able to do DNA testing or whether the U.N. should do it. The mother, child and possible father are swabbed. Results are compared.

The testing has not been made mandatory. Since the U.N. started pressing states to follow up on pending paternity issues, the response rate is just 20 percent.

Cooperation in a possible criminal case, such as rape, could be more challenging. The U.N. has no authority to conduct criminal investigations and can’t force a country to do DNA testing.

Almost half of the paternity claims reported since January 2010 – 14 out of 29 – were made by minors who said they’ had been sexually abused. The U.N., nervous about angering member states amid a persistent need for peacekeepers, does not even list the countries whose troops are accused. Officials say that could change as soon as next year.

Responses to the DNA testing are mixed. Ban Ki-moon’s latest annual report on combating sexual abuse and exploitation in the U.N. system, released in February, said “one member state in particular has been very proactive.”

The country was not identified. But a report on Public Radio International’s “The World” in August said the U.N. mission in Haiti had brought seven local women with their children to the capital, Port-au-Prince, for DNA tests. The report said peacekeepers from Uruguay had been asked to submit DNA samples. Uruguay’s mission to the U.N. did not reply to an AP request for comment.

Sexual relationships between peacekeepers and locals are never acceptable, Uruguayan Col. Girardo Frigossi was quoted as saying.

The U.N. appears to agree. Asked Friday whom peacekeepers, who are in the field for up to a year at a time, can have sex with, one official said, “No one.” Except, the official then clarified, with each other. Or with those who don’t create an imbalance of power.

“I don’t see any downsides” for DNA testing, said Alison Giffen, co-director of the Future of Peace Operations program for the Washington-based Stimson Center think tank. The evidence could help hold people to account but also disprove any false claims, she said.

“When we raise the darker side of peacekeeping, that can be embarrassing for troop-contributing countries,” but the U.N. zero tolerance policy is clear, she said. “They know what they’re signing up for.”

Peacekeeping missions also include U.N. staffers who are not troops or police. In his report a decade ago, Zeid proposed a paternity claim system that gave those possible fathers a narrow choice. “The staff member would have to either acknowledge the claim or to submit to a DNA test to prove that the allegation was ill-founded,” he wrote. Money for child support could be taken from the U.N. staffer’s salary.

Ban has also suggested creating a U.N. fund to help support children left behind, especially in cases where countries fail to act on paternity claims.

It is not clear if the U.N. is following those suggestions. Even when a DNA match is made, legal proceedings are needed to officially recognize the relationship. It is not known whether any peacekeepers are regularly paying child support.

Ban’s report in February did report signs of progress: “positive matches that have established paternity in four instances and ruled it out in two; results remain pending in seven more instances.”

“Yet hurdles remain,” he continued, “as some of the alleged fathers refuse to be tested.”