Panel Blasts U.N. Over Handling of Central Africa Peacekeeper Abuse

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The United Nations and its agencies grossly mishandled allegations of child sexual abuse by international peacekeepers in the Central African Republic, an independent review panel said in a report released on Thursday.

At least 13 French soldiers, two from Equatorial Guinea and three Chadian troops were implicated in the alleged abuse of children between December 2013 and June 2014, according to a U.N. report leaked in April.

The peacekeepers were not under United Nations command at the time, but the U.N. has come under fire for its handling of the allegations, including its investigation of the U.N. official who alerted French authorities to the charges.

The U.N. only began speaking openly about the year-old charges after media organizations began reporting on them in April. At that point, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon ordered an independent investigation of the U.N. treatment of the allegations.

In its findings, the three-member review panel harshly criticized the way the U.N. and its agencies dealt with the alleged abuse, calling it "seriously flawed" and a "gross institutional failure." It said three senior U.N. officials had abused their authority by failing to take action.

Ban said he accepted the report's findings.

"The report depicts a United Nations that failed to respond meaningfully when faced with information about reprehensible crimes against vulnerable children," he said. "I express my profound regret that these children were betrayed by the very people sent to protect them."

U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power said in a statement that the report painted a "troubling picture of a woefully inadequate response by the U.N. to credible allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse. We are horrified by the panel’s findings of inaction around these crimes."

British Ambassador Matthew Rycroft said on Twitter that the "U.N. has failed to protect most vulnerable – this is unacceptable."

The panel said investigating sexual abuse by peacekeepers, whether or not those troops have a U.N. mandate, is obligatory because such actions can constitute a "serious human rights violation."

But the allegations were "passed from desk to desk, inbox to inbox, across multiple U.N. offices, with no one willing to take responsibility."

The panel was particularly harsh about the head of the Human Rights and Justice Section (HRJS) of the U.N. mission and the head of the mission itself, saying they had abused their authority. Neither of them was available for comment, and it was not immediately clear where they were.

"HRJS obscured the allegations by only reporting them in the context of broad, thematic reports that also included violations by other international troops," the panel said.

UNICEF, the U.N. children's fund, provided inadequate trauma support to the alleged child victims after the allegations surfaced, offering only a two-hour counseling session by a local organization, it said.

The panel exonerated Anders Kompass, the U.N. official in Geneva who sent the initial U.N. report on the abuse allegations to French authorities last year. Kompass "did not act outside of his authority," the panel found.

The panel report criticized the U.N. for investigating Kompass over the leak rather than focusing on the abuse charges themselves. It said the head of the U.N. Office of Internal Oversight Services, the U.N. oversight body, had abused her authority in the manner in which Kompass was investigated.

A French criminal investigation of the allegations against French troops is underway.

France intervened in Central African Republic, a former colony, over two years ago to stem violence between Christian militias and largely Muslim Seleka rebels who had seized power. It started withdrawing some of its 2,000 troops this year, handing over to U.N. peacekeepers.