**UN suspends five in Congo for contract violations**

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UNITED NATIONS, Aug 7 (Reuters) - Five U.N. staff members have been suspended in the Democratic Republic of the Congo over allegations that they steered contracts to particular vendors, the United Nations said on Tuesday.

All five are civilian U.N. staff members and were suspended after investigations conducted by the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services, the U.N watchdog, a U.N. statement said.

A U.N. official said they were accused of "improper collusion with vendors," by awarding contracts to certain suppliers in violation of U.N. regulations.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, did not give further details.

The action follows accusations that peacekeepers and other U.N. staff in the Congo, beginning in 2005, had sex with women and girls in exchange for food.

More recently, the U.N. investigated allegations that peacekeepers traded food and even military intelligence with Rwandan Hutu rebels in return for gold.

Punishment of peacekeepers found to have committed crimes while serving with the United Nations is left to the discretion of their home countries. But the United Nations can discipline its own civilian staff, which includes procurement officials.

Congo is currently the largest U.N. peacekeeping mission, with more than 17,000 troops in the vast central African country.

Despite successful polls last year that resulted in Joseph Kabila becoming Congo's first democratically elected president in over 40 years, fears are growing of a return to war in the eastern regions. The east suffers from violence at the hands of armed militias, foreign rebel groups, and the national Congo army.

The U.N. force has been in the Congo since it helped to end a 1998-2002 civil war that involved neighboring countries.