UN Peacekeeper Sex Scandal: A Lebanese Affair, Too

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Now

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United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in conflict zones around the world are “regularly” engaging in “sexual exploitation and abuse” of members of their host communities, according to a [report](https://oios.un.org/page/download2/id/13) [*pdf*] released Monday by the UN’s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS).

Of 480 allegations identified in the report between 2008 and 2013 — which ranged from paying for sex to rape — over a third (36%) involved victims under the age of 18. In one case in Haiti profiled as a “case study,” peacekeepers from the Pakistani contingent of the force were said to have abducted and raped a 13-year-old boy. In the Liberian city of Monrovia, over a quarter of women aged 18-30 had engaged in paid sex with UN peacekeepers. The UN forbade its staff from transactional sex worldwide in a 2003 bulletin, and 19 servicepeople were dismissed for sexual violations from 2008 to 2013.

Though the vast majority of cases concerned peacekeepers in African nations — those in the Democratic Republic of Congo being the most numerous — it appears violations have also been committed by members of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) based in south Lebanon. There were no substantiated allegations in the OIOS report (no data was provided on unsubstantiated ones), and a UNIFIL spokesperson denied knowledge of any occurring, but NOW learned independently of two separate claims of UNIFIL troops paying for sex in Lebanon.

“I met one woman in prostitution who said that she was approached by a UNIFIL soldier, and he and all his colleagues paid for sex,” said Ghada Jabbour, head of the anti-trafficking unit at [KAFA](http://www.kafa.org.lb/), a Lebanese NGO working against exploitation of and violence against women. “It was in a bar in south Lebanon, a regular bar […] she was bought for sex by many soldiers.”

While Jabbour said this was the only specific case she had come across, in general “one could assume that paying for sex is happening among [UNIFIL] soldiers, because it’s a huge number of men present in Lebanon, not necessarily with a family,” she told NOW. There are presently over 10,000 UNIFIL staff stationed in the country.

The second allegation was made by a civil society activist, who, requesting anonymity, told NOW he was leaving the popular B018 nightclub in Beirut one night in “either 2007 or 2008” when he wound up sharing a taxi with a man who identified himself as an Irish UNIFIL peacekeeper. Declaring that he wanted “girls” and was “willing to pay,” the peacekeeper arranged for the driver to take him to certain bars in the Hamra district known to be frequented by prostitutes. Coerced into helping the soldier, who started “getting really aggressive,” the activist accompanied him to the bars until he reached an agreement with a woman.

Significantly, the activist recalled the peacekeeper “was complaining about the costs and telling me that his friends went to Maameltein” — a notorious unofficial red light district 20km north of Beirut — “and found much better options at much better prices.” This would suggest this individual peacekeeper’s case was not a one-off.

Yet with little available data, just how exceptional or otherwise such examples are is difficult to ascertain. A UNIFIL soldier from the Indonesian contingent (the only respondent of 19 UNIFIL peacekeepers contacted by NOW via Facebook) said he was unaware of any instances of troops paying for sex in Lebanon, explaining that the rules against it were “very strict” and, at least as far as his fellow Indonesian Muslims were concerned, sex with prostitutes was “*haram*” [religiously prohibited].

For his part, UNIFIL spokesperson Andrea Tenenti told NOW there had been no sexual exploitation or abuse cases in Lebanon “as far as I know. I haven’t seen any reports on this specific subject within UNIFIL.”

Nonetheless, measures including a “gender unit” and a “conduct and discipline unit” are on hand to deal with potential cases should they arise, said Tenenti. Asked what disciplinary measures would be taken if a UNIFIL peacekeeper were found to be violating the rules, Tenenti told NOW it would “depend case by case,” as the verdict would ultimately have to come from headquarters in New York, following a prior internal investigation in Lebanon. The OIOS report identified this disciplinary system, with its “inherent” time delays, as “a principal challenge of the […] enforcement architecture.”

Beyond issues of enforcement, however, KAFA’s Jabbour told NOW the “root cause” of the phenomenon was the “demand” for prostitution itself, which is “something social and cultural.” In the long run, argues Jabbour, what’s needed is a broader overhaul of attitudes toward the concept of paying for sex.

“One should work on this, changing mentalities, and […] raising awareness that buying sex is a violation of one’s dignity, and is a form of exploitation and violence.”