‘I don’t know how many children I raped while working for the UN’

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Didier Bourguet shifts in his seat and adjusts his red tie. He is finding it hard to recall how many children he raped when he was working for the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2004: “I would say about 20, maybe 25. I didn’t count.”

Bourguet was earning $7,000 a month as head of logistics in the peacekeeping mission in Goma while getting locals to procure children for him. He had two assets that ensured children trusted him: he was white and he worked for the UN.

He said the sex was consensual but is unsure whether the children were afraid to say no: “I’m not sure. I don’t think so but I’m not sure. Could be.”

After the Congolese police arrested Bourguet and the French authorities jailed him for nine years in 2008, the UN made a public promise to help his victims. That promise was never kept.

The UN said it could not find the victims. But 14 years on, when we investigated UN sex abuse for Channel 4, it took only one afternoon for my producer to find four women whom Bourguet had raped when they were children.

Bourguet’s hunting ground was the slum around Goma airport where barefoot children in ragged clothes scamper through the alleyways.

Adults remember the rapes well. Valerie Safari was 14 when she used to sell bananas by the side of the road to pay for her education. Luring her with promises of help, for six months Bourguet took her to a hotel where he abused her.

“He was so old, as old as my father,” she whispered.

Bourguet, a civilian, was part of a culture of UN personnel having sex with prostitutes — including children. More than a decade on, that culture persists.

There have been thousands of allegations against civilian peacekeepers and even more against military ones — the “Blue Helmets”.

Yet the UN has recorded only 53 Blue Helmets who have been jailed for sexual offences. It is up to each troop-contributing country to convict its men, but there is institutional and national reluctance to prosecute those accused of sex crimes.

“The reality is there is no guarantee of criminal accountability for someone who commits rape inside a UN peacekeeping mission, despite a lot of effort by a lot of people and a strong commitment by the top reaches of the UN,” said Anthony Banbury, an academic and former UN assistant secretary-general.

This is a crime that knows no national boundaries. Francine was 15 when she got a job as a housekeeper for a UN worker in DRC. She soon learnt that sex was part of the job and fell pregnant. Her son is now five years old and has never met his father; Francine never heard from him again. She never reported the case to the UN.

In a forest near Bambari in the Central African Republic, Manda is squatting on a patch of scorched earth by a small straw hut in a makeshift refugee camp. Her family are among more than 1m Central Africans who have fled the fighting in the past few years.

Manda was 11 when she was repeatedly raped by a DRC peacekeeper: “I was wearing a nice dress. After he had sex with me he gave me money. He told me not to talk about it.” She got pregnant; her baby hangs from her breast. Her mother said they did not know how to report the case to the UN.

Not far away, 17-year old Mauricette is recovering from being gang-raped by Mauritanian peacekeepers at a checkpoint. She was interviewed by several UN employees, although she has not heard from them in months and does not know what has happened to the men accused of raping her.

“I thought the Blue Helmets were here to protect the population, not rape the population,” said her uncle, Ismael. “It’s not normal.”