**Number of victims in Congo mass rape increases: U.N.**

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UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - The number of reported victims of a recent mass rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo has grown by nearly a hundred over the last week, the United Nations said on Wednesday.

U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters in New York that the world body's MONUSCO peacekeeping force in Congo has received further reports of rapes committed over the course of several days in a town in the eastern part of the country, bringing the number well above the 154 reported last week.

"They (MONUSCO) have received by now reports of more than 240 victims of rape in the eastern Congo," Haq said.

MONUSCO has said it was only informed of the incident more than a week after it happened, even though they had a base just 20 miles from the scene in the country's violent east.

That led U.N. Security Council members to suggest, at an unscheduled meeting called last week by the United States and France, that the 20,000-strong MONUSCO force needed at least to improve its communications with the local population.

One senior Western diplomat said on condition of anonymity that there was a "robust discussion" underway at the United Nations about why it took MONUSCO so long to learn about the rapes, and for the Security Council to be informed.

Rebels from the Mai Mai militia and Rwandan Hutu FDLR occupied the town of Luvungi in North Kivu province from July 30 to August 3.

U.N. officials have said that they first learned of the rapes on August 12. But a report from the U.N. humanitarian agency OCHA dated August 10 -- two days earlier -- refers to the reported rapes of at least 25 people.

One aid group has said many women were gang-raped by between two and six armed men.

The attack has stung the United Nations, whose peacekeeping force in Congo is its largest anywhere. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has made protecting civilians and combating sexual violence central themes of his stewardship of the world body.