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ALLEGATION OF “WIDESPREAD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION” IN WEST AFRICA REFUGEE CAMPS NOT CONFIRMED BY UNITED NATIONS INVESTIGATION

Preventive Measures Recommended to Alleviate Vulnerability of Refugees

New York - The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) of the United Nations has recently concluded an investigation into alleged sexual exploitation of refugees by humanitarian aid workers and peacekeepers in refugee camps in West Africa. The investigation, conducted at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), arose from a report by two consultants who had been commissioned by UNHCR and Save the Children (UK) to study the questions of girl mothers, sexual violence and exploitation in the refugee communities in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The allegation in the report of widespread sexual exploitation of refugees was not confirmed by the investigation. However, OIOS has confirmed that the conditions in the camps and in refugee communities in the three countries make refugees vulnerable to sexual and other forms of exploitation and such vulnerability increases if refugees are female and young. A number of remedial and preventive measures are being implemented by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies as well as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

The objectives of the OIOS investigation included ascertaining whether or not allegations of sexual exploitation, by aid workers, including UNHCR and NGO staff, and by peacekeepers could be substantiated. It also included ascertaining whether the problem was “widespread” as alleged, what the contributing factors were and whether evidence of criminal and/or administrative misconduct could be obtained. Specifically, OIOS was requested to determine whether sufficient evidence of such wrongdoing could be established, so that criminal and/or disciplinary charges could be brought against specific persons.

The investigation team fully investigated 43 cases of possible sexual exploitation, of which 10 cases were substantiated by the evidence. No allegation against any United Nations staff member could be substantiated. The team identified several factors, which contribute to sexual exploitation in refugee communities, including aspects of refugee camp life,

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camp structure, camp security, food and services distribution, employment opportunities, profiles of camp workers and the quality and quantities of food and other relief items distributed.

By reporting that sexual exploitation is widespread without attempting to verify any of the information given to the consultants and based on little or no evidence, the consultants' report unfairly tarnished the reputation and credibility of the large majority of aid-workers, national and international staff of United Nations agencies and NGOs and United Nations peacekeepers in West Africa who work diligently under difficult circumstances. However, OIOS strongly confirms that the issue of sexual exploitation is a significant one — not just in West Africa as our investigation has found — but wherever refugees find themselves in similarly desperate circumstances.

OIOS assembled an investigation team from eight countries comprising professional investigators, lawyers, refugee protection and human rights specialists, translators and a paediatric trauma specialist. The investigation team conducted its operations between February and July 2002. Despite weeks of effort, the stories reported by the consultants could not be substantiated, as information was vague and general. The few sources that could be traced were mainly relating third-hand stories of events they had not witnessed themselves.

The investigation team conducted extensive interviews of many potential witnesses, victims and others thought to have relevant information, and was able to develop new allegations of sexual exploitation including one of sodomy of a 14 year-old returnee boy by a peacekeeper in Sierra Leone, who has since been repatriated. Another allegation concerned the rape of a 14 year-old refugee girl by an NGO worker in Guinea -- the case has been referred to the NGO for action and is to be separately referred to the local police. Another case involved a United Nations Volunteer working for UNHCR in Guinea who was in an exploitative relationship with a refugee girl when she was 15 years old. He denied paternity and support to a child born to the refugee, but acknowledged the relationship. His working relationship with UNHCR has since been terminated.

A significant number of the cases investigated involved relationships between refugee girls and aid workers, especially schoolteachers and those involved in the distribution of food and non-food items. It should be noted that some of the allegations related to aid workers who are themselves refugees.

Measures taken by UNHCR and others to address the issue includes the establishment of a task force on sexual exploitation of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which coordinates international responses to humanitarian crises. Other measures include codes of conduct prohibiting exploitation, action against staff members suspected of involvement in sexual exploitation and training of staff and refugees.

OIOS has made 17 recommendations to assist UNHCR and its partners in further addressing the issue and to follow up on cases with the relevant organizations employing staff who have been using their position for exploitative purposes. OIOS strongly urges UNHCR, other humanitarian agencies, as well as the Department of Peacekeeping

Operations and the IASC to pursue corrective actions including emphasis on timely detection and resolution of reports of sexual exploitation.