

Christian Saunders: “Sexual exploitation and abuse causes trauma and destroys the lives of people already facing immense everyday difficulties”

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On his second day in Beni, this Tuesday, January 21, Christian Saunders, Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, met with members of the Community-Based Complaints Network (CBCN).

For almost two hours, the discussions focused on several topics, including the experience of managing reports concerning cases of gender-based violence, as well as cases of sexual exploitation and abuse involving United Nations personnel.

The discussions also provided an opportunity to explore ways to strengthen prevention efforts, improve victim support, and identify challenges faced by the network in carrying out its mission.

“We shared experiences within the community, especially stories of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. We also discussed the challenges we face as members of the community-based complaints network, particularly with regard to prevention efforts and victim support in our community,” underlined Eugénie Kavugho, vice-president of the CBCN.

Lack of financial resources, a major obstacle for CBCNs

During discussions, members of the Community -Based Complaints Network (CBCN) highlighted the challenges they face in sustaining their activities, in particular the lack of financial resources.

Eugénie Kavugho, vice-president of the network, expressed their concerns: “We recommended having financial autonomy which allows us to alert and prevent, even in the absence of funding or support from United Nations agencies. It is essential that we can support our communities on our own and continue to raise awareness about sexual exploitation and abuse.”

She also reiterated the importance of implementing income-generating activities to guarantee the continuity of interventions, even after the departure of MONUSCO or other UN entities.

The UN reaffirms its commitment against sexual exploitation and abuse in Beni

During his visit to Beni, Christian Saunders reiterated the importance of this fight for the UN and its leadership. He stressed that this fight is not only a priority for the organization, but also a moral responsibility towards the people it is committed to protecting: “The mission of the Blue Helmets is to protect the population and restore peace. If the protector becomes the perpetrator, it is inexcusable. Sexual exploitation and abuse causes trauma and destroys the lives of people already facing tremendous daily difficulties,” he said.

According to him, it is urgent to put an end to all forms of violence against the inhabitants of Beni, a region which has already suffered greatly. “It is time to restore peace and build an environment where the rights of every individual are respected,” he added.

These remarks underline the United Nations' desire to build trust with local communities and ensure that its actions fully reflect its mission: to protect and support vulnerable populations.

Fight against sexual exploitation and abuse: progress by the UN

The Special Coordinator for Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Christian Saunders, notes, however, "there has been some limited progress" made in the fight against this scourge, attributing this progress to increased awareness and commitment among the military, police and civilian personnel of the Organization: "We have recorded some progress in the fight against sexual abuse and violence. However, it is essential to maintain this momentum by strengthening leadership, mobilizing collective will, and raising awareness of the harmful consequences, pain and suffering that these acts inflict on victims and communities," he said. Christian Saunders also reiterated his personal commitment, adding: "This is my third visit in two years, and I will continue coming here so that, together, we can continue this fight."

Awareness raising and training: essential tools against sexual exploitation and abuse

In the meantime, the fight against sexual exploitation and abuse continues, armed with a number of tools including awareness and education. These efforts target both UN personnel and local communities, who must be aware of the devastating effects of these acts, particularly in regions where girls and women already bear the brunt of decades of insecurity, violence and trauma: "We have undertaken actions in this area, particularly in terms of information, training, education, and capacity building of members of the community-based complaints network. This includes how to receive community alerts, inform the community of their rights, and report incidents. United Nations agencies, like UNFPA, are also working to assist victims. We also work closely with countries that send their troops or police to the DRC, and we have redoubled our efforts to raise awareness and strengthen their commitment on this issue," said Christian Saunders.

Before leaving Beni for Goma, Christian Saunders reaffirmed the importance of collective mobilization and continuous efforts to combat this scourge, while emphasizing that bringing peace to the region is essential to bring about lasting change and restore the dignity of communities affected.