

“Voices from the Field”

Briefing by United Nations Field Victims’ Rights Advocates and dedicated Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Coordinators

28 October 2020 (10:00-11:30am EST) Microsoft Teams

Field Victims’ Rights Advocates in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan and dedicated inter-agency PSEA coordinators in South Sudan, Lebanon and Bangladesh/Cox’s Bazar provided overviews of the progress, good practices and challenges in coordinating and delivering system-wide provision of assistance and support to victims in line with the Secretary-General’s victim-centred strategy to address sexual exploitation and abuse. The briefing, which was also addressed by the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse, Mr. Pablo de Greiff, a member of the Secretary-General’s Civil Society Board of Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Member State sponsors, provided a platform to identify the most significant gaps and possible steps forward to strengthen assistance and support for victims.

Summary notes

A victim-centred approach to addressing sexual exploitation and abuse

1. The Victims’ Rights Advocate (VRA) welcomed participants and expressed appreciation to the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Republic of South Africa, the United Kingdom and the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations’ response to sexual exploitation and abuse for co-sponsoring the event. The VRA recalled the Secretary-General’s new approach to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse introduced in 2017, and the role of the Victims’ Rights Advocate, supported by advocates on the ground in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti and South Sudan. The work extended to supporting victims of all United Nations personnel, uniformed, civilian, international and national across the United Nations system in peacekeeping, humanitarian and development settings. The VRA had brought together three of the four Field Victims’ Rights Advocates, and three inter-agency Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Coordinators, to focus on implementation of the Secretary-General’s strategy on the ground, particularly the ways in which the imperative of placing the rights and dignity of victims at the forefront has been realized in practical terms.
2. The VRA noted that in the three years since the creation of the mandate, good progress in institutionalizing a system-wide victim-centred approach had been made. This included the development of policies and tools, such as the Victims’ Assistance Protocol, and practical support facilitated by the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. The Office of the Victims’ Rights Advocate conducted a pilot mapping of availability of assistance for victims in 13 countries with varying United Nations presences. This showed there are gaps especially in remote areas and those affected by conflict or health and other emergencies. There is also an urgent need for a system-wide tool to track victims, the assistance they receive and available service providers. The mapping revealed challenges in realizing accountability, as well as resolving paternity and maintenance claims for children born of sexual exploitation and abuse. She called for the strengthening of the role of Field Victims’ Rights Advocates (FVRAs) as the main contact for all victims on the ground, as well as the

designation of additional victims' rights advocates and system-wide Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Coordinators in other contexts.

3. The Special Coordinator (SC) reaffirmed the Secretary-General's determination to address sexual exploitation and abuse, and recalled his strategy consisting of four themes: placing the rights and dignity of victims at the centre; addressing impunity; building partnerships; and communicating more effectively, including to build understanding of how such misconducts relate to gender imbalances and other structural factors. The importance of bridging policy with work in the field, and support for those at the frontlines was underscored. As a standards-based organization, the United Nations needed to train and hire staff to meet those standards. It also required the correct mindset, policies, programmes, organizational structure and people to translate rhetoric into practice. On progress, the SC referred to the creation of the VRA and FVRAs and the ClearCheck screening system. The presence of FVRAs and system-wide coordinators for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse made a difference, but adequate resourcing and an increased presence of these actors in the field was needed. The SC reiterated the Secretary-General's call on Member States to collaborate with the United Nations in addressing sexual exploitation and abuse.

Provision of assistance to victims: progress and challenges

4. The FVRAs stated that for victims knowing there is a someone they can turn to in the United Nations, who is responsible for making sure that their rights and dignity are respected was essential. FVRAs conducted regular community- awareness raising sessions so that communities and potential victims knew how to contact them. Efforts in the Central African Republic had encouraged victims, of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel, or their legal guardians, contacting the FVRA to seek assistance. FVRAs described how they meet regularly meet with victims and listen to their concerns and expectations. FVRAs also stressed the importance of keeping victims regularly informed and providing feedback on their cases, and recording updates in the Victim Assistance Tracking System (available in mission settings).
5. Over the past three years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 65 victims had received some form of assistance and support, mostly involving medical, psycho-social and logistical support, including the provision of accommodation and transportation for medical care and court appearances. Referrals to local service providers were made in most cases through UNICEF and UNFPA. Some Member States had also facilitated investigations by bringing in national focal points to interview victims and facilitate the resolution of cases. The FVRA in the Central African Republic provided examples of coordination with UN entities and the Government to ensure that assistance provided was timely and of decent quality. These included the payment of a victim's medical bills, and the provision of prenatal kits through the support of local partner organizations.
6. Highlighting the importance of policy guidance provided by the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate, the FVRAs also identified challenges in translating policy into practice on the ground. The FVRA in South Sudan raised difficulties in determining the duration of assistance for victims, especially when investigations could last several years. The quality of services provided by local partners to whom victims were referred also varied significantly depending

on the location. In remote areas, basic services were at times non-existent. Significant gaps in the provision of assistance and support for victims were identified in the areas of shelter, psychosocial support, quality of medical care, security, and the provision of legal assistance and services. In this context, a shared challenge was the lack of adequate and sustainable funding and resources to provide for the assistance and support to victims, which was required for the United Nations to move from lip service to actual assistance, and for victims to become survivors.

Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

7. FVRAs reflected on the benefits of the projects supported by the Trust Fund, in particular to enable victims to self-sustain. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, three projects had been completed and six were ongoing across the country. The projects offered vocational training, capacity building, scholarships, and early reintegration into communities and provided up to 400 beneficiaries with income generating activities. Fifty-two children, including children born of sexual exploitation and abuse were receiving educational support. These projects played an important role in restoring the dignity and self-respect of victims. The Director/ALD/DMSPC referred to a recent appeal to all Member States for funds, and appreciation was expressed to the Kingdom of Bhutan for its early contribution to the Trust Fund.

PSEA coordination on the ground – good practices and challenges

8. The PSEA Coordinators briefed on their interagency role in capacity building and training of staff, conducting awareness-raising in communities, unifying reporting channels and referral pathways for victim assistance. In Cox's Bazar, the PSEA Coordinator noted the development of an interagency referral pathway in collaboration with the gender-based violence sub-cluster. Coordination efforts in the PSEA Task Forces involved regular and inclusive meetings, with participation of UN entities, international and national non-governmental organizations. In South Sudan, a high-level meeting dedicated to PSEA, chaired by the DSRSG/HC/RC, is held at least once a year to sustain momentum.
9. In South Sudan, an information-sharing protocol is being prepared in by the PSEA Task Force, in close coordination with the FVRA, to enable smooth sharing of information and clarification of procedures related to victim assistance, including through the use of the Incident Reporting Form (which will soon be available electronically) to facilitate the collection of information and limit the number of interviews of victims. The activities of the FVRA were also fully integrated into the PSEA Task Force workplans, reflecting the close coordination of the FVRAs and the PSEA coordinator. An information -sharing protocol had been implemented in the Central African Republic and was under development in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Lebanon.
10. The PSEA Coordinators in Cox's Bazar and Lebanon, where no FVRAs are present, noted that victim assistance is delivered through referrals made by individual UN entities. In Cox's Bazar, the PSEA network provides guidance to PSEA focal points on victim assistance. The PSEA network also provides training to caseworkers on case management. In response to a query regarding how ideas and best practices are shared among Field Victims' Rights Advocates,

PSEA coordinators and focal points across the system, the FVRA in South Sudan noted that regular meetings are held and practices are shared through an online community of practice.

Reporting by victims of sexual exploitation and abuse – progress and challenges

11. FVRAs highlighted the importance of community-based complaints networks and mechanisms (CBCNs/CBCMs) which raised the consciousness of communities of prohibited conduct and the behaviour they should expect from UN personnel, as well as a safe, confidential and secure conduit for victims to report cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. These networks consisted of volunteers, often community leaders, local police, heads of local NGOs, including youth groups. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there were 43 such networks comprising a total of 1,053 volunteers. In South Sudan, the inter-agency PSEA Task Force regularly assessed the 17 CBCMs for their capacity to facilitate effective reporting mechanisms, and had set up dedicated hotlines, emails contacts and other means of reporting in an effort to ensure that all incidents reached the PSEA co-chairs. Communication strategies to raise awareness among communities across the country were also well coordinated within the PSEA Task Force. Despite these efforts, it was recognized that in many of the local communities, sexual exploitation and abuse and the multiple forms of gender-based violence continued to be seen as ‘cultural issues,’ thereby hindering reporting by victims. The high turnover of community members involved on a voluntary basis in the CBCMs was also cited as an issue of concern.
12. The FVRA in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had recently visited Beni and other locations in the east of the country, in respect of which allegations had been reported in the media of sexual exploitation and abuse implicating UN system entities linked to the Ebola response. She met with CBCNs, civil society representatives and UN staff working in the area in an effort to encourage victims to come forward. Yet, despite the reports and corroboration of local community members that such misconducts had taken place, no one had come forward to report or engage with the FVRA.
13. In Lebanon, a severe economic crisis, high rates of poverty and the Beirut port explosion put the large refugee population at a particularly high risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. The PSEA Coordinator noted that she had taken part in community-based focus group discussions where women and girls indicated that they knew of the reporting mechanisms, but had little faith in them and would not report cases. This demonstrated the importance of fostering trust, transparency and providing feedback to victims. In Cox’s Bazar, the PSEA Network collaborated on a communication campaign featuring animations via video to raise community awareness on reporting and victim assistance to encourage victims to report cases, despite their reluctance based on a belief that assistance would not be forthcoming. The difficulties in encouraging victims to come forward to report cases of sexual exploitation and abuse were common across all contexts for various reasons, including lack of faith in the system or due to the risks of stigmatization and retaliation.
14. In response to a participant’s query on methods to collectively build more trust in the mechanisms and make victims feel more comfortable to report and seek support, the PSEA Coordinator in Lebanon highlighted the importance of consulting affected people and communities in the establishment of complaint and feedback mechanisms and adapting them accordingly, and of providing consistent feedback to complainants and victims.

Sustaining PSEA focus and continuity of assistance to victims during COVID-19

15. The FVRAs described innovative means of ensuring that assistance to victims continued during COVID-19. Their mobile phone numbers were provided to all victims, and these numbers switched to roaming during periods when FVRAs were abroad to keep communication lines open. When FVRAs themselves could not reach the victims, outreach efforts were made on their behalf through the CBCNs/CBCMs, heads of local field offices and service providers.
16. The FVRA in the Democratic Republic of the Congo recounted an instance where two victims had crossed the border to Rwanda, and one had fallen ill. She was able to facilitate provision of medical assistance to the victim in the neighbouring country through liaison with UN partner entities. In another instance, the FVRA coordinated transportation for a pregnant girl in a remote village so she could receive timely medical attention. In Lebanon, the PSEA coordinator had fully integrated PSEA activities in the UN's response to COVID-19 and organized online PSEA sessions for close to 400 aid workers.
17. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Under Secretaries-General of the Department of Management, Strategy, Policy and Compliance, the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs issued a joint communication on managing risks of misconduct during the pandemic. The USG DMSPC and the VRA also issued a joint communication on the victims' rights approach to continuing assistance and support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Paternity and child maintenance claims

18. The FVRAs in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo described their involvement in efforts to resolve paternity and child maintenance claims, including facilitating of the collection of DNA samples from victims and children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse. In the Central African Republic, the FVRA recalled his recent experience of responding to a request of one concerned Member State to provide bank account details for two victims whose children were eligible for child support. His prompt engagement with the Ministry of Child Protection and Women's Affairs to facilitate the process of opening their bank accounts (a complicated process for victims requiring submission of a work certificate and other documentation) led to an agreement between the Ministry of Child Protection and Women's Affairs and Ecobank to expedite the opening of bank accounts for all victim of sexual exploitation and abuse with open paternity claims. The smooth transfer of child maintenance payments had brought positive and real change to the lives of these victims and their children.
19. The VRA noted that victims tended to focus less on accountability and more often demanded support and assistance, especially if they had children born of sexual exploitation or abuse. The FVRA in the Central African Republic noted that victims were often fearful of not receiving support from the father of their children, and sometimes did not want the father to be sanctioned. The Director/ALD/DMSPC commended the Republic of South Africa for its strong collaboration in addressing paternity matters.

20. Notwithstanding some good practices and examples of successful paternity claims, the biggest challenge in the context of peacekeeping mission settings such as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan remained the lack of responsiveness of some Member States to facilitating paternity tests and related procedures. FVRAs encouraged all Member States to intensify their collective efforts to address the gaps in collaboration with United Nations entities on the ground. In this connection, the Director/ALD/DMSPC informed participants that DMSPC and the Department of Peace Operations are preparing a high-level forum in the context of Action For Peacekeeping to renew the commitment to uphold conduct and discipline standards, and exchange good practices. A related technical level meeting would be hosted by the Office of Human Resources and the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate to exchange good practices on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, including facilitation of paternity and child support claims in peacekeeping missions.

Civil Society Advisory Board

21. Pablo de Greiff, member of the Civil Society Advisory Board highlighted the importance of establishing relationships with civil society actors on the ground and ensuring their involvement in PSEA efforts, and involving civil society in the design of programmes to ensure that the work on PSEA is effective and sustainable on the local level and to develop trust. He noted that the CSAB will present ideas on five topics regarding its work to reduce the gap between civil society and the UN, including: (a) examining NGO policies on PSEA with consideration to their applicability to UN operations; (b) lessons learned from the civilian oversight mechanism of the armed forces with an aim to considering prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse by such forces in UN Missions; (c) case work on redress which includes the provision of mental health and psycho-social support at the national level, complemented by legal aid, victim sensitive laws, policies, practices and funds to help victims; (d) possible updates to the relevant UN legal framework on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse; and (e) strengthening capacities within human rights institutions to respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Closing remarks

22. H.E. Mr. Jonathan Allen, Chargé d'Affaires/UK Mission expressed appreciation for the expertise from the field on its work tackling sexual exploitation and abuse, and noted that the UK was proud to be a sponsor and a champion of the work, and supported the victim-centred approach and zero-tolerance policy. He recalled that sexual exploitation and abuse not only violates the principles and values of the UN, but also the those of all nations and peoples, and that it stops our ability to deliver positive change. He reminded participants that we must always look through the eyes of the victims. On the recent allegations on sexual exploitations and abuse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the Ebola crisis, he noted that it would have been preferable if the reported allegations had come from the UN rather than the media. He affirmed the UK's support to the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate.

23. H.E Mr. Karma S. Tshosar, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan extended gratitude for the event and noted Bhutan's commitment to the work on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. He stressed that Member States must demonstrate determination

to address sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers through demanding more accountability and taking a victim-centred approach. Mr. Tshosar highlighted Bhutan's contribution to the Trust Fund and its work to combat these wrongs.

24. Major General Wiseman Mbambo, Deputy Chief of Staff, South African National Defense Force expressed appreciation to the FVRAs and PSEA Coordinators for sharing practical experiences from the ground. He affirmed South Africa's commitment to a victim-centred approach to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse committed by its troops serving under the UN flag. He highlighted a number of measures taken by South Africa, including its pre-deployment PSEA training, and follow-up trainings conducted in the mission area, its collaboration with the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services in investigating allegations of misconduct, and the in situ prosecutions, and immediate repatriations of the perpetrator where the cases are substantiated. South Africa had made substantial progress in terms of paternity and child maintenance claims, with the appointment of a paternity maintenance support team to facilitate the prompt resolution of paternity and child maintenance claims against SANDF members. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the maintenance team will be conducting a working visit to MONUSCO to delineate maintenance payment modalities and to address all cases. It was recalled that the first interim court order was issued by the South African military court of appeals in 2018. South Africa also put in place measures for DNA collection and profiling. The first case of DNA testing had resulted in a confirmed paternity and child maintenance payments arrangements were in process. South Africa's commitment to adhering international obligations as a troop contributing country was underscored, and it emphasized the need for transparency in all efforts concerning sexual exploitation and abuse.
25. In closing, the VRA thanked all presenters, and co-sponsors for their words of encouragement. She conveyed her intention to host similar events and briefings more regularly to update everyone on how the victim-centred approach is moving forward on the ground. She underscored the importance of partnerships, support for victims, accountability for perpetrators and the need to bring the organization from a position of zero intolerance to zero impunity. The VRA reiterated the need to strengthen the role of Field Victims' Rights Advocate, designate more Field Victims' Rights Advocates and inter-agency PSEA coordinators on the ground.

The recording of the event is available here:

<https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/7c036fd4-a8e3-4d26-92cc-fba8b39f522a>