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February 12, 2021: The United Kingdom’s decision not to investigate child rape by a British United Nations official nor to address the UN’s ongoing sex abuse crisis during its month as Security Council president makes one thing clear: the UK is failing to live up to its self-proclaimed leadership on “safeguarding.”

In attention-getting rhetoric from public platforms, the United Kingdom vows to put the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment by aid sector and UN personnel [“at the centre of everything we do.”](#) But off-stage, the UK is far less interested in doing the hard work necessary to address the crisis.

For example: In July 2017, a distraught mother reported to authorities in the rape-stricken city of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), that her daughter, still a child, was raped by a civilian employee of the United Nations peacekeeping mission, “MONUSCO.” For reasons that the UN has not disclosed, the DRC did not press charges. In November 2017, the child’s mother tried another route to justice by reporting the rape allegation to MONUSCO.

When Code Blue inquired about progress on the case, Atul Khare, then the UN’s Under-Secretary-General for Field Support, [informed us](#) that the UN’s internal investigative service had determined that the allegations of rape—in fact, of a “series of acts” committed against the girl—had been “substantiated.” On the UN’s Conduct and Discipline [database](#), we learned that the internal investigation had taken a grueling 220 days.

What does the United Kingdom have to do with the case?

The UN has no authority to investigate or prosecute crimes; those responsibilities fall to Member States, with “primary jurisdiction” held by the country where an alleged crime occurred. If that government is unable or unwilling to carry out its roles, then the government of the accused can exercise “extraterritorial jurisdiction”—provided that it has laws in place to do so.

As a matter of UN policy, the names and even the nationalities of personnel accused of crimes are withheld from the public. But in a meeting with Ben Swanson, Director of the UN’s Investigations Division, we learned that the alleged perpetrator in this case is a British national.

Mr. Swanson said that procedures had been properly followed: when the DRC declined to press charges, the UN referred the case to the UK, whose laws enable it to prosecute British citizens accused of committing child rape in other countries.

But the dedicated commitment to ending UN impunity for sexual offenses that's so vividly on display when the television lights are turned on was nowhere to be found. Behind closed doors, the UK opted out of pursuing justice for the child victim and her mother. The British weren't interested, said Mr. Swanson.

The UN fired and fined its employee, and the British allowed an accused rapist to walk free.

Justice for victims and public safety cannot be made optional. But that's exactly what the UN has done—led by its powerful Security Council, which in turn is led by five permanent members including the UK—by pretending that complete reliance on extraterritorial jurisdiction is a tenable solution when UN civilian personnel are accused of sex crimes.

If a government as powerful, wealthy, and supposedly intolerant of child rape as the United Kingdom can abdicate all responsibility, the UN's system for handling sexual offenses by its civilian personnel is clearly broken.

If a girl whose life was irrevocably damaged when the UN arrived to "protect" her is relying now on UN Secretary-General António Guterres' 2017 promise that, "When Member States fail to follow up after the United Nations refers cases for their action, I am ready to engage Heads of State and Government," we fear that her hope is unfounded. There is nothing to hint that the Secretary-General has confronted a head of state who can veto his second term in office.

The rotating presidency of the UN Security Council and the ability to set its agenda fell to the UK this month. The self-declared global leader on ending the UN's sexual abuse crisis didn't make time for an issue it describes as an urgent priority. But the new Permanent Representative, Dame Barbara Woodward, still has time to show that the UK is willing to move past giving lip service to victims and buckle down to the hard work of reforming a broken system.

In the name of a young girl who has been rendered powerless, and on behalf of us all, we appeal to the United Kingdom to find the space that a high priority deserves by adding sexual exploitation and abuse to the Security Council agenda for February.

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