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## Oxfam Staffers Accused of Abusing Haitian Women and Children

by George Rodríguez

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Their job in Haiti was to protect and assist the country's population, which had been battered by poverty, destructive natural events, and violence, but the UN peacekeepers and the members of Oxfam, an international relief organization, strayed from their missions' aims, and local women and children were harmed.

The peacekeepers, known as "blue helmets," were part of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for Stabilization in Haiti, MINUSTAH), created "to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, within its capabilities and areas of deployment."

According to its job description, MINUSTAH also had to support the government, human rights bodies, and specialized NGOs "in their efforts to promote and protect human rights, particularly of women and children, in order to ensure individual accountability for human rights abuses and redress for victims."

In real life, many protectors actually turned out to be perpetrators of the very abuses they were supposed to prevent.

Women and children were highlighted by the UN as a sector the mission had to watch out for in terms of security and crime-related violence. But the blue helmets did not stick to the script, and many of their actions were counter to their mandate and to elementary ethics.

### *The cholera epidemic*

In October of 2010, just nine months after an earthquake devastated parts of Haiti, cholera-infected Pakistani blue helmets polluted the country's largest river, the Artibonite, by throwing contaminated sewage from their base into the water, triggering an ongoing epidemic that has sickened around one million people and claimed about 10,000 lives ([NotiCen, March 28, 2013](#), and [Oct. 3, 2013](#)).

Mission troopers have also been held responsible for the killing of unarmed civilians in anti-crime operations. And reports and personal accounts place in the hundreds the cases of sexual abuse of women and minors by MINUSTAH personnel, including a child sex ring run by more than 100 of the mission's military from countries as varied as Sri Lanka and Uruguay ([NotiCen, May 11, 2017](#), and [Nov. 9, 2017](#)).

#### New accusations

And in recent weeks another variety of abuse centered on Haitian women and minors has just surfaced, this time from members of the British charity organization Oxfam.

In this case, the whistleblower was the London daily *The Times*, which after a series of reports on worldwide sexual misconduct by members of international charities, on Feb. 9 detailed the specifics of the Haitian case.

Under the headline “Minister orders Oxfam to hand over files on Haiti prostitute scandal,” The Times began to unravel the complex web whose victims included underage girls. Quoting government and charity sources as well as a 2011 Oxfam confidential report on the case, the daily revealed that three members of the organization had resigned after an in-house inquiry, including Roland van Hauwermeiren, country director in Haiti at the time. Four other staff members were fired.

“A Times investigation found that Oxfam, which receives ... British government funds and public donations, allowed three men to resign and sacked four for gross misconduct after an inquiry into sexual exploitation, the downloading of pornography, bullying, and intimidation,” The Times reported. “A number of sources with knowledge of the case said they had concerns that some of the prostitutes (hired by the staffers involved) were under age. One said that men had invited groups of young prostitutes to their guesthouse and held sex ‘parties.’ The source [‘claimed to have seen footage from a night there that was ‘like a full-on Caligula orgy with girls wearing Oxfam T-shirts.’](#)”

According to the newspaper, the British government ordered Oxfam to hand over its case files, a demand that followed The Times’ revelation that Oxfam had covered up the misbehavior of senior aid workers.

British Culture Secretary Matt Hancock, responsible for charity regulation, told The Times that the allegations were “deeply shocking.”

The Times reported that Hauwermeiren had been “allowed to resign without disciplinary action,” adding that although he had “admitted using prostitutes at the villa rented for him by Oxfam with charitable funds,” Oxfam’s top executive at the time, Dame Barbara Stocking, offered him “a phased and dignified exit” in order to protect Oxfam’s reputation.

### *Oxfam’s reply*

The same day The Times report was published, Oxfam issued a response stating that “the behaviour of some members of Oxfam staff uncovered in Haiti in 2011 was totally unacceptable, contrary to our values and the high standards we expect of our staff.”

Oxfam said it had launched an investigation “as soon as we became aware of the allegations,” with the goal of taking “action against those involved.” It added that “allegations that underage girls may have been involved were not proven.”

Oxfam also reported that, after the investigation, it had created a “Safeguarding Team” and a confidential “whistleblowing” hotline to ensure “that we do all we can to protect our staff, prevent sexual abuse and misconduct happening in the first place, and improve how we handle any allegations.”

Oxfam emphasized that it had issued a press release on Aug. 5, 2011 saying that an investigation had been launched, and had reported on the outcome of the investigation on Sept. 5, 2011.

“The legal advice we received in Haiti was that given the nature of the allegations, especially with the continued upheaval and chaos post the earthquake, it was extremely unlikely that reporting these incidents to the police would lead to any action being taken,” Oxfam said. It added that the organization’s trustees, the Charity Commission, and the Department for International

Development, as well as the European Union, the World Health Organization, and various UN agencies, had been kept informed.

"The Charity Commission confirmed that Oxfam had taken appropriate action and that it therefore had no regulatory concerns," Oxfam said.

The document, made public although it was initially labeled as "Confidential," included on "Appendix 2," an action plan that noted the need for "more embedding of Oxfam's values and behaviours across the organization" and for "more embedding of women's rights at the heart of all we do."

### *'A violation of human dignity'*

Three days after The Times's report, Haitian President Jovenel Moïse posted several messages in his Twitter account, harshly condemning behavior of Oxfam staffers.

"There is nothing more outrageous and dishonest than a sexual predator who uses his position as part of the humanitarian response to a natural disaster to exploit needy people in their moment of greatest vulnerability," Moïse wrote in French. "What happened with Oxfam in Haiti is an extremely serious violation of human dignity."

And 10 days after The Times's account, Simon Ticehurst, Oxfam's regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean, met with Aviol Fleurant, Haiti's minister for planning and foreign cooperation.

"We came here ... to express our shame and our apologies to the government and to the people of Haiti for what happened," he told reporters after the meeting in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital.

In stern terms, Fleurant said, "We're going to request all kinds of information, audits, financial reports, aiming at accountability." He also noted the possibility of "obstruction of justice" by Oxfam, since Haitian authorities "were never informed about these crimes committed in the institution's installations."

In other reactions quoted by The Times, Liz Truss, Britain's chief secretary to the Treasury, called what happened in Oxfam's Haiti operation "shocking, sickening, and depressing,"

Gavin Shuker, a member of Parliament for the Labour Party, added, "Teenage girls, in one of the poorest countries in the world, immediately following an earthquake, don't by any measure 'choose' prostitution."

-- End --