

UN Prostitution Scandal

Author: [IWPR](#)

The UN mission in Bosnia comes under fire for allegedly trying to cover up a prostitution scandal.

The United Nations mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina may face an investigation following charges that it sought to cover up media reports implicating its officials in selling women into prostitution.

UN headquarters in Sarajevo has denied the claims but acknowledged that several members of its staff have been sacked for misconduct. Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has demanded an investigation and diplomatic sources have told IWPR that she may get one.

The charges were first aired by Kathy Balkovac, an American police officer and a former UN human rights investigator. She made them in a memo last November to Jacques Paul Klein, head of the UN in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vincent Coeurderoy, the UN's Police Commissioner in Bosnia,

Balkovac alleged that extensive trafficking of women into prostitution had been carried out by UN personnel, NATO troops and other international officials in Bosnia, along with the local police. Balkovac was diagnosed as 'stressed and burned out' by the IPTF Deputy Commissioner Mike Stiers and her contract with the UN was subsequently terminated by DynCorps, the US State Department's personnel subcontractor for the UN Mission.

In an official statement, the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Sarajevo demanded the investigation to be carried out "in an open and transparent manner and that the reports should be made public." It insisted that punishment for anyone found guilty should be "commensurate with the gravity of the offences."

International news agencies picked up on the story during a visit Klein made to the UN Security Council in New York on June 14-15. Western diplomats said that during his presentation in New York, Klein was "peppered" with questions about charges that women had been forced into prostitution by UN officials.

The Balkovac memo in November was filed at a time when UN monitors and local police were involved in a series of controversial raids on brothels in Prijedor. Later it was alleged that these UN officials had collaborated with Prijedor police in "buying" the women and having sex with some of them. Several of the victims were said to be under aged girls.

Six officers, three of them Americans, were dismissed after this incident. But no critical remarks were made on their personal records.

In documents obtained by IWPR, Balkovac said the UN was aware of numerous cases in which international police monitors had engaged in the trafficking of women in Bosnia since October 2000. But she claimed nothing was done about it.

Prostitution is illegal in Bosnia. In December 2000 Bosnia signed the UN Convention on Trans-national Organized Crime, the first international legal instrument that calls on signatories to adopt domestic legislation to criminalize trafficking. In consequence, Bosnia is bound to uphold the obligations of the treaty.

In an e-mail dated October 2000, which was broadly circulated among her UN colleagues, Balkovac outlined the legal definitions of "prostitution, pimping and trafficking." She reported that the UN had received accounts of women being tortured, raped and kidnapped into sexual enslavement in Bosnia.

Balkovac was subsequently demoted to a non-human rights position and reassigned. But she managed to urge senior UN officials to follow up her conclusion that a number of reported trafficking activities deserved further police investigation. Her contract was terminated in April 2001 on grounds that she had falsified a time sheet.

Doug Coffman, spokesperson for the UN in Sarajevo said a few weeks ago that he was not aware of any UN investigation into Balkovac's charges. He said that only one UN officer was found guilty of paying for a prostitute.

In a press statement in May, Klein denied all allegations that the UN mission had concealed reports of misconduct. "During my tenure, there have been no cover-ups and I have implemented a zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual and other serious misconduct," he said in the statement. "Following due process, the UN has investigated all allegations of misconduct in a fair, thorough and timely manner."

However many local and Western officials disagree.

"The truth about the Prijedor raids and the subsequent resignation of the officers involved has never been made apparent," said Madeleine Rees, the representative for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bosnia.

Trafficking in women is called the "dirty secret of UN interventions around the world - the nasty underbelly that no one wants to confront," said Martina Vanderberg, researcher for the women's project for Human Rights Watch, a U.S. based group which is preparing a major report on trafficking. "None of these allegations come as a surprise."

It is estimated that 200,000 to 300,000 women are sold into prostitution from former communist bloc countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to Western Europe and North America annually.

Tanya Domi is the former OSCE spokesperson in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is now taking an advanced degree in Human Rights at Columbia University in New York

Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/un-prostitution-scandal>