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Sexual exploitation and abuse: implementing a zero-tolerance policy

Administrative and budgetary aspects of the financing of the United Nations peacekeeping operations

Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolutions [71/278](#), [71/297](#), [72/312](#) and [73/302](#). It contains updated information on measures to strengthen the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.



I. Introduction

1. Progress in eradicating sexual exploitation and abuse and placing victims' rights and dignity at the centre of these efforts has continued since I last reported to you (A/74/705), the challenges associated with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic notwithstanding. The United Nations senior leadership shows heightened commitment to the implementation of my four-pronged strategy: (a) prioritizing the rights and dignity of victims; (b) ending impunity through strengthened reporting and investigations; (c) engaging with Member States, civil society and external partners; and (d) improving strategic communication for education and transparency. The crafting and implementation of system-wide initiatives, in areas within my direct authority, that engage all personnel remain a priority.

2. My Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse continues to lead efforts to implement my strategy, encouraging alignment of approaches and coherence across the complex United Nations system, which comprises offices, departments and funds, programmes and agencies, including over 30 unique entities. She has given me regular briefings on this work, resulting in the development of common mechanisms, procedures, standardized protocols and tools. A fact sheet¹ provides a summary of implementation since 2017, showing strengthened harmonization in approaches to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse across the development, humanitarian, peace and human rights sectors of the system. Victims' rights and assistance are increasingly integrated into protection from sexual exploitation and abuse workplans and are beginning to be mainstreamed across the United Nations culture.

3. Despite senior leadership commitment and the dedicated service of the majority of the more than 95,000 civilians and 100,000 uniformed military and police professionals around the world who uphold the values and principles of the United Nations, often in harsh and dangerous conditions, allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse continued to surface. Most recently, in September 2020, allegations emerged relating to United Nations personnel involved in the response to the tenth Ebola virus disease epidemic in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. An independent commission² and other bodies are investigating these wrongs. I am deeply concerned that such egregious allegations continue to implicate United Nations personnel and pledge that we will redouble and spare no efforts to address the underlying factors that harm those whom we seek to assist.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened existing inequalities and exposed those in vulnerable situations to increased risks of sexual exploitation and abuse. It also had a negative impact on capacity to investigate allegations and provide victims with assistance. Nonetheless, the United Nations made tangible advances. These include: (a) improving the response to identified victims of sexual exploitation and abuse; (b) securing the United Nations leadership role in setting a global standard for prevention, response and transparent public reporting of allegations;³ and

¹ United Nations, "Fact sheet on the Secretary-General's initiatives to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse".

² See World Health Organization (WHO), "WHO appoints co-chairs of Independent Commission on sexual misconduct during the Ebola response in North Kivu and Ituri, the Democratic Republic of the Congo", 15 October 2020.

³ The Office of the Special Coordinator reviewed the policies and standards of more than 100 international and regional intergovernmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations and found that over 95 per cent adhered to the United Nations standards of conduct.

(c) enhancing the alignment of the policies and practices of the Organization's humanitarian, development and peace pillars.

5. Colleagues across the system were able to adapt and innovate, including through the use of technology, strengthening prevention and response. The United Nations will continue to: (a) introduce more technological solutions to improve capacity to receive and track complaints; (b) enhance investigations, including by encouraging joint investigations when allegations involve more than one United Nations entity; (c) monitor the assistance provided to victims and the availability of service providers; and (d) deepen transparency of reporting and staff and community outreach. In line with the Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere,⁴ I have encouraged the use of data analytics to inform screening, training, response and mitigation measures.

6. Stepped-up efforts to put victims' dignity and rights at the centre have become more cohesive across the system. There is a deeper appreciation of realities on the ground. First, victims confide in people whom they trust and believe will guide them to the assistance that they need. Second, victims and others do not distinguish among United Nations entities when they report allegations or seek assistance. Third, when an allegation involves United Nations personnel or staff of an implementing partner, victims and their communities expect long-term United Nations engagement. Taking these insights into account, at the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) meeting in November 2020, I urged the United Nations leadership to remove bureaucratic obstacles to the legitimate exchange of information among entities on allegations, on a need-to-know basis, so that the Organization's work is coordinated and directed towards a common purpose. This will be facilitated in 2021 by the launch of a United Nations system-wide secure digitized complaint receipt and information-sharing platform, the electronic incident reporting form.

7. Victims need to be aware of their rights, and in particular the behaviour to expect from United Nations personnel. Internal and community awareness will be increased through: (a) the creation of more community-based complaint networks and the facilitation of access to them; (b) the review of strategies and training to reflect the latest policies and guidance; and (c) the development of innovative ways to work with duty station practitioners to promote the standards of conduct. The Organization has continued to engage more closely with the communities served, deepening outreach to women's and victims' groups and stepping up efforts to hear from victims themselves. It will continue to focus on creating an environment of trust in which victims and witnesses feel safe coming forward and confident that they will receive support. Recognizing that the United Nations alone cannot eradicate these behaviours, the Organization will continue to strengthen partnerships with Member States, regional organizations and civil society, especially on the ground, to ensure that efforts are complementary and reinforcing.

II. Institutionalizing protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

8. Constant vigilance is required, and I have institutionalized mechanisms to continue engagement and cohesion across the United Nations system. The High-level

⁴ Available at www.un.org/en/content/datastrategy/index.shtml.

Steering Group on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse,⁵ chaired by the Chef de Cabinet, provides principal-level strategic direction to prevention and response actions. The system-wide working group on sexual exploitation and abuse,⁶ chaired by the Special Coordinator and consisting of representatives of members of the High-level Steering Group and other entities, met twice a month during 2020 to advance and develop policies and initiatives.⁷ Reflecting the acceptance of my strategy across the system, the working group expanded to include nine further United Nations entities.⁸ To maintain momentum and coordination in implementation, I extended the Special Coordinator's mandate until 31 December 2021.

9. Conflict and public health and other emergencies exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities and the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. In March 2020, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee issued an interim technical note on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse during the COVID-19 response,⁹ developed with the Victims' Rights Advocate, and a checklist to assist field staff in verifying that prevention and response systems remain functional and address risk was published in June 2020.¹⁰ Guidance was issued to peace operations and special political missions by the senior leadership on the risks of sexual misconduct as a result of the pandemic. In addition, missions and humanitarian coordinators received guidance on assistance and support for victims. Together with the Victims' Rights Advocate and other United Nations entities, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) conducted consultations with staff in high-risk duty stations on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse during

⁵ The members of the High-level Steering Group are the heads of the Department of Global Communications, the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, the Department of Operational Support, the Department of Peace Operations, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the Development Coordination Office, the Office of Legal Affairs, the Office of the Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the World Food Programme (WFP). The Office of Internal Oversight Services participates as an observer.

⁶ The members of the working group include representatives of all members of the High-Level Steering Group, the Department of Safety and Security, the Peacebuilding Support Office, the Office of Human Resources, the Office of Military Affairs, the Office of Information and Communications Technology, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations Volunteers.

⁷ See the fact sheet on the Secretary-General's initiatives to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

⁸ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and WHO.

⁹ Available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/interim-technical-note-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-psea-during-covid-19-response>.

¹⁰ Available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-06/IASC%20Checklist%20PSEA%20during%20COVID-19.pdf>.

COVID-19. Meetings were convened twice a month with conduct and discipline teams in peace operations and special political missions on risk management and support for victims, and the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) introduced new investigation techniques, including remote interviewing of victims and witnesses. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) leveraged its existing programmes on violence against women and girls to provide a rapid response to gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse, in its country presences. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiated an analysis of the provision of assistance in several country offices.

Deepening system-wide coherence

10. Pursuant to the United Nations development system reform and the establishment of a reinvigorated resident coordinator system, in 2020, the United Nations significantly strengthened its internal protection from sexual exploitation and abuse architecture by appointing regional prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse focal points, establishing a community of practice on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse among resident coordinators' offices and facilitating communication among field and regional offices and Headquarters. To clarify the role of resident coordinators, where they are my most senior representatives for sustainable development in countries, their specific responsibility and accountability has been strengthened to unify the country team's approach to prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse, in accordance with my global commitment to promote an environment of zero tolerance. The new reporting lines between country team members and resident coordinators has also helped in this regard, ensuring stronger in-country leadership for system-wide issues. The General Assembly has shown support in this context, for example in paragraph 113 of its resolution [75/233](#), on the quadrennial policy review of operational activities for development in the United Nations system, which helps to amplify and take these efforts further across the system.

11. On the humanitarian front, members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee have scaled up efforts to create a harmonized approach to preventing sexual exploitation and abuse at the country level through: (a) the deployment of 20 dedicated inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordinators; (b) partnership between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations on training; and (c) the adoption of a harmonized tool to assess implementing partners' capacity to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse congruent with the United Nations protocol on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving implementing partners. In the last quarter of 2020, an Inter-Agency Standing Committee mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo supported the Humanitarian Coordinator and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse network to address gaps in coordination and services and improve coordination among investigations, protection and communications. This inter-agency mission supported the finalization by the United Nations country team of a new strategic framework to reinforce a system-wide approach to sexual exploitation and abuse at the national and subnational levels, drawing upon the capacities of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the United Nations country team and the humanitarian country team, and is an example of the growing synergy across the peace, development and humanitarian pillars. A mission to the Central African Republic is planned for 2021.

12. The Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance continued to work with the conduct and discipline structures in peace operations and special political missions, and supported conduct and discipline focal points appointed by

Secretariat entities other than peace operations through guidance, templates and capacity-building, including on mitigating risks. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) delivered training for its field staff on methodology and practices to monitor and investigate sexual violence and provided support on the management of sexual exploitation and abuse cases.

13. At the end of December 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees concluded his term as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Champion on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. The 2021 Champion, the Executive Director of UNFPA, will continue to take forward Inter-Agency Standing Committee priorities on bolstering prevention, encouraging victims to come forward and a speak-up culture, improving high-quality, survivor-centred support and protection, and strengthening vetting, reference-checking, investigatory processes and disciplinary measures. Areas of focus are the reinforcement of prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse country mechanisms by: (a) establishing an inter-agency prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse coordinator roster; (b) improving access to high-quality assistance by training gender-based violence practitioners on the specific needs of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse; and (c) organizing an independent external review of Inter-Agency Standing Committee initiatives to assess progress made and the overall effectiveness of the Standing Committee's approach to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. The previous review was held in 2010.

14. Successive Champions have emphasized the importance of the deployment of a dedicated, full-time senior prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse coordinator at the country level for system-wide coordination on prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse across development, peace, and humanitarian contexts. The terms of reference for coordinators have been standardized and a deployment package has been developed.

III. Accountability across the system

15. The United Nations senior leadership is responsible for setting a tone that creates trust and respect in the communities served and among personnel. I have prioritized leadership accountability relating to sexual exploitation and abuse through mandated action plans and personal certifications. Given the heightened risks of sexual exploitation and abuse associated with the pandemic, in 2020, I requested the senior leadership to provide information on mechanisms introduced to address those risks, in addition to the risk-mitigation measures required in previous years.

16. The submission of action plans increased by 400 per cent, from 50 in 2019 to 207 in 2020, in part owing to support from the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance and the Development Coordination Office, with the former developing comprehensive baseline indicators, adaptable by each Secretariat entity to harmonize plans across all peace and special political missions, and the latter supporting resident coordinators, who provided plans on behalf of the United Nations country teams.

17. The plans indicate that all entities have: (a) a policy on the prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse and workplans to implement the policy; (b) issued a management letter stating,¹¹ or certified as part of their compact, that all allegations

¹¹ Certification letters were received from the following entities: FAO, IAEA, IFAD, ILO, International Maritime Organization, IOM, International Telecommunication Union, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFPA, UN-Habitat, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNOPS, Universal Postal Union, UN-Women, UNRWA, WFP and World Bank.

have been reported and addressed; (c) complaint and reporting mechanisms; and (d) mandatory training to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

18. The Office of the Special Coordinator compared the 2019 action plans against the results of the fifth annual survey on the facts and perceptions of United Nations personnel with regard to sexual exploitation and abuse, undertaken in 2020. A total of 19,421 individuals, representing all categories of personnel, from 34 entities in 75 duty stations responded to the survey, constituting an increase of 174 per cent compared with 2019. Respondents stated that their leadership was engaged, but that more was required to increase awareness among United Nations personnel and communities to instill trust in the policies, including through the elimination of fear of retaliation and the provision of clear guidance on where and how to report or to direct victims to report allegations. The action plan indicators will be updated in 2021 by the Office of the Special Coordinator, with the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, the Development Coordination Office and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, to take account of the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network indicators,¹² which measure accountability of organizational performance, including by putting victims at the centre. Disaggregated results of the survey provided to the heads of the participating entities fostered frank discussions that reinforced awareness of the standards of conduct.

19. Annual certifications enhance leadership accountability in the Secretariat, and new elements related to conduct and discipline, notably on sexual exploitation and abuse, were included in the 2020 compacts for heads of peace operations and special political missions. Similar elements will be integrated into the compacts for heads of other Secretariat entities in 2021, and ways to integrate accountability for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse into the new competency framework are being explored.

20. The accountability of senior managers requires concurrent efforts to change the culture of the Organization to ensure that the effects of power and inequality are understood. Dialogues on culture and respect, spearheaded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), were convened with CEB and Inter-Agency Standing Committee principals, and a communications package was developed to support the senior leadership in conducting dialogues with staff. A respectful workplace is critical to eliminating sexual exploitation and abuse. Going forward, I will continue to spare no effort to ensure that the organizational culture is transformed through heightened attention to gender equality and inclusion, as well as recognition of discrimination on all grounds, including race, disability and intersectionality.

21. The standing review committee for the implementation of Security Council resolution [2272 \(2016\)](#) continued its work in 2020. Its secretariat, the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, launched a dedicated database allowing data collection for the analysis and maintenance of records of the committee's work. Guidance for users is being developed.

IV. Risk management

22. The United Nations continues to develop and enhance risk management tools, screen potential personnel, strengthen complaint mechanisms and increase transparency in reporting allegations.

¹² Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network, "Measuring multilateral performance on preventing and responding to SEA and SH", note for practitioners. Available at www.mopanonline.org/studies/items/MOPAN%20SEAH_Practitioners%20Note%20%5bweb%5d.pdf.

23. The Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance enhanced the Case Management Tracking System, building on its Misconduct Tracking System, to provide a single repository of misconduct and disciplinary records, including uniform processes for reporting, recording and tracking sexual exploitation and abuse and other misconduct for the Secretariat. Roll-out began in late 2020, with completion envisaged for 2021. The Department supported the implementation of the misconduct risk management tool, extending the risk management approach beyond Secretariat entities to create an integrated approach among United Nations system actors in field locations. In 2021, it will update the sexual exploitation and abuse e-learning programme, mandatory for all Secretariat personnel, which includes modules for commanders and managers.

24. Clear Check, the screening tool used by 25 United Nations entities, is designed to prevent any United Nations personnel dismissed following substantiated allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse or sexual harassment from being rehired by the United Nations. Personnel who leave the Organization with an open allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse are also to be included in Clear Check. Member States and civil society organizations recognize the potential of this tool to preclude the recruitment of perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse beyond the United Nations. I will reflect on experience acquired with the tool in consultation with stakeholders before considering expanding its use.

25. I welcome the Inter-Agency Misconduct Disclosure Scheme,¹³ launched in 2019 by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response¹⁴ and aimed at precluding known sexual abusers from moving within and among humanitarian and development entities. According to the Steering Committee, as of January 2021, the Scheme had been adopted by 63 organizations and affiliates, which were at various stages of implementation, and others were preparing to sign up to it. More than 6,000 recruitments have been conducted that involved the use of the Scheme, and 41 applicants were rejected because of negative or incomplete data.

26. I am pleased that the non-governmental organization and aid community are aligned with the United Nations on the need for public reporting of allegations. In 2020, the Office of the Special Coordinator began cooperation with the Executive Secretary of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response to assist it in creating a public reporting tool mirroring the categories of information contained in the United Nations reporting mechanism.

27. As the United Nations relies heavily on implementing partners,¹⁵ whose personnel are not under the Organization's authority, significant efforts have been made to encourage them to adopt and implement measures to prevent, respond to and report sexual exploitation and abuse. Building on the United Nations protocol on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving implementing partners, directed at minimizing the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse by personnel of implementing partners, in 2020, UNHCR, in collaboration with WFP, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other Inter-Agency Standing

¹³ Available at www.schr.info/the-misconduct-disclosure-scheme.

¹⁴ The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response is a voluntary alliance of nine of the world's leading humanitarian organizations.

¹⁵ Implementing partners are defined as national government entities (including agencies or institutions), non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations, United Nations system agencies or organizations acting as implementing partners, non-United Nations multilateral and intergovernmental entities and other entities (academia, etc.) with which United Nations system organizations enter into agreements and allocate United Nations resources to execute or implement programmes, projects and activities for the organization's beneficiaries (Joint Inspection Unit report on the review of the management of implementing partners in the United Nations system organizations (JIU/REP/2013/4), para. 3).

Committee members, funded the adaptation of an interactive training programme, “Saying no to sexual misconduct,” and its translations into Arabic, French and Spanish.¹⁶ In February 2020, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) rolled out a procedure for managing risks of sexual exploitation and abuse in implementing partnerships, accompanied by a toolkit. These provided the basis for the development of a common United Nations implementing partner capacity assessment,¹⁷ avoiding multiple assessments by the United Nations of partners they share.

28. I am grateful for the strong and continued advocacy role of Member State donors in encouraging specific commitments on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and ensuring that these are adhered to by the United Nations and its partners. Entities that report allegations in good faith must do so publicly for transparency. I urge donors to assess humanitarian agencies and implementing partners against their willingness to address capacity gaps and take corrective action, rather than on the number of complaints or allegations. In most situations, there is a need to balance the impact on beneficiaries of removing the assistance with the capacity and will of the partner to meet required standards.

29. An electronic version of the incident reporting form, directed at improving consistency in collecting and exchanging information on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse within the United Nations system, with scrupulous regard to data protection principles, is being finalized. The electronic form will be the first step in the initiation of a formal process by the United Nations to respond to an allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse, minimizing the number of times that a victim or witness is interviewed to diminish trauma, standardizing and bringing rigour to the complaint intake process and serving as a common platform for information-sharing within the United Nations system.

V. Prioritizing victims’ rights and dignity

30. The integration of a victim-centred approach into system-wide efforts on sexual exploitation and abuse, including risks to beneficiaries and others associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, was strengthened in 2020.

31. In December 2020, UNHCR issued a policy on a victim-centred approach in its response to sexual misconduct, aligned with its policy on the prevention of risk, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence, applicable to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. As of July 2020, the Victims’ Rights Advocate had led formal consultations with United Nations entities on a draft victims’ rights statement, designed to raise awareness of what victims should expect from United Nations personnel and avenues of redress. A final draft will be submitted to the High-level Steering Group on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse in 2021. With the support of the Office of the Victims’ Rights Advocate, the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, IOM and UNFPA, UNICEF led the development of a draft technical guidance note to assist in the implementation of the United Nations protocol on the provision of assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse in the field. In collaboration with OHCHR and UNICEF, the Office of the Victims’ Rights Advocate convened a consultation on legal aid for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The Victims’ Rights Advocate initiated system-wide consultations on the scope and duration of assistance to victims to guide those supporting victims on the ground. OHCHR continued consultations on the draft policy

¹⁶ Available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-learning-package-protection-sexual-misconduct-un-partner-organizations>.

¹⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, “(Interim) Harmonized Implementation Tool: United Nations implementing partner PSEA capacity assessment” (September 2020).

on integrating a human rights-based approach into United Nations efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse, with a view to endorsement by the High-level Steering Group in 2021.

32. In May 2020, the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate concluded a pilot mapping of victims' services, capacities and approaches in 13 countries with United Nations presences.¹⁸ The mapping involved broad, system-wide consultation. It found that services, such as medical, psychosocial, shelter, protection and legal services, were generally provided through existing gender-based violence pathways. They varied in terms of availability, accessibility, quality, capacity and resourcing, and there were gaps, particularly in remote contexts, for those affected by conflict or health emergencies, including COVID-19. Some service providers might not have sufficient expertise in the provision of support to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. It was noted as part of the mapping that there was no system-wide tool to track victims, the assistance that they received and available service providers, although the victim assistance tracking system had been operational in peace operations and special political missions since 2019. The mapping results and recommendations will be updated in 2021.

33. The Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate is developing a methodology to seek feedback from victims, so that their perspectives inform United Nations country-level assistance. To improve safe and ethical access for victims to gender-based support services, UNFPA analysed those services, identifying gaps and the improvements required to integrate sexual exploitation and abuse response into existing gender-based violence responses.

34. Accountability, including the resolution of paternity and child support claims for children born of sexual exploitation and abuse, remains challenging, and legal aid is largely unavailable. The Victims' Rights Advocate maintains a focus on the resolution of paternity and child support claims, cooperating closely with the Conduct and Discipline Service of the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance and supporting the related practical work of Field Victims' Rights Advocates and Senior Victims' Rights Officers.

35. The Victims' Rights Advocate continued advocacy with Member States, the United Nations system, intergovernmental and regional organizations, civil society and academic institutions. She participated in discussions with protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordinators and resident coordinator offices to encourage the implementation of a victim-centred approach on the ground, and the designation of more Senior Victims' Rights Officers, Field Victims' Rights Advocates and victims' rights focal points. In partnership with the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate is preparing an outreach package for national human rights institutions to encourage their participation in activities to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse, including capacity-building and training, the facilitation of accountability processes and paternity and child support claims.

36. The trust fund in support of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, financed through contributions from 22 Member States and payments withheld from United Nations personnel against whom allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse have been substantiated (see [A/70/729](#)), provided support for projects, predominantly aimed at strengthening victims' capacity to sustain themselves, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, although restrictions related to COVID-19 required the temporary suspension of projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2020. The positive impact of these projects on victims' lives, described in

¹⁸ Available at www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/mapping-assistance.

the annual report of the trust fund published and launched in 2020,¹⁹ cannot be overstated. I look forward to the launch of a project in Haiti focusing on the provision of livelihood and other support to victims, and educational assistance to children born of sexual exploitation and abuse. I encourage the submission of proposals and reiterate my gratitude to Member States that have provided contributions. I invite others to do so.

37. Restrictions on travel related to COVID-19 precluded the Victims' Rights Advocate from implementing her operational mandate through field visits, but the Field Victims' Rights Advocates and Senior Victims' Rights Officers in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti and South Sudan responded innovatively to challenges related to the pandemic. Mitigation measures, including physical distancing, reduced mobility across countries and lockdowns and curfews, had a negative impact on communication and in-person meetings with victims, as well as on their ability to report in person and to gain access to services. The Advocates facilitated victims' access to mobile phones and reinforced outreach and communication through calls, text messages and emails assuring them that the United Nations had not forgotten them. They organized medical and other support through implementing partners, including where livelihood support projects funded by the trust fund in support of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse had been suspended. The Advocates also strengthened partnerships among heads of United Nations field offices, civil society and community-based complaint networks. In June 2020, the Advocates launched a two-month "call to action" social media campaign in English and French on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

38. In the Central African Republic, the Field Victims' Rights Advocate collaborated with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse task force and the gender-based violence and child protection subclusters to coordinate assistance and support for victims, including transportation to service providers, with MINUSCA and UNICEF providing flights for service providers to enable them to assist victims in remote locations. The Advocate located victims and witnesses and facilitated communication and interview appointments between them and OIOS and national investigation officers. He supported the collection of DNA samples for OIOS and Member States to advance the resolution of paternity and child maintenance claims. He also worked with local partners to enable victims with children born as a result of sexual exploitation or abuse to open bank accounts to receive child maintenance payments. Together with the Conduct and Discipline Team, he led awareness-raising and training sessions on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse for implementing partners providing gender-based violence services. Together with the Ministry of Women, Family and Child Protection and the gender-based violence subcluster, he organized community discussions with people in extremely vulnerable situations, including women, young people, internally displaced persons and sex workers, highlighting the United Nations rules on sexual exploitation and abuse and avenues for reporting and seeking assistance. He also regularly promoted awareness of these issues through local radio and television programmes.

39. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Field Victims' Rights Advocate collaborated with UNFPA and UNICEF to facilitate medical and psychosocial support through local partners. With support from MONUSCO, she relocated victims and facilitated transportation to service providers and referral to mission medical facilities. She supported the MONUSCO Conduct and Discipline Team in collecting

¹⁹ Available at www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/projects-and-reports.

DNA samples for paternity and child support claims and cooperated with one Member State to resolve outstanding claims. She delivered training for community-based complaint networks across the country, engaging over 1,000 members, including community leaders, local authorities, civil society and women's and youth groups to strengthen awareness-raising, including on reporting and assistance for victims. In November, she coordinated the launch of new trust fund projects providing educational support for children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse and provided advice to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee mission to the country. She also supported victims of alleged sexual exploitation and abuse related to the response to the tenth Ebola epidemic in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in investigations and other actions of United Nations and international and national humanitarian entities.

40. In line with the instruction contained in paragraph 77 of [A/70/729](#), the Field Victims' Rights Advocate in Haiti leveraged funds from the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti for immediate medical, travel and accommodation support for victims and children born of sexual exploitation and abuse, and cooperated with UNICEF and UNDP to generate longer-term assistance, including for school fees and other educational support. She cooperated with lawyers and legal aid organizations to provide legal assistance relating to paternity and child support claims. She also cooperated with the Office of the Ombudsperson to report and follow up on allegations. To secure more sustainable assistance, the Advocate collaborated with UNDP to develop a trust fund project to provide holistic support to victims and their children, and with IOM on a Central Emergency Response Fund project for life-saving assistance to children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse.

41. With the support of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, the Senior Victims' Rights Officer in South Sudan arranged rent advances for victims, when the COVID-19 pandemic precluded evacuation to safe shelter, and medical and psychosocial assistance. She maintained contact remotely with victims and stakeholders on child maintenance and other support, including legal assistance. She initiated discussions with rule of law practitioners on practices, in particular related to child marriage, that remain obstacles to realizing victims' rights. She also collaborated with the inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordinator and task force to embed victim assistance in their workplan and a system-wide approach to victim assistance. As a result, victim assistance has been integrated into the task force's workplan. It is developing a common inter-agency victim-assistance tracking system and a framework for the provision of mobile services to victims.

VI. Facilitating accountability at the national level

42. The Organization, as an employer, uses its administrative and disciplinary mechanisms to sanction personnel who engage in sexual exploitation and abuse. All substantiated allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse violate United Nations standards of conduct and those that fall within the definition contained in the Secretary-General's bulletin on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse ([ST/SGB/2003/13](#)) result in the perpetrating staff member being separated from service and included in Clear Check.

43. Not all such allegations amount to crimes in national jurisdictions. Where they may amount to crimes, the role of the United Nations is to: (a) refer credible allegations of which it becomes aware to Member States as a priority; and (b) whether or not initially referred by the United Nations, cooperate with national investigations and prosecutions to facilitate the proper administration of justice. That is without

prejudice to the rights of any victim or witness to report allegations of criminal acts of sexual exploitation and abuse to national authorities at any time.

44. I provide information received from Member States on the status of investigations and prosecutions in referral and cooperation cases in my annual report on the criminal accountability of United Nations officials and experts on mission.²⁰ That report does not include information on allegations concerning members of national military contingents in United Nations peace operations, which, in line with the model memorandum of understanding governing the contribution of personnel to United Nations peace operations (see [A/C.5/69/18](#), chap. 9), are subject to the exclusive criminal jurisdiction of their State of nationality. Information received from Member States contributing national military contingents is available on the United Nations website.²¹

45. Between 1 July 2016 and 30 June 2020, 19 credible allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse against United Nations officials and experts on mission were referred to their States of nationality. In all cases, the United Nations provided cooperation when requested by the relevant national authorities. Recent cooperation resulted in the arrest and indictment of a former staff member alleged to have raped several women.²²

46. I urge Member States to ensure that United Nations personnel who may have engaged in any form of criminal conduct, including in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse, are held accountable, and reiterate that the Organization will cooperate with national authorities in this regard.

47. OHCHR continued to follow up with Member States providing non-United Nations security forces operating under a Security Council mandate to support accountability processes, including by providing information and technical advice, facilitating contact with victims and designing protection measures. OHCHR is not aware of national proceedings leading to sanctions for perpetrators in relation to the cases documented in my reports on such forces.

VII. Engagement with Member States and civil society

48. Collective action and coordination, including at the bilateral and multilateral levels, and exchange of experience and learning, are essential if we, as the international community, are to be successful in eliminating sexual exploitation and abuse. Initiatives such as the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recommendation on ending sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in development cooperation and humanitarian

²⁰ Annex I to the report of the Secretary-General on the criminal accountability of United Nations officials and experts on mission ([A/75/217](#)) contains information regarding each case referred to national authorities by the Organization and the status of actions taken by the States concerned, in accordance with General Assembly resolution [62/63](#). Annex II to that report contains information concerning cases in which Member States have informed the United Nations of investigations in the past four years.

²¹ Data on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse are provided in the supplementary information to the present report, in English only, available at www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/secretary-generals-reports. Section III.B of that supplementary information contains data regarding allegations involving members of national military contingents under United Nations command, which are subject to the exclusive criminal jurisdiction of the States contributing such personnel.

²² The referral was done by the Secretary-General, in accordance with his obligation under General Assembly resolution [62/63](#) to bring credible allegations of criminal conduct by United Nations officials and experts on mission to the attention of the relevant State of nationality.

assistance, endorsed by UNICEF and UNHCR, are noteworthy.²³ Equally welcome are the work of the cross-sector steering group, led by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which maps progress across the aid sector against the Safeguarding Summit 2018 commitments, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and United States Agency for International Development employment accountability community of practice, which facilitates knowledge-sharing among organizations, as well as reviews, such as that of the United Kingdom House of Commons International Development Committee on progress in tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries²⁴ and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact report on sexual exploitation and abuse by international peacekeepers.²⁵

49. Member States support United Nations efforts through the voluntary compact, which has been signed by 103 Member States. It sets out commitments of the United Nations and signatory Member States beyond their existing legal obligations and demonstrates the political will to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, realize accountability and provide support to victims. My circle of leadership on prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse in United Nations operations testifies to the individual political commitment of Heads of State and Government to strengthen those measures. I urge Member States to consider joining both initiatives.

50. In July 2020, the Special Coordinator convened a meeting of representatives of my circle of leadership. During the meeting, updates on the implementation of my strategy in the context of the pandemic were provided and the Field Victims' Rights Advocate in the Democratic Republic of the Congo outlined her work on the ground. In October 2020, the Victims' Rights Advocate hosted a briefing entitled "Voices from the field", at which Field Victims' Rights Advocates and dedicated protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordinators described their collaboration and progress and challenges in the light of COVID-19.

51. The Secretariat strengthened its bilateral cooperation with troop- and police-contributing countries and regional partners through the regular exchange of information on technical-level experiences and good practices. The Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance completed the collection and analysis of data to assist in the development of specialized training materials for military and police commanders on conduct and discipline, including sexual exploitation and abuse, for use in predeployment training to complement the Pipeline to Peacekeeping Command Programme leadership initiative. In the context of Action for Peacekeeping, the Department will convene a high-level meeting on good practices solicited from Member States through a survey. A related technical-level meeting will be convened to discuss solutions to paternity and child support claims, informed by an analysis by the Department of 226 claims.

52. The Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance shared good practices, lessons learned and technical support on conduct and discipline, including methodologies for vetting personnel for a history of misconduct in prior peace operations, the development of case management systems and processes and misconduct risk management and training, with the African Union. OHCHR also cooperated with the African Union on the screening and selection of personnel for African Union peace operations and case management of and accountability for misconduct and human rights violations, providing assistance on standard-setting, the development of policies and the exchange of lessons and good practices. These efforts

²³ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, document OECD/LEGAL/5020.

²⁴ United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Parliament, "Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: next steps inquiry launched" (8 July 2020).

²⁵ Independent Commission for Aid Impact, "Sexual exploitation and abuse by international peacekeepers" (30 September 2020).

are aimed at harmonizing the standards applicable to non-United Nations forces deployed by the African Union and those applicable to United Nations personnel.

53. My Civil Society Advisory Board provides a conduit for civil society voices to be heard within the United Nations system. In 2020, the Board regularly engaged with the Office of the Special Coordinator, the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate and other United Nations actors to promote the alignment of civil society actors on good practices to strengthen prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse. The Board is mapping the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse initiatives of other multilateral organizations and international non-governmental organizations to identify where the United Nations is leading and lessons to be learned. It is also reviewing the impact of civilian accountability mechanisms on the military.

VIII. Communications

54. In 2020, the Department of Global Communications led two training courses for nearly 30 senior United Nations, African Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization personnel to enhance their ability to communicate internally and externally on sexual exploitation and abuse. Feedback was positive, and further sessions are planned for 2021.

55. The Secretariat developed a video on ways to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, available in the six official languages of the United Nations, as well as Hindi, Kiswahili and Portuguese, to be shown on aircraft transporting military and police personnel for deployment in peace operations.

56. Radio Okapi of MONUSCO and other community radio stations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo broadcast messages on victim assistance and reporting in different regions and languages. In Haiti, radio spots raised awareness of reporting mechanisms, including a hotline, in collaboration with the Office of the Ombudsperson.

57. Websites and other technology are increasingly used to bolster coordination. My dedicated public multilingual website²⁶ provides a "one-stop shop", enhancing transparency through the publication of all allegations brought to the attention of the United Nations. To facilitate information-sharing among personnel and avoid duplication of effort, the Department of Operational Support launched a web-based knowledge gateway, including a section on sexual exploitation and abuse, organized thematically. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has consolidated resources and information for humanitarian country teams and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse networks on a website,²⁷ which features a global dashboard to track progress against the Standing Committee plan for accelerating protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian response at the country level and make country documents easily accessible.

58. In February 2020, UNHCR and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies launched the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse community outreach and communication fund, to support community-led efforts to make victims aware of how and where they can safely report sexual exploitation and abuse. Over 1,600 applications were received, and 19 projects received grants. In December 2020, to streamline system-wide external communications on sexual exploitation and abuse, an inter-agency communications task force was formed under the umbrella of the

²⁶ Available at www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse.

²⁷ Available at <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org>.

system-wide working group on sexual exploitation and abuse, co-chaired by the Department of Global Communications and UNFPA.

59. A mobile phone training application for Apple and Android phones, developed by the United Nations with pro bono support from Ericsson, is available in English and will soon be available in French. The application provides online training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse for United Nations staff and related personnel and will also be made available to the general public.

IX. Overview of data on allegations

60. The total number of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse received across the United Nations system in 2020 was 387. Of those allegations, 66 related to peace operations and special political missions, compared with 80 allegations reported in 2019; 91 involved United Nations staff and related personnel and personnel of agencies, funds and programmes, compared with 107 reported in 2019; and 227 related to personnel of implementing partners, compared with 174 reported in 2019. Three allegations of sexual exploitation involving members of a formerly deployed non-United Nations security force were reported.

A. Peace operations and special political missions

61. A total of 66 allegations were reported with sufficient information to identify at least one act of sexual exploitation or abuse committed by at least one identifiable perpetrator or against at least one identifiable victim, involving personnel in peace operations and special political missions. This is a decrease from the 80 allegations reported in 2019 and below the average of the 69 allegations reported annually over the past 10 years.

62. Of the allegations reported, 46, or 70 per cent of the total allegations reported, were related to MINUSCA (27) and MONUSCO (19). This proportion is similar to that observed in 2018 and 2019. When compared with 2019, this is a decrease in the number of allegations relating to MINUSCA (41 in 2019) and an increase relating to MONUSCO (15 in 2019). There were 19 allegations, or 29 per cent of the total, related to other peace operations (United Nations Mission in South Sudan (8), United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (2), African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (2), United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (1), United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (1), United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (3) and the former United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (2)). The remaining allegation (1 per cent) concerned the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, a special political mission.²⁸

63. Of the 66 allegations reported in 2020, 40 (60 per cent) related to events in 2019 or earlier, including 1 in 2003. The percentage of allegations related to events from 2019 and earlier increased to approximately 70 per cent for MINUSCA and MONUSCO. The 26 allegations related to events in 2020 represent the lowest number of allegations related to the reporting year since such data started to be compiled, in 2010.

64. The number of identified alleged victims (68) and perpetrators (68) decreased in 2020 and represents the lowest in both categories in the past five years. Almost all allegations involved a single victim and perpetrator, in comparison with 2019 and

²⁸ Additional information and details on allegations, including on the status of investigations, are available at <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-data-introduction>.

2018, when the allegations involved 92 victims and 106 perpetrators, and 112 victims and 108 perpetrators, respectively. The proportion of child victims fell below 20 per cent for the first time. Also in 2020, 20 allegations (30 per cent) concerned acts of sexual abuse and 46 concerned sexual exploitation, making the proportion of allegations related to sexual abuse in 2020, as in 2019, the lowest since 2010. In 2020, 37 allegations were associated with paternity claims.

65. The decrease in the number of allegations reported in 2020 coincides with similar decreases related to civilian and military personnel, but a slight increase in allegations involving police personnel, with the following data for each category of personnel:

(a) Allegations involving civilian personnel, international or locally recruited staff and contractors' personnel in peace operations and special political missions (18 allegations in 2020, compared with 25 in 2019, 13 in 2018 and 11 in 2017);

(b) Allegations involving military personnel (41 in 2020, compared with 49 in 2019, 39 in 2018 and 41 in 2017). Of the 41 allegations received in 2020, 24 (59 per cent) involved military personnel in MINUSCA, although 17 of the allegations pertaining to MINUSCA and involving military personnel (71 per cent) related to events in 2019 or earlier;

(c) Allegations involving police or other government-provided personnel, other than military personnel (7 in 2020, compared with 6 in 2019, 4 in 2018 and 11 in 2017).

66. The proportion of allegations substantiated following the completion of investigations has remained fairly constant over the years, with approximately 40 per cent of allegations being substantiated and 60 per cent being unsubstantiated. Investigations conducted by the United Nations into allegations received in 2019 or earlier have been completed, with the exception of four allegations reported in 2019, with efforts remaining under way by OIOS to complete investigations for those allegations reported late in 2019.

67. Complete information remains pending on investigations conducted by Member States with regard to 78 allegations involving military personnel reported in 2019 or earlier, namely, 20 allegations received in 2019 and 58 allegations received in 2018 or earlier, with information awaited from one Member State with regard to 25 allegations. In addition, for allegations involving military or police personnel that have been substantiated through investigations, information on accountability measures taken by Member States remains pending for 51 allegations reported in 2019 or earlier. However, following additional engagement, some troop- and police-contributing countries have been providing information on results of investigations and/or accountability measures taken on a number of outstanding matters.

B. United Nations entities (other than peace operations and special political missions) and their implementing partners

68. In 2020, 91 allegations relating to personnel of agencies, funds and programmes were reported, compared with 107 in 2019.²⁹ Of the 91 allegations, 19 related to 2020 and 25 related to previous years, with the date of 47 reported incidents being unknown. The number of allegations of sexual abuse decreased from 38 in 2019 to 17 in 2020, and the number of child victims decreased from 38 in 2019 to 15 in 2020.

²⁹ In addition to the 95 allegations indicated in [A/74/705](#), 12 additional allegations were recorded for 2019, as acts of sexual exploitation and abuse occurring in 2018 were uncovered during investigations completed in 2020.

Regarding the status of the allegations, 7 allegations have been substantiated, 9 were unsubstantiated, 35 are under investigation, 21 are at the preliminary assessment stage, 1 is to be determined and 18 are closed. Those 18 allegations were closed because of a lack of evidence and/or separation of the alleged perpetrators from the entity at their own initiative or the entity's initiative on grounds of other misconduct. Of the 107 allegations reported in 2019, 18 remain under investigation, 16 were substantiated, 20 were unsubstantiated, 7 are at the preliminary assessment stage and 46 are closed.

C. Allegations involving personnel of implementing partners

69. In 2020, 227 allegations relating to personnel of implementing partners not under the authority of the United Nations were reported, compared with 174 in 2019. There was a significant increase in allegations of sexual exploitation, from 39 in 2019 to 63 in 2020.

D. Non-United Nations forces

70. In 2020, the United Nations received three allegations of sexual exploitation involving three men from different non-United Nations security forces: two concerning the former African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) and one concerning the European Union Military Training Mission in the Central African Republic, an increase in allegations since 2019 (when one allegation was reported in connection with MISCA). Each allegation involves one female victim from the Central African Republic, and two include paternity claims. OHCHR found that the information was substantiated in two cases, and credible in another, but was unable to finalize the investigation owing to a lack of cooperation. Each case has been referred to the Member State concerned for investigation and is being followed up by OHCHR.

X. Conclusions

71. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations maintained its resolve and commitment to place victims' rights and dignity at the centre of its efforts to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse. Institutionalized coordination mechanisms have mainstreamed efforts to confront these intolerable behaviours across all pillars of the Organization, and it is clearly recognized that accountability begins at the top. Partnerships with Member States and other intergovernmental organizations and civil society were and will continue to be enhanced, as these are challenges that confront everyone.

72. Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse requires the constant vigilance of all international actors, exchange of best practice and innovative solutions. We must step up efforts to address the power differentials and inequalities that lie at the root of this inexcusable behaviour. We must expand the work to embed a culture that rewards those who call out sexual exploitation and abuse, sanction perpetrators and sharpen focus on risk factors. We will not relent.

73. The Secretary-General recommends that the General Assembly take note of the present report.