

U.N. Knew of Rebels in Area of Congo Rapes New York Times Josh Kron 25 August 2010

The United Nations knew Rwandan rebels were occupying villages in eastern Congo at the time the rebels raped nearly 200 women there, United Nations and aid officers said Wednesday, raising questions about why peacekeepers failed to move to protect villagers.

Between July 30 and Aug. 3, hundreds of soldiers from two rebel groups took over the villages, raping at least 179 women. Many of the attacks were gang rapes by two to six men. The humanitarian group that documented the rapes, International Medical Corps, said that it first notified the United Nations of the attacks on Aug. 6. The United Nations claims the group told it about the rapes on Aug. 12 for the first time. The U.N. made its first public comments on the rapes Sunday. (...)

According to the officers, an e-mail alert from the United Nations Department of Safety and Security was sent to United Nations staff members on July 30, the day the rapes began. The message warned them to stay away from the area — part of Walikale, in the North Kivu Province of Congo — because it had been taken over by rebels. (...)

The officer said that the alert did not mention rape. On Wednesday, the top United Nations official in Congo said that the rebel activity reported on July 31 was not out of the ordinary. “There was no particular suggestion of an attack, much less the kind of events like the mass rape,” said the official, Roger Meece, speaking to reporters in New York by video teleconference from Goma.

Even so, a United Nations official based in Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, said that such an alert would almost certainly have been shared with peacekeepers and should have prompted them to try to protect the villagers.

The United Nations keeps a forward peacekeeping base nearby, for better communication with villagers, and the Congolese military has a presence in the area. It had sent a patrol down the main road at the time to remove a roadblock set up by other rebels, Mr. Meece said. (...)

Mr. Meece said that a United Nations patrol had passed through a couple of the villages where the rapes were taking place — once while at least some rebels remained in the area and once after they were gone — but that the villagers never said anything about the horrific sexual assaults. The first word came via humanitarian workers nearly two weeks after the rapes occurred, he said.

The presence of the patrol during the time of the attacks meshes with reports from the area. A

United Nations spokesman, Madnodje Mounoubai, said humanitarian organizations alerted the United Nations of the attacks a week after the rebels left the villages, on Aug. 12. The United Nations then organized a team for fact-finding, security and aid. (...)

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