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UN peacekeepers in Haiti

6 months after democratic elections, Port-au-Prince has seen another upsurge in violence. Staff at Médecins Sans Frontières report treating more than 200 gunshot wounds in July, double the previous month's number of injuries. The fighting raises questions about the effectiveness of the UN peacekeeping mission, whose intermittent 15-year presence was extended for a further 6 months on Aug 15.

In today's *Lancet*, Athena Kolbe and Royce Hutson report human rights violations in Port-au-Prince. Central to their findings is the fact that civilian welfare fails to attract the attention it deserves from authorities in times of conflict, with neither the Haitian government, nor the UN peacekeepers being able to estimate the effect of the conflict on civilians. Yet in just 22 months—from the departure of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the end of 2005—an estimated 8000 people were murdered and 35000 women sexually assaulted, half of whom were under the age of 18 years.

Most perpetrators were identified as criminals, but police, armed forces, paramilitaries, and foreign soldiers were also implicated. Although UN peacekeepers have

been investigated for accusations of sexual misconduct in Haiti and elsewhere, Kolbe and Hutson's survey did not find evidence for their involvement in murder or sexual assault. However 14% of the interviewees did accuse foreign soldiers, including those in UN uniform, of threatening them with sexual or physical violence, including death.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has spoken out firmly against exploitative behaviour by UN peacekeepers. In 2005, at Annan's request, Prince Zeid of Jordan, whose soldiers serve in Haiti, proposed a number of measures to reduce sexual exploitation by UN personnel. One result has been the active investigation of allegations. Yet since 2004, only 17 peacekeepers have been dismissed and 161 repatriated out of 313 allegations worldwide. Annan's stand needs to be followed by stronger action to restore both international and local confidence, without which local security cannot be assured. Severely traumatised populations remain vulnerable, and as Kolbe and Hutson show, suffering does not stop when peacekeepers arrive. UN peacekeepers must no longer add to that suffering. ■ *The Lancet*