

Inter-Agency Standing Committee

**Rome, 9 April 2002
FAO Headquarters**

**IASC Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
in Humanitarian Crisis**

Draft Communication Strategy

Background

The public acknowledgement on 26 February that humanitarian workers in West Africa refugee camps were allegedly involved in the sexual exploitation of children and women brought widespread global media coverage. The story made top headlines for at least three days.

Although the news coverage dropped off significantly thereafter, the IASC Working Group on Communications believes that public interest remains strong and that further broad media coverage must be anticipated.

A number of upcoming events may be seen by the media and others as opportunities to resurrect the issue. Such events may include:

- The issuance of the IASC Policy Statement
- The eventual release of the OIOS report or other documents related to the original allegations
- The 15 May elections in Sierra Leone, when many journalists may visit the country
- The United Nations Special Session on Children, from 8-10 May
- The Fourteenth International Conference on HIV/AIDS, 7-12 July
- The Humanitarian Segment of ECOSOC, from 15-17 July
- The November Security Council session on the protection of civilians in armed conflict
- The Launch of the 2003 Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeals on 19 November

In addition, it is understood that the media will continue to explore this issue for the foreseeable future and that fresh allegations could potentially emerge at any time in any part of the world. It is equally well understood, therefore, that all agencies in all countries must be ready to work with journalists on the ground.

Although specific audiences such as governments and major donors may be receiving regular updates on the evolving response of the humanitarian community, the broader public may still be left wondering what is being done to punish offenders and prevent such abuses in the future.

In response, some humanitarian agencies have been issuing regular public updates on their own follow-up actions. All agencies are encouraged to do so.

But by creating a common public information strategy, the IASC will ensure that the public at large understands that the system is speaking with one voice and is united behind a common plan of action to stamp out all such abuses.

Finally, the Working Group briefly considered the need for a coordinated communication strategy with DPKO. It was decided that the IASC strategy must focus on its area of responsibility –humanitarian workers – leaving the issue of coordinating messages with DPKO to OCHA.

Strategic Objectives

- To convey to the general public that the humanitarian community is united in its efforts to stamp out the problem using a transparent, coordinated and effective plan of action – and that action is being taken quickly.
- To anticipate developments in media coverage and advise the IASC on appropriate actions.
- To enable the humanitarian community to prepare for further media coverage, to ensure that such coverage is accurate, and to respond effectively to such coverage in a unified manner.
- To enable IASC members to turn ongoing media interest into opportunities to educate the public about broader humanitarian challenges and themes.
- To support IASC members in their efforts to protect civilians by educating vulnerable populations about their rights via local mass media.

Key Messages

For the purposes of media relations and public information, a few simple key messages are proposed for use by all IASC members. These messages should be communicated in a frank, open and transparent manner at every opportunity. These messages may be reinforced and fleshed out by individual agencies as long as the common themes remain paramount.

1. Zero tolerance

All allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse are being promptly investigated and those found guilty will be sanctioned.

2. Action is underway

Remedial actions and preventive measures are underway. The immediate steps are part of a long-term process of instituting safeguards. Actions are focusing both on empowering vulnerable communities and better training and monitoring humanitarian workers.

3. Sexual exploitation and abuse affects all societies, and is a serious problem.

Open discussion of the recent allegations is an opportunity for societies to remove the veil of secrecy that hides and implicitly sanctions sexual exploitation and abuse.

4. The accusations are local, but our response is global

While focusing on the particular needs of refugees in West Africa, we are also taking a broader approach to prevention by developing policies and working procedures to forestall cases of sexual abuse and exploitation by humanitarian personnel in all parts of the world.

5. Women and children must be empowered

The vast majority of the victims of sexual exploitation and abuse are women and children. A mass communications programme will help ensure that refugee and displaced populations are aware of their rights to unfettered assistance and protection. Women beneficiaries should also be more involved in the distribution of humanitarian assistance.

6. The vast majority of humanitarian workers are committed to helping people in need with integrity, decency and honesty.

Unfortunately, the allegations have tarnished the reputations of the many dedicated national and international aid workers who continue, under difficult and often dangerous conditions, to ensure that the world's most vulnerable people are provided with life-sustaining assistance and protection. Their work deserves to be supported and their ranks increased, particularly with additional female staff.

7. The humanitarian needs in West Africa remain serious and require sustained international support.

These allegations should in no way undermine donor support for both protection *and* assistance in these refugee camps, where humanitarian needs remain enormous.

Recommended Actions

These recommendations presuppose that IASC wishes to take the proactive position of keeping the public informed of remedial and preventive actions being taken. It is in the interest of the IASC to place itself on record, showing the seriousness with which it views

the matter and demonstrating that, in essence, there is nothing to hide from public scrutiny. By shouldering full responsibility and “owning” the issue, the IASC can defuse criticism.

The Working Group proposes the following actions for its own follow-up:

- 1) Continued meetings on a regular basis to review latest developments and consider upcoming key dates. Such meetings are necessary to ensure the humanitarian community adequately considers what public information steps may be useful as the situation develops. Working Group to establish ongoing calendar at its next teleconference on 11 April.
- 2) The development of two distinct basic fact sheets, one for internal and the other for external purposes, outlining coordinated actions underway and other key information. These fact sheets would be updated on a bi-weekly basis and disseminated to all IASC members. The external fact sheet should be distributed to field offices and posted on the Web sites of the individual agencies, as well as on Relief Web. Working Group suggests that UNHCR acts as lead on this tool. Drafts to be finalized by 19 April.
- 3) The establishment of an information-sharing mechanism via email that enables and encourages member agencies to share information about upcoming media stories on this topic as soon as such coverage appears likely. The Working Group is aware that, at present, broadcast and print journalists are in the field and exploring this subject – there is little excuse for the system to be caught by surprise by any major new coverage. OCHA to take the lead on creating a mechanism.
- 4) The establishment of an early-warning mechanism that alerts the Working Group and allows for quick and coordinated responses to unforeseen media developments. This would most likely take the form of a rapid-response conference call initiated by OCHA with members of this Working Group. Key information could be shared and a general approach, including key messages, agreed. To this end, Working Group has created a list of immediate contact points. .

The Working Group makes the following proposals for immediate IASC consideration and decision:

- A) The group proposes an IASC press event prior to the Special Session on Children to provide a general update on actions taken and anticipated, depending on the press climate at the time and on the basis that this would not be detrimental. If undertaken, such a press event should come at least 10 days to 2 weeks ahead of the May 8 start of the SSC. Such an event would both demonstrate the humanitarian community’s commitment to action and transparency, and defuse lingering questions that might otherwise arise during the SSC. The group also proposes that this event be used as the forum for issuing the IASC Policy Statement.

- B) The Communication Working Group asks the IASC to consider a mass communications plan for vulnerable populations around the world. We believe that communication through local mass media and other devices can be an excellent tool both for educating vulnerable communities about their rights and empowering them to take action should those rights be violated. A vigorous and visible communication effort in the refugee and IDP camps and among other vulnerable populations also serves as a reminder and warning to those who might consider exploitation and abuse acceptable activities. A considerable amount of work has been done in this regard, which can be built upon and amplified by IASC members.