

Bosnia: The United Nations, human trafficking and prostitution

Tony Robson
21 August 2002

There is mounting evidence that the United Nations has carried out a cover-up of the role played by its personnel in human trafficking and prostitution in Bosnia—a trade that has grown astronomically since the establishment of the Western protectorate seven years ago.

An American woman who served with the International Police Task Force (IPTF) in Bosnia recently won a case of unfair dismissal against a US State Department sub-contractor, after she was sacked for reporting an alleged prostitution racket involving other serving officers.

Kathryn Bolkovac was an employee of DynCorp Technical Services, one of the US government's top 25 service providers with 23,000 employees worldwide. In Bosnia DynCorp provides maintenance support for the US military, as well as recruiting American officers for the international police force through its UK subsidiary, DynCorp Aerospace Operations Ltd. DynCorp has earned \$1 billion since 1995 for providing maintenance to the US military worldwide. The contract to provide recruitment for the IPTF is valued at \$15 million.

The case against DynCorp Aerospace Operations Ltd was brought under the UK Public Interest Disclosure legislation, known as the "whistleblowers charter", which protects employees who make disclosures about malpractice within their company. Bolkovac had been posted to Sarajevo in 1999 to investigate traffic in young women from Eastern Europe who were forced into prostitution.

"When I started collecting evidence from the victims of sex-trafficking, it was clear that a number of UN officers were involved from several different countries, including quite a few from Britain," she said. "I was shocked, appalled and disgusted. They were supposed to be over there to help, but they were committing crimes themselves. But when I told the supervisors they didn't want to know."

Bolkovac first drew attention to the abuses in October 2000 in an email to DynCorp management. She was first demoted and then six months later sacked. On August 2, in a 21-page judgement, the Southampton Employment Tribunal found in favour of Bolkovac and against DynCorp Aerospace Operations Ltd. The company's claim that her employment was terminated because of gross misconduct was firmly rejected. Evidence of falsifying time sheets was dismissed as "sketchy to the point of being non-existent". Charles Twiss, the tribunal chairman stated, "We have considered DynCorp's explanation of why they dismissed her and find it completely unbelievable. There is no doubt whatever that the reason for her dismissal was that she made a protected disclosure and was unfairly dismissed."

Bolkovac is not the only employee of DynCorp to seek legal redress for unfair dismissal. An American aircraft maintenance technician, Ben Johnstone, filed a lawsuit against his sacking in 1999 after he also disclosed information about the involvement of co-workers and supervisors in the sex trade at the DynCorp hangar at Comanche Base, one of two US bases in Bosnia. The allegations included sex with minors, rape and buying and selling women for sex.

His allegations led to a raid on the base by the 48th Military Police

Detachment on June 2, 2000. The operation by the US Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) began to uncover evidence supporting the claims made by Johnstone. However, the investigation was wound up after the CID determined that, under the Dayton Agreement, UN officials and contractors enjoyed immunity. Two of the employees named by Johnstone and most heavily implicated in the abuses were sacked, but escaped criminal charges.

Johnstone was sacked the day before the raid for disciplinary reasons that were unsubstantiated—he merely received a letter of discharge for bringing "discredit to the company and the US Army while working in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina." Since 1998, eight DynCorp employees have been sent home from Bosnia, three have been dismissed for using prostitutes, and none have been prosecuted.

Bolkovac made disclosures to the UN chief in Bosnia, Jacques Paul Klein, and the UN's police commissioner in Bosnia in November 2000, but IPTF Deputy Commissioner Mike Steirs described her as "stressed and burned out" and her contact with the UN was terminated following her sacking.

The disclosures came at a very sensitive time. Bolkovac's memos coincided with a number of controversial raids on brothels in Prijedor by UN monitors and police. The owner of the brothels subsequently alleged that the raids were mounted after he refused to pay protection money to the officers. Six officers were sent back home on the grounds that they had exceeded their duties, but a charge of improper conduct was withdrawn. In a press statement in May 2001 Klein stated: "During my tenure, there have been no cover-ups and I have implemented a zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual and other serious misconduct."

Despite these denials, there are tensions between those bodies that are supposed to be dealing with the criminal aspects of sex trafficking and those monitoring human rights issues. Madeleine Rees, the representative for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bosnia, stated: "The truth about the Prijedor raids and the subsequent resignation of the officers involved has never been made apparent."

In February 2001, David Lamb, a former Philadelphia police officer who worked as a UN human rights investigator until April of that year, conducted an investigation into allegations against six Rumanian, Fijian and Pakistani officers stationed in the town of Bijeljina. The preliminary results provided evidence that merited a full-scale criminal investigation. However, Lamb and his co-workers complained of obfuscation and intimidation by senior figures in the IPTF. Lamb was quoted in the *Washington Post* stating, "I have to say there were credible witnesses, but I found a real reluctance on the part of the United Nations ... leadership to investigate these allegations" (*UN Halted Probe of Officers' Alleged Role in Sex Trafficking*, September 27, 2001).

Lamb's evidence was based upon interviews with Bosnian police sources and women who had fled from the brothels and were awaiting repatriation. The investigation team established the identity of one of the officers who admitted to purchasing working documents from the

Rumanian embassy for two women, but warned them to end the inquiry. A confidential internal affairs report claims that a follow-up investigation by a Canadian officer, Rosario Ioanna, was hampered by Rumanian officers who attempted to remove four trafficking victims and to intimidate them under questioning.

Based upon interviews given by informants it was established that in return for tip-offs about police raids the brothel keepers gave the IPTF officers gifts. A list of around 10 other Rumanian officers involved in patronising the brothels was compiled based upon the evidence of one trafficking victim. The UN's Ukrainian police chief of staff Oleh Savchenko ordered Ioanna to close the investigation and concentrate on the charges of sexual misconduct of a less serious nature, such as soliciting prostitutes, against five police officers from Fiji and Pakistan. Four of these officers were sent home and the other left the mission. The inquiry into IPTF involvement in human trafficking was left hanging in mid-air. The inquiry into UN police involvement in sexual trafficking—promised by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Mary Robinson—never came to pass. After an initial inquiry by two investigators sent by the Office of Internal Oversight to Bosnia on June 26, 2001, a further criminal investigation was ruled out. This decision was made after only two weeks. At no time did the UN contact Lamb or Bolkovac and none of the women who had initially made the allegations were traced after having left the country.

The IPTF has sought to deflect criticism by being seen to play a more active role against sex trafficking. The Special Trafficking Operations Program (STOP) was set-up by UN in July 2000. The think tank, International Crisis Group (ICG), describes it as a body “to guide and monitor local police, to rescue women from sexual bondage and to *keep UN staff on the straight and narrow*” (emphasis added). In the period between March 1 and July 25, 2001 the IPTF accompanied local police on more than 200 raids on brothels. According to its progress report for the year published on August 1, 2002, a special unit of UN and Bosnian police has conducted 600 raids on some 200 bars and clubs suspected of using trafficked women for prostitution. Half were closed down and 182 women, mainly from Rumania, Ukraine and Moldova, were returned home. However only a fraction of the 56 bar owners sentenced to jail have ended up there. Despite being identified as centres of prostitution, 78 bars were allowed to stay open on the basis of legal technicalities. According to an ICG report published in May 2002, only seven people had been convicted of trafficking related offences. They received custodial sentences of between four and 30 months and fines from KM 1,200 (\$US600) to KM 10,000.

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) between 6,000 and 10,000 foreign women have been coerced into prostitution in Bosnia. Sources put the figure of establishments where sex can be bought at 900. Figures compiled by the IOM in May 2000 showed that more than 50 percent of the women came from Moldova while the remainder originated from other former republics of the Soviet Union such as Ukraine and Belarus, and a significant number from Rumania. More than two thirds had never worked in prostitution before.

Many are lured by promises of finding work in the West as waitresses or nannies. Once isolated from their families, the sex traffickers take their passports and sell the women to pimps for between \$500 and \$1,500. At some venues, like the nightclubs in Brcko, near the Bosnia-Serbia border, women are auctioned like cattle to brothel owners. The area is known locally as the “Arizona market” in recognition of American influence. It was established as a zone of separation following the partition of the republic into two entities and is policed by NATO troops. The US provided finance to establish it as a free trade zone and it has long been a centre for trade in illicit goods.

The IOM provides shelter and helps repatriate women who have been abducted and forced into prostitution. Since August 1999, it has assisted

429 women and girls, repatriating most and helping one to resettle in a third country. Of these, 12 were minors—with the youngest being just 12-years-old. Following a police raid on a nightclub last December, a 15 year-old girl was found. The girl reported that she had been kidnapped in Rumania on her way to school.

The overseas personnel and officials of the UN and NATO have provided much of the demand for prostitution. Madeleine Rees claims, “When the civil war ended in 1992 there were few curfews and ordinary people didn’t have cars or money.” In addition to approximately 20,000 NATO troops and aid workers that were stationed in Bosnia, there are some 1,600 officers from 48 different countries serving with the IPTF.

A similar development has taken place in Kosovo where prostitution was relatively small-scale before the establishment of the protectorate. While it is estimated that internationals account for 30 percent of the clientele, they provide 80 percent of the revenue, making them the most important patrons. The province has some 120 strip-clubs. One of the first to open was the Apache club, named after the US helicopters used in the 1999 conflict, only 14 kilometres from the massive US military base Camp Bondsteel.

The two protectorates have provided a major impetus in the growth of sex trafficking and also serve as a general transit route to Western Europe. Poor law enforcement, corruption and porous borders offer favourable conditions. The IOM estimates that around 250,000 women from Eastern Europe are trafficked through Serbia and other neighbouring states. When they arrive in Serbia they are divided into two groups. While a large number end up in Kosovo or Bosnia, many are destined for the West via Montenegro and northern Albania.

Many Bosnian women end up in the shelters that give aid to those escaping prostitution. If they have not been abducted, economic and social deprivation has a coercive influence. A recent report produced by the “Anti-Poverty Action Plan” reveals that only one in eight families in the Muslim-Croat Federation earns enough for a reasonable standard of living, while in the Serb entity only one in 25 families live above the poverty line. The unemployment rate is the highest in Europe.

Many of the criminal gangs that had been involved in gun running and drug trafficking have turned to sex trafficking because it is extremely lucrative and carries lighter criminal penalties. Collusion between the criminal underworld and those in officialdom—mainly nationalist politicians in both entities of Bosnia—is evidenced by the fact that many of the trafficked women have work permits designating them as “waitresses”, even though the unemployment rate in the protectorate is estimated officially at 40 percent.

The Dayton Peace Accords gave the UN “complete and unimpeded movement” and “no liability for damage to property”. Annex B gave NATO personnel legal immunity for their actions “under all circumstances and at all times” and made them subject to the “exclusive jurisdiction of their respective national elements” regarding any criminal or disciplinary offences in Bosnia. This has clearly been extended to cover all those serving within the Western protectorate. In short, the Western powers rule Bosnia like the colonial masters of old.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact