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A Canadian solution to a peacekeeping sex scandal

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Summer, 2000: A young NATO officer in Kosovo has reason to believe that the military contingent to which he is assigned is involved in a grave human-rights abuse: human trafficking. He writes a memo to his commanding officers describing the brothel located 200 meters from the contingent's base where women and girls are held against their will and where troops from this contingent can be seen entering and exiting. The memo makes its way up the chain of command, until a senior officer hands it over to the very contingent under suspicion. Nothing else happens except the contingent blacklists the whistle-blower.

Why? NATO has no procedures or training on this issue: Turning a blind eye substitutes for policy.

Summer, 2004: NATO is poised to change that. In the next few weeks, it is expected to roll out a policy that condemns trafficking and calls on nations participating in NATO-led operations to train their troops in what has been for many an ignored or tacitly accepted part of peacekeeping missions. Evidence has been mounting for some time that trafficking, especially the enslavement of women and girls for forced prostitution, follows market demand, and in postconflict situations, that often means international peacekeepers.

NATO is taking the key first step in cutting the links by endorsing a policy.

Now the hard part, implementation, begins. Canada can help turn this piece of paper into something real by leading the way in training peacekeepers on this issue. There are many reasons to do so.

Human trafficking is the movement of persons either through coercion, fraud, deception or force, for the express purposes of enslavement. Sex trafficking is not "just about prostitution." It is about people being sold as chattel, stripped of their passports and forced to pay off a bogus "debt" to their traffickers. In the Balkans, thousands of women and girls have been trafficked in the past several years. At least 10 per cent are minors.

As most of the world now recognizes from the war in Iraq, troops who condone or engage in human-rights abuses, themselves increase security threats to the mission. This is no less true of trafficking in humans in postconflict regions. International organized-crime networks that traffic in humans also often traffic in guns and narcotics. In Bosnia and Kosovo, human trafficking generates revenue for extremists implicated in war crimes.

Peacekeepers (including military personnel and civilian contractors) who exploit trafficked women and girls not only break local laws but also put money in the hands of

precisely the people who do not want a stable, secure environment. Supporting human trafficking helps institutionalize corruption within peacekeeping deployments. When those who control access to the gates of a base are involved, it adds to the force's risk: Guards can be bribed and bases penetrated. So it's especially worrisome that few militaries or civilian contractors in such missions are trained on this issue.

I fully expect that even when there is a policy, militaries will be reluctant to confront the issue. Not long before the young NATO officer tried to sound the alarm in summer, 2000, I went to NATO to talk about trafficking. I encountered a lot of eye-rolling and snickering. Just months ago, an officer who had served in the Balkans told me, "this [paying for sex] makes the boys happy and that's good for the mission"; another defense official from a core NATO country dismissed human trafficking as too low a priority for the intelligence community to be interested (though many missions already monitor trafficking in guns and drugs).

The real key to making the NATO policy -- and any nation's policy -- matter is vocal support from senior military leadership. In March, along with the U.S. and Norwegian ambassadors, I helped organize the first meeting on this issue for NATO ambassadors and military representatives. Despite promises, almost no one with stars on their shoulders participated.

Canada can make a very specific contribution. At NATO, the campaign to cut links between trafficking and peacekeeping operations has been driven by the Americans and the Norwegians; Ottawa has been silent.

Ottawa should instruct the Canadian mission at NATO (and the United Nations) to take an active part in what must be an international campaign.

Nations will be asked to make specific contributions: The most important would be if Ottawa financed and tasked the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre with leading the way in developing training modules for militaries on the human-trafficking issue.

What right do I as an American have to ask Canadians to fund such work? I'm the daughter, granddaughter and the great-granddaughter of Canadians. My mother's father fought four years in the First World War. His cousin died winning the Victoria Cross in that war. I've worked hard with policymakers in my country, the United States, to address this issue. Now I'm hoping the army my grandfather served in will lead the way in restoring honour to peacekeeping.

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