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WRITTEN QUESTION P-0687/02 by Maria Sanders-ten Holte (ELDR) to the Commission. Report by Save the Children about sexual abuse of girls by aid workers in exchange for aid in refugee camps in West Africa.

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by Maria Sanders-ten Holte (ELDR) to the Commission

(5 March 2002)

Subject: Report by Save the Children about sexual abuse of girls by aid workers in exchange for aid in refugee camps in West Africa

On 27 February, Reuters and The Guardian reported that in camps in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, refugee children are in many cases being sexually abused in exchange for aid. This has emerged from an extensive investigation by Save the Children. Nearly 70 people were identified as culprits in 1 500 interviews.

Is the Commission aware of this report?

Does the Commission know whether the alleged offenders include anybody who is involved in aid from the European Union and/or who is paid from EU funds? If so, which organisations do they belong to and what measures will be taken?

How does the Commission propose to prevent such excesses in future?

Answer given by Mr Nielson on behalf of the Commission

(27 March 2002)

The Commission has been made aware of the report following the announcement in the media. However, this is the first time the specific issue has been brought to its attention. In general terms, the Commission is aware of the desperate plight of refugees and the fact that they are vulnerable to abuses of various kinds. This is why it stresses the importance of protection activities in the refugee camps. In this context, it has consistently argued for a stronger international presence in the camps. The issue is regularly raised by the Commission in the discussions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other partners.

As far as the Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) is concerned as a funding agency, it does not deliver aid directly to beneficiaries. The humanitarian aid it provides is channelled through operational partner agencies (United Nations (UN), Red Cross and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)).

The Commission has not yet seen an official list of the 40 organisations allegedly involved. It could be that some of its partners are among them.

If it is shown that partner organisations have employed staff who have demanded sexual favours in return for humanitarian assistance, the Commission would expect the partner to dismiss those proved to have been involved immediately, and to report the matter to the local criminal authorities.

An inadequate reaction from the partner will lead the Commission to reconsider its funding arrangements with that partner.

Furthermore, ECHO has instructed its field experts in the region to contact partners urgently, with a view to ascertaining the extent of the problem and to discuss practical ways of tackling it.

In the field of humanitarian aid, the Community develops its action through ECHO, whose modus operandi include a well defined pre-screening procedure for all organisations chosen as project implementers. This screening procedure will lead to the signature of the Framework Partnership

Agreement. The screening and selection procedure of implementing organisations obeys to very strict, precise and predefined rules.

In this context, ECHO consistently stresses to its partners the importance of staff training and ensuring the best possible supervision of aid distribution in refugee camps using qualified staff.

This is reflected in Article 15(1) of the Framework Partnership Agreement currently in force between ECHO and the vast majority of its NGOs' partners, which states:

The humanitarian organisation shall be responsible for the conduct of its staff, which must conform to the laws, rules and customs of the country in which the operation is located in as far as the obligations arising from these are not in contradiction with the obligations which arise from international law

Partners are, therefore, under a contractual obligation to ensure proper staffing.

Should the situation arise where a partner manifestly fails to take action to stamp out sexual abuse by its employees, ECHO could invoke Article 31.1 of the Framework Partnership Agreement which states:

ECHO reserves the right to suspend, terminate or cancel, in writing, with immediate effect, the Framework Partnership Contract and/or the operation contract signed with the humanitarian organisation in the event of serious breaches of the contractual obligations.

The obligation being breached, in this case would be the one set out in the aforementioned Article 15(1).

Any failure by a partner to put its house in order in this respect would clearly have repercussions on future humanitarian funding decisions by ECHO.

The alleged events in West Africa underline the need to continue to discuss concepts of quality and performance. It should be stressed that anything possible should be done to ensure full protection of vulnerable refugees. It is a collective responsibility in which we all have to contribute.