

African Union and Somalia to Investigate Rape Claims
By Nicholas Kulish
15 August 2013

NAIROBI, Kenya — The African Union and the Somali government said Thursday that they had set up a joint team to investigate allegations by a Somali woman that she was held hostage and gang-raped by international peacekeepers, in a case that has prompted local outrage and could strain ties between the public and foreign troops in the country.

The woman said she was drugged and repeatedly raped by African Union soldiers at a military base in the Somali capital, Mogadishu. The government said in a statement that the woman had reported that the crime took place on Aug. 8.

The African Union and the Somali government vowed to “take all necessary steps to bring justice to those who committed this incident and ensure that such crimes do not occur again.”

One man accused of kidnapping the woman has been arrested, said Ridwaan Haji Abdiwali, a government spokesman. He said that the man was not a member of the military forces, but that he had a military uniform in his possession.

“There are still further investigations if he had links with security personnel,” Mr. Abdiwali said.

The attack, which has received attention in the Somali news media, could undermine the African Union’s mission to help stabilize the country. The Shabab, the Islamist militant group that the union has been battling for years, is using the case as a rallying cry to have the foreign forces ejected.

“The Somali government will not tolerate violation of human rights, in particular sexual violence towards the most vulnerable members of our society, and perpetrators will be dealt with” to the fullest extent of the law, said Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon Saaid.

Mahamat Saleh Annadif, the head of the African Union mission in Somalia, known as Amisom, said, “As we have done in the past, we will take appropriate action against any soldier found to have contravened the African Union code of conduct.”

Rape by armed men, both soldiers and militants, has been a problem in Somalia through its decades of instability. When he took office last year, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud said the government would protect women and punish rapists.

The case is the latest challenge for the Somali government as it tries to build on recent security gains after the ejection of the Shabab militants from Mogadishu and other cities. A [deadly siege](#) on a United Nations compound in June and other recent attacks have helped expose the significant dangers that remain.

On Wednesday, the medical humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders announced that it was [ceasing operations in Somalia](#) because it could no longer guarantee the safety of its staff. The group had operated in the nation uninterrupted since 1991.

In January, the Somali government outraged human rights groups after a woman who said she had been gang-raped by members of the security services was charged with making a false accusation and insulting a national institution, as was a Somali journalist who interviewed her. Both the journalist and the woman were found guilty and sentenced to a year in prison, but their convictions were [overturned](#) on appeal.

Amisom has about 18,000 troops in the country, from Uganda, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Burundi and Djibouti.

"I've been hearing reports of Amisom abuses since December, but this is the most extreme case I've heard of," said Lisa Shannon, an American who is a founder of [Sister Somalia](#), an organization that helps rape victims there. Previously, Ms. Shannon said, "people were nervous to talk about Amisom abuses because they thought it could destabilize the fragile peace."

The victim was held for a day and a half before being tossed on the street by her captors, said Ilwad Ali, who also works with Sister Somalia. When she was found, she had two needle marks in her arm from where she had been sedated with injections. She was receiving treatment to prevent H.I.V. and other sexually transmitted diseases.

A doctor confirmed that the woman had been raped, said Ms. Ali, adding that the victim had described two girls who were being kept in the same room, one of whom had been stabbed.

"The way the government responded is quite promising, actually," Ms. Ali said. "They have acknowledged the allegations, set up a committee to investigate this thoroughly, and our hope is that it remains a transparent and due, just process."

© New York Times, 2013