

UN Troubled by Rise in Child Rapes in South Africa

by Thalif Deen

South Africa is reporting an alarming increase in sexual violence against children, most of it involving family members or people known to the victims, a United Nations (UN) official said Friday.

According to reports, attackers are targeting young children as sexual partners in order to reduce the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, said Juan Miguel Petit, a special rapporteur with the UN Commission on Human Rights.

"Of great concern is that the age of the perpetrators of rape is getting younger—even young boys and teenagers are now being implicated in acts of sexual violence. Similarly, reported instances of gang rape are increasing," Petit added.

But he praised the government of South Africa for making "tremendous efforts" since apartheid ended eight years ago to begin creating a culture of respect for human rights.

The increase in the reporting of rape cases is a welcome development, Petit said, compared to pre-1994, when very few reports were filed.

Petit plans to present a full account of his investigations to the commission at its forthcoming session in Geneva on March 2003. The report was prepared following his visit to South Africa.

According to Petit's preliminary findings, the rape of children, including very young children and babies, is not a new phenomenon in the country. Rape in South Africa, according to the report, results from several factors including the general high incidence of violence, the culture of patriarchy and the treatment of children as commodities.

High levels of alcoholism also lead to sexual violence, pointed out Petit.

The preliminary report says that poverty coupled with domestic abuse is forcing children, mainly girls, into prostitution. As the children's education grant ends at age seven, many children drop out of school because their parents are unable to pay school fees.

In some cases, a family friend or relative assists the child to attend school, in return for sex, Petit said.

Additionally, the AIDS epidemic has left many children orphaned, and the breakdown of traditional extended family structures has led to a rise in the number of child-headed households.

In many of these families, girls may resort to prostitution in order to feed their siblings.

The report adds that the issue of trafficking of children in South Africa has received little attention. Trafficking itself is not yet recognised as a criminal offence, it adds.

Yet reports state that South Africa is becoming both a receiving and a transit country for child victims of trafficking originating from other parts of Africa and from Asian countries.

"The very desperate food shortage, particularly in countries bordering South Africa, is contributing to an increase in trafficking of children," Petit added.

He recommends several measures to help protect children. Victims of sexual violence, he said, must be given prophylaxis against HIV/AIDS, which should be made available at schools, shelters and police stations.

In addition, the government should provide children living with HIV/AIDS access to treatment, and care and support. It should exert effort to alleviate poverty and unemployment, as many acts of sexual violence against children appear to result from anger and boredom, adds the report.

Petit admits that although many different and committed groups are working on behalf of children's rights in South Africa, they are not well co-ordinated. "There is currently not a specific referral centre, no first entry point for children who have been abused," he added.

He recommends a collective structure, such as a multisectoral children's ministry, to bring the many actors together. It should be fully resourced and have qualified staff, Petit added.

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He has also been told of child rape by individuals who believe that sex with a virgin will cure them of HIV/AIDS. While there is insufficient evidence to prove the reports, they cannot be discounted, he added.