



SITUATIONAL ALERT: RISK OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN THE U.S. RESPONSE TO THE EBOLA OUTBREAK IN AFRICA

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The USAID Office of Inspector General (OIG) has consistently led efforts in preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) within U.S. foreign assistance programs. SEA has been a longstanding challenge within U.S.-funded foreign assistance given the inherent power disparity between aid workers and those they interact with in-country. Global health emergencies, including the current Ebola outbreak, involve conditions that further heighten the risk of SEA—including the need for rapid mobilization, weakened oversight mechanisms, and heightened vulnerabilities among affected populations. Critical to the deterrence of SEA is preventing the recirculation of perpetrators throughout the aid sector, which requires the cooperation of nongovernmental organizations, United Nations (UN) agencies, and contractors to swiftly respond and report allegations to OIG.

Given the reported prevalence of SEA allegations in previous Ebola outbreaks, and USAID OIG's continued concerns about the capacity of implementers to safeguard and address allegations of SEA, we provide the following information to inform the U.S. government's current response.

USAID OIG Investigation Into World Health Organization Ebola Response Results in the First Known U.S. Government Debarments of UN Officials for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

USAID OIG launched an independent investigation following a 2020 World Health Organization (WHO) commission report on SEA. On October 15, 2020, WHO Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus appointed an Independent Commission (the Commission) "to establish the facts relating to allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse during the response to the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), identify and support survivors, ensure that any ongoing abuse had stopped, and hold perpetrators to account." The Commission, in its final report, interviewed 75 alleged survivors, identified 83 alleged perpetrators, and "established with certainty" that in 21 cases the alleged perpetrators were WHO employees.

The Commission noted that "the majority of the alleged victims were in a very precarious economic and social situation during the response. Indeed, very few of them were able to complete their secondary education, and some had never set foot in school." Moreover, for some survivors, "[t]he economic insecurity and precariousness were so great that for them the need to get a job outweighed" everything else, including the coercion to have sex in exchange for the promise of a job with the WHO.

Given that the WHO staff identified in the Commission’s report, including doctors and others operating in other positions of serious trust within WHO, could foreseeably participate in subsequent U.S.-funded programs, USAID OIG launched its own independent investigation in 2021 to further U.S.-based enforcement remedies. This investigation resulted in a debarment referral for 18 WHO staff for sexually assaulting women and girls while performing USAID-funded Ebola work, including medical professionals. The ensuing action by USAID resulted in the first known U.S. government debarments of UN officials determined to have engaged in SEA.

Timely Disclosure, Clear Expectations, and Swift Responses Are Necessary to Protect Beneficiaries and Prevent Recirculation of Perpetrators

Timely disclosure of and response to SEA allegations is critical to protecting beneficiaries, preventing the recirculation of perpetrators, and preserving the integrity of U.S. humanitarian programming overseas. In June 2021, USAID had instituted new standards and procedures to establish “clear expectations between USAID and its multilateral partners to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse in USAID-funded programs, and sexual harassment in their workplaces in a survivor-centered manner.” USAID specifically noted that its “Compliance Division has focused on leveraging available administrative tools to respond to widespread allegations of SEA during the 2018–2020 eastern DRC Ebola outbreak.” We encourage the Department of State to consider adopting the same or similar language in ongoing and future humanitarian responses. Furthermore, we encourage entities working in Ebola affected areas to immediately assess their safeguards for preventing, and swiftly reporting, allegations of SEA.

USAID OIG's Hotline is open for individuals to safely and confidentially report misconduct during the current Ebola response, to include sexual exploitation and abuse. USAID OIG criminal investigators will work to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable, along with employers who fail to act.

To confidentially report allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse and other misconduct to USAID OIG’s Hotline, please visit <https://oig.usaid.gov/report-fraud>.