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Reported Cases of Sexual Assault In Military Increase

By Ann Scott Tyson

The number of reported sexual assaults in the military grew in 2004 and is expected to continue to rise next year as a result of new policies intended to remove barriers to victims coming forward, the Pentagon announced yesterday.

Military criminal organizations in 2004 received 1,700 reports of alleged cases of sexual assault, which includes rape, nonconsensual sodomy, indecent assault as well as attempts to commit those offenses.

In 1,275 of the reported cases, service members were alleged victims – an increase of 25 percent over the number determined by a Pentagon task force in 2003, and 41 percent over the 2002 figure. The overall 2004 figure also included 425 cases in which service members allegedly assaulted or attempted to assault civilians – a category not included in earlier years' totals.

Victim advocates said the increase could mean that incidents of sexual assault are actually rising in the military, as larger numbers of servicewomen are mobilized for today's conflicts, or that more victims are coming forward to report the assaults – or a combination of both.

“Our concern is that sexual assault within the military continues to escalate,” said Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation Inc., a private, nonprofit organization that offers assistance to victims. At the same time, she said, “victims continue to be concerned about their privacy and confidentiality, as well as repercussions that they may face, either through charges of fraternization and adultery or drinking.”

Both the Pentagon and victim advocates agree that barriers to reporting such offenses have been a persistent problem within the military. “Sexual assault is probably the most underreported crime,” said Lt. Col. Joe Richard, a Pentagon spokesman.

However, Pentagon officials said they believe the increased numbers primarily reflect efforts to raise awareness and sensitivity toward the problem. “We believe that due to greater emphasis and focus, down through the chain of command, to encourage victims to

come forward – that may account in some measure for the numbers,” Richard said. He added that “we expected to see a spike.”

In January, the Defense Department put in place a sexual assault prevention and response policy that allows victims to receive medical care, legal information and other support without automatically triggering an investigation. Still, if the victim decides to pursue an investigation, information about the assault could be revealed during a court-martial, Hansen said.

The 2004 cases resulted in completed investigations of 1,362 alleged offenders, including 1,011 service members. An additional 468 cases are pending.

Punitive action was taken in 342 cases, including 113 courts-martial, 132 nonjudicial punishments – such as reduction in rank or forfeiture of pay – and 97 administrative actions and discharges. No punitive action was taken in 629 cases, either because the alleged offender was not found or because of insufficient evidence.

“Regrettably . . . the military continues to use nonjudicial punishment when a crime has been committed,” Hansen said. “That may preclude that individual from being listed as a sexual offender.” A court-martial in recent years took place in only about 2 or 3 percent of military sexual-assault cases, she said.

One of the most troubling aspects of the assault problem is the emergence of cases in which U.S. troops – men as well as women – are abused by other service members in hostile environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Reported sexual assaults have risen in the Central Command region, which includes the Middle East and Central Asia, from 24 in 2002 and 94 in 2003 to 123 in 2004, according to figures the Miles Foundation obtained from the Pentagon’s Joint Task Force on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response.

In many U.S. military camps in Iraq, for example, signs are posted in female showers and other locations requiring U.S. servicewomen to be in the company of a “battle buddy,” especially at night, for their safety.

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