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Sex Assaults Against Women GIs Increase in War Time

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

WASHINGTON — Sexual assault reports involving members of the Armed Services rose to 1,700 in 2004, up from the previous two years, according to Pentagon statistics, leading some critics to say the Department of Defense is not doing enough to prevent sexual misconduct in the military.

The infractions in the reported cases include rape, sodomy, indecent assault and attempts to commit these offenses on deployed and non-deployed U.S. soldiers. Of the 1,700 cases, 1,275 included a service member as a victim and 1,305 incidents involved a service member as an alleged offender.

Sexual assault is a society-wide problem and “unfortunately we bring people on who bring in some of those problems,” said Richard Kaplan, spokesman for the Joint Task Force on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, which was set up in October to improve the military’s efforts at addressing sexual assault.

But critics of the military’s responsiveness say the problems will inevitably worsen, in part because the military permits thousands of women to serve in support roles to combat troops, putting them in close proximity to men in stressful quarters for long periods of time.

“What they need to do is to have a policy to discourage indiscipline, and the way you get into indiscipline is when you pretend that gender doesn’t matter, that sexuality doesn’t matter,” said Elaine Donnelly, director of the Center for Military Readiness, which supports upholding current military regulations that prevent women from serving in combat.

“This is a symptom of the problem,” said Martha Kleder, policy analyst for Concerned Women for America, also an opponent of women in combat. “We really feel that mixing men and women in close combat is disruptive.”

Not everyone agrees. Ret. Navy Capt. Lory Manning, a senior fellow with the Women’s Research and Education Institute in Washington, said it is unclear whether the Pentagon’s latest figures on sexual assault reflect an increase in the number of incidents or are the result of women feeling more comfortable reporting them. She added that she believes the military is doing a good job in addressing the problems.

“I do think they have been taking it seriously,” she said.

Manning said she feels that segregating men and women would just lead to more problems. “The more you make different policies for men and women, the more men think women aren’t carrying their fair share and the more you have this problem,” she said.

U.S. Central Command, whose areas of operations include Iraq, Afghanistan and a number of other bases in the Persian Gulf region, reported 123 assaults in 2004, with a cumulative total of 253 from the beginning of operations in 2002 until January 2005, Kaplan said.

But the number released from Centcom is disputed by analysts with the Miles Foundation, a non-profit agency that helps victims of military sexual assault. The foundation recorded 184 assaults in 2004 with a cumulative 307 cases during the same time period in the same theaters.

“We are not surprised that the number has continued to increase and is substantially increasing,” said Miles Foundation spokeswoman Anita Sanchez. “It mirrors many of the reports we’ve been receiving.”

Sanchez said her foundation does not blame close quarters between men and women for the number of assaults; it faults the Pentagon for not planning for prevention and response to victims, especially since officials have been recording sex assaults charges in the military since the Vietnam era, and have observed increases during times of war.

“Particularly in the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have seen very little preparation, if you will, for the eventuality of sexual assault,” she said.

A Veterans Affairs Administration survey of 1991 Persian Gulf War women veterans found that one-third of those surveyed experienced physical sexual harassment.

“This speaks to the Pentagon’s failure to fully prepare,” said Sanchez.

Some 35,000 women served in the Persian Gulf War. Nearly 100,000 women are serving or have served in the current war theater.

The military’s defenders say a closer look at the numbers indicates that the situation is not as dire as the Miles Foundation suggests. Just by looking at the proportion of reported assaults compared to the numbers of women serving shows a limited problem. Defenders note that varying surveys showing an uptick in the last two years were conducted by different entities using a range of methodologies that show conflicting snapshots of the problem.

“When you look at 1,700 out of 1.4 million (service members) on active duty, and then you look at 123 (assaults) in area of the Middle East out of 1,700 – you can’t make the case that going over to Iraq and Afghanistan has actually led to higher rates,” said Kaplan. “In fact, it’s not true.”

According to the task force report, as of the end of 2004, 1,232 investigations of the 1,700 reports had concluded. Punitive action – from court martials to administrative actions to discharges – was taken against 393 offenders. Moreso, 351 cases were not charged based on lack

of or insufficient evidence, and in 278 cases, the victim could not identify the assailant. In the remaining cases, adjudication was handled by an outside authority or were still pending.

Officials warn that the uptick to 1,700 cases from 1,012 in 2003 and 901 in 2002 reflects the inclusion of offenders and victims among both servicemembers and civilians working with the military. They say they expect the number to rise even further as awareness is heightened and people are encouraged to report assaults and the DoD improves its tracking.

Kaplan said the task force issued new policy directives military-wide in January that aim to improve standards for training service members about prevention, victim support and response, data tracking and providing commanders a “check list” to handle sexual assault situations, among other efforts.

“People are working really hard and people are very serious about this,” said Kaplan.

But members of Congress and other critics say educational efforts are not moving fast enough as a lag time exists between policy formulation and activation.

“While there is movement on this issue on the part of the Pentagon, the latest numbers reported by the Pentagon may suggest that we need to redouble our efforts,” said Rep. Susan Davis, D-Calif., a member of the House Armed Services Committee.

The United States is not the only nation to deal with the issue of men and women in the military and sexual assault and harassment as a familiar outgrowth. Charges of sexual assault and harassment have emerged in Canada and Israel, for example, as those militaries became more integrated throughout the 1990s.

In India, where for a decade female pilots have been welcomed into the Indian Air Force in non-combat roles, a flight officer faces a court martial for what her supporters say is retaliation for sexual harassment charges she lodged against three superior officers. This follows the dismissal of three female cadets who made similar charges.

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