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By: Paul Toohey

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There's a battle in our shipping ports between our US navy allies and the parents of star-struck young girls, writes Paul Toohey

THE 15-year-old Darwin girl knows the chances of seeing her attackers in court is, at best, a long shot. But she has persuaded herself to emerge from months of silence to tell police that she and her best friend, aged 16, were gang raped by US servicemen. She says they were both given chlamydia, along with careful instructions from the sailors that they ``wanted it''.

When her father has tried to talk to her about it, she tells him to ``get a life''. ``She's embarrassed -- I am her father,'' he says. As for the girl's mother: ``I'm doing everything in my power to recover my daughter.''

In the 50th anniversary year of the ANZUS alliance, the girl's parents and supporters claim there is a pattern of abuse emerging in Australian ports, of underage girls being targeted for rape, often gang rape, by US servicemen.

The girl's parents hope to see the sailors tried locally, partly as a wake-up call to other girls. But even if the sailors are charged, there is no guarantee of a trial on Australian soil. Under the long-standing Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the US and Australia, which deals with criminal acts by servicemen on Australian soil, the federal attorney-general has discretion to decide whether crimes are heard by an Australian court or by court martial in the US.

A spokesman for Attorney-General Daryl Williams says Australia does not usually waive jurisdiction where there is an Australian victim, although this was not the case with US Staff Sergeant Herman Lee Brown. Brown, who raped and sodomised a 15-year-old Hobart girl, was court-martialled in San Diego this year and sentenced to 18 years' prison after the US used its SOFA option to request jurisdiction over the case.

In the past 12 months, there have been seven allegations or findings of sexual abuse by US servicemen in Australia (see box). Only one involved a lone serviceman.

Some residents are taking action. On a Friday night last month, about 30 people, mostly women, went to the Darwin wharf to protest against the arrival of several US warships. Some of the posters were predictable: ``Yankee go home.''. Others, less so: ``Leave our girls alone.''. The protesters were booed and jeered from the decks until wiser heads onboard ordered the men away from the contest.

``Some of [the sailors] later came by and asked us to take their photo with the Yankee Go Home posters. I think it's because some of them really do want to go home,' ' says Penny

Campton, one of the protesters. ``A lot of these sailors have three choices in American society: jail, gangs or the military.''

Another local woman, Carolyn McLennan, says she is concerned about an ever-increasing US military presence in Darwin.

``I'm supporting [the mother and daughter] because it's personal. I know them both,' ' she says. ``This is just about trying to protect children.''

The allegations of the Darwin girl have not been detailed before. On a September night last year, at about 10pm, four Darwin girls, all of similar age, were at a taxi rank about to go home -- where they should have been hours earlier. Two sailors approached, seeming friendly enough.

The girls agreed to go back for a drink to their hotel room in the city. When they arrived, there were a few other sailors in the room. The girls were given shots of a red vodka drink before another 700ml bottle of liquor was cracked. ``I kissed [sailor's name] because I thought he was cute,' ' says the 15-year-old in her statement to police.

``The others started stirring us up so we went into the bedroom. I consented going into the room with him.''

After that, she made out a silhouette standing over the bed. It became clear it wasn't just between her and him. The girl then saw her girlfriend, also in the room, circled by six men. ``[A] guy in front of her had her by the hair and she was moving her head as though she was trying to get away. All of the men were naked. I don't know where they came from.' ' None of the men wore condoms. Their talk became abusive and seemingly porn-scripted. The girls were ``bitches''.

Altogether, the two girls believed they were assaulted by seven or eight African-Americans. In most reported cases, here and abroad, the story is the same. Yet complainants regard this as almost more touchy than rape and are disinclined to comment lest the focus change to a racial rather than assault issue.

The girls clutched each other in bed, crying, leading to calls for a lesbian act. ``[Friend] and I were walking around the room trying to find our clothes and the guys were groping us and whenever I saw my shirt one of the guys would pick it up and throw it. They thought it was hilarious.''

They found their two other friends in the lounge, apparently unaware of what had happened. Then the sailors sat the girls down for some intimidating tuition. ``You wanted it, didn't you?' ' one of the sailors demanded. And, ``Did you get raped?' ' When the girls raised a meek initial protest, they were told: ``You're lying little whores, you wanted it.''

The 15-year-old girl has not been back to school since and it is unlikely she ever will. Her mother says she has attempted self-mutilation and suicide. It took three months for the mother to discover what was plaguing her daughter. By then, any DNA evidence was long gone.

NORTHERN Territory police claim they are definitely taking the allegations seriously, but have not yet sought crew lists from the ships, all apparently San Diego-based. Their only clue is the sailors' distinctive first names.

``I want to see these guys tried and held accountable under

Australian law and to serve time here just like anyone else,' says the mother. Others argue the SOFAs are working. Brown, they say, would never have received 18 years from an Australian court. But the girl's father says: ``Good, we should increase our own sentences to match the court martial penalties. I think they might be tried in an American court martial partly to keep a lid on this stuff.''

Those who discount the effect of a few sexual assaults by a foreign power should look at Japan's Okinawa incident to see how even one rape can alter the perception of the US from protector to aggressor. There, the 1995 abduction and rape of a 12-year-old girl by two marines and a sailor has led to demands that the key US base be closed or scaled down. Anger has intensified anew with the trial of US Air Force Staff Sergeant Timothy Woodland -- who has pleaded not guilty to raping a young Okinawa woman -- about to begin.

Is a pattern of sexual abuse emerging in Australia? ``I would think if my daughter were in that situation, I'd be very upset about it and I would think the same way,' says Colonel Rick Lester, defence attache at the US embassy in Canberra.

``It has been an emphasis item for all the commanders who come [to Australia]. I would also like to point out we had 100 ship visits in the last year. And a single ship like a carrier has 5500 18 to 25-year-olds on it. A lot of them will do multiple ports. I think you take a look at the numbers and they might say something, that it might not be as bad as it appears.''

Catherine Koerner, a sexual assault service co-ordinator in Rockhampton, swamped with US forces during the Tandem Thrust exercise this year, says her town is seeing ``young women, under the age of 16, being courted by marines''.

``They don't see what has happened to them as rape. I believe they're being targeted because they're starry-eyed about the US military.' Koerner claims there were at least two gang rapes during Tandem Thrust, although in both the girls withdrew their allegations.

``I worked with one of those young women and her report to me certainly wasn't baseless,' Koerner says. ``That was a gang rape [involving four men] and she was very brutally beaten. She was 17. She still had handprints where she'd been picked up [by] the shoulders and flung across the room.''

Koerner says her town was sold ``a lot of hot American glorification'', with positive local news stories about the business benefits of the big foreign presence.

``They did stuff like hire a nightclub in town for the US military only, and had free entry and free alcohol for local women. That sort of thing is outrageous. The Singaporeans are often here and they never do that.''

Loss of innocence

April: Twenty US personnel questioned and DNA-sampled in Darwin after an alleged rape in Exmouth. Allegations unsubstantiated.

May: Two gang-rape complaints against US servicemen during

the joint US-Australian operation Tandem Thrust. Both police complaints withdrawn.

May: US Staff Sergeant Herman Lee Brown convicted in San Diego for raping a 15-year-old in Hobart; two other marines convicted of lesser charges.

July: Two American sailors, Bennie Lee Carson and Billie Gene Easton, given suspended sentences after taking photos of a naked, unconscious 15-year-old girl they had plied with alcohol in Hobart.

August: US sailor Mark Anthony Campbell sentenced to 5 1/2 years' jail for raping a 13-year-old girl and indecently dealing with her 12-year-old friend in a Perth hotel.

Caption: Yankee go home: Campton and McLennan as they greet the USS Essex at Fort Hill Wharf in Darwin; social worker Koerner, below left, has recorded cases with a strong basis in fact
Pictures: Peter Eve (main) and Rhodes Watson
Accused: Carson, above left, and Easton, below left, with their lawyers

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Darwin girl raped by sailors: claim

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By: ALAN HARDIE

Police are investigating a 15-year-old Darwin girl's allegation that she was raped by up to eight American sailors.

The deeply traumatised girl, now 16, formally complained to police in August.

The assault allegedly happened in September last year, but the girl had been too upset to complain formally at the time, her mother said yesterday.

The girl's mother complained to police in December -- but police needed the girl to complain herself before they could begin investigations.

The girl is said to have been at a Darwin taxi rank, about to go home at 2am one day last year, with three other girls.

She told police in a statement the group was approached by two American sailors.

They agreed to go back to the sailors' hotel room in the city, where she and another girl were allegedly assaulted.

A police spokeswoman said yesterday: ``We are continuing to make inquiries into these reports.

``But it has not yet reached a stage where diplomatic representations need to be made to US authorities.

``Police are taking the complaint seriously -- any report of sexual assault is treated seriously.''

The girl's mother fears a legal arrangement existing between Australia and the US means her daughter's attackers will probably never stand trial in this country.

She referred to a Status of Forces Agreement between Australia and America.

Under the agreement, the federal Attorney-General has discretion to decide whether crimes are heard by an Australian court or by court martial in the US.

The girl's mother said: ``I believe this agreement ensures those American sailors will never stand trial in Darwin.''

She said she had given police the names of five American ships visiting Darwin at the time of her daughter's assault.

And she stated: ``The sailors who attacked my daughter have distinctive first names.

``If the police obtained a list of the crew, I believe those people could be traced fairly easily.''

Section: NEWS

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Rape NT**