

NGO Call to Action on Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Sexual violence in Congo is the worst in the world...The sheer numbers, the wholesale brutality, the culture of impunity — it's appalling.

John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, October 8, 2007

As humanitarian, development, and human rights organizations, we condemn the epidemic of sexual violence associated with armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). We call on all stakeholders involved in the DRC to strengthen their commitment and action to stop this epidemic and to assist its survivors.

Fighting between the national army and a number of armed groups continues in eastern DRC – and with it the scourge of brutal sexual violence, primarily against women and girls of all ages. In this context, sexual violence is a tactic of war, used to humiliate and demoralize individuals, destroy families, and terrorize communities. The calculated sexual violence perpetrated by these armed groups – including the DRC army and national police – is often of unimaginable brutality, with the purposeful mutilation and destruction of sexual organs. In many cases, those who refuse to submit or those who try to stop the crimes have been tortured and murdered. These vicious attacks leave survivors with severe physical and emotional trauma.

Between June 2006 and May 2007, UNICEF and its partners in eastern DRC identified nearly 13,000 survivors of sexual violence, more than 4,200 of them children. Many more attacks went unreported. Women and girls often suffer in isolation and silence because of the stigma associated with sexual violence. Even when survivors seek assistance, they are confronted with the overwhelming shortage of appropriate health and other services in eastern DRC.

Any sexual assault is an unacceptable violent crime. But systematic use of rape by armed groups in eastern DRC should be named for what it is: a crime against humanity. Yet despite years of reports and rhetoric about these atrocities, despite the presence of thousands of UN peacekeepers with a mandate to protect civilians, the attacks continue, and perpetrators enjoy almost total impunity.

We believe there is a humanitarian imperative and a moral obligation to do everything we can to prevent these crimes against humanity, to assist survivors of these brutal attacks, and to change the attitudes that allow such violence to persist. As NGOs, we recommit our organizations to action, through our programs and our advocacy efforts, to address the scourge of sexual violence in the DRC.

Every stakeholder in the DRC must make this fight against sexual violence a high priority:

- We call on all armed groups to stop attacks on civilians, and to clearly state that sexual violence by their members in any context is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.
- The Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo must fulfill its obligation to protect civilians from human rights abuses. First and foremost, it must hold its own commanders and troops accountable for human rights abuses, with a focus on sexual attacks in eastern DRC.
- As a leader in the humanitarian response, the United Nations must reaffirm its commitment to coordinate both advocacy and program efforts to address sexual violence

in eastern DRC, in partnership with national and international nongovernmental organizations working in the region.

- The international community, under the leadership of the United Nations, must do its part to ensure the protection of civilians, and significantly increase support for desperately needed services for survivors, and programs to prevent sexual violence.
- All governments must put the prevention of sexual violence and assistance to survivors at the top of their agendas for diplomatic, military, and humanitarian engagement in the DRC.

We believe that the sexual violence by armed groups in eastern DRC can – and must – be stopped. All of us must take action to help stop it.

InterAction Members & Other Concerned Groups:

