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Hundreds of Thousands Raped in Congo Wars

By Chris McGreal in Goma

Hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been raped over the past decade by soldiers, rebels and ethnic militias in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The scale of the assaults has become increasingly evident over recent months as growing numbers of women have emerged for treatment with the reduction in fighting ahead of presidential elections, and because medical workers have been able to reach areas in the east of the country long cut off by conflict.

The survivors have given accounts of villages subjected to repeated assaults in which many women and girls were serially raped and men killed.

Although there are no comprehensive statistics, in one province alone, South Kivu, about 42,000 women were treated in health clinics for serious sexual assaults last year, according to statistics collected by the human rights group, Global Rights.

While rape has been a product of many conflicts, its scale and systematic nature in eastern Congo has led some human rights groups to describe it as a "weapon of war" used to punish communities for their political loyalties or as a form of ethnic cleansing. On occasions men and boys have also been raped.

Doctors and women's groups working with the victims say the attacks are notable not only for their scale but also their brutality.

Among those receiving treatment in the relative safety of the town of Goma in eastern Congo is a woman from Kindu who was repeatedly raped in May 2005 but was only able to reach a hospital for treatment earlier this year.

The 54-year-old woman, bent double over a stick after surgery to save her womb, said her village first came under attack from a group of Mai Mai, an ethnic militia recognisable by a preference for wearing animal skins and amulets believed to give magical powers.

"There were Mai Mai in the area. They came in the morning and raped me, two of them. That didn't disturb me so much after what happened later," she said. "In the afternoon five men came into the house. They told my husband to put three kinds of money on the table: dollars, shillings, francs. But we didn't have any of that kind of money. We are poor. We don't even know what dollars look like. So they shot him. My children were screaming and so they shot them. After that they raped me, all of them."

As she lay bleeding the attackers thrust the barrels of their guns into her vagina.

The woman identified the second group of armed men as members of the interahamwe, the extremist Hutu militia that fled into Congo 12 years ago after leading the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda. The interahamwe used rape as a tool of genocide, telling women that they would bear Hutu children and that would be the end of the Tutsis. Thousands still hide out in the forests of eastern Congo.

The Doctors On Call Service (DOCS) hospital in Goma has seen close to 4,000 women for rape over the past four years. One in four required major surgery. More than a third are under 18. "They really come with very bad wounds," said Justin Paluku, a doctor. "For example some have their vaginas pulled out. Most of them have been raped by four, five or six or even 10 men. A village will be attacked and all the women are raped. They kill the men and rape the women."

Immaculee Birhaheka, head of a women's rights group in Goma, Paif, said those women who make it to hospital are just a fraction of those attacked. "It's impossible to know how many women have been raped in the war but it is hundreds of thousands," she said.

Some human rights groups are calling for the leaders of groups responsible for the tide of rape to be brought before the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

One militia leader, Thomas Lubanga, founder of the Union of Congolese Patriots, went on trial before the the ICC last week for the forced recruitment of child soldiers, although his troops were also involved in the systematic rape of civilians.

Mrs. Birhaheka says the Congolese authorities must act where the international court does not. Her women's rights group was at the forefront of a campaign that persuaded the DRC parliament to pass a new tougher law on rape earlier this year.

"There have already been 10 prosecutions in Goma under the new law, some were soldiers and some civilians," she said. "Before it was the women who were regarded as the criminals and condemned. That's changing. Now at least there is a recognition that rape is a crime."

Case study

Among the thousands of women attacked was a 23-year-old from Walikali who travelled more than 90 miles (150km) to hospital in Goma, where she had surgery after being assaulted by members of the Rwandan Hutu militia, the interahamwe.

"Where I lived they were in the forest ... we had to go there to find food. There were four of us and we were stopped by seven interahamwe," she said.

Two of us tried to run away. One was shot dead. The other got a bullet in the leg. They still raped her. I fainted because there were seven of them.

"I really got damaged. I couldn't hold in my urine. I heard those people came back and killed my father."

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