

The Congo War And A HIV Epidemic

Written by Westside ID265

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More than 40,000 women and girls were raped by soldiers and used as sex slaves in the six-year civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and desperately need medical care, according to a report released yesterday.

Amnesty International said soldiers from more than 20 armed groups, and government soldiers from the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda had taken part in the attacks, some on girls as young as five. Even soldiers from the UN peacekeeping mission, Monuc, are under investigation for sexual abuse. In some cases, militias have kept women for several months and attacked them repeatedly.

Floriane, 21, was abducted from the forest and held in captivity by a militia from 2001 to 2004. "It was terrible. They used to beat me on my arms with an iron bar, just like an animal. I can't move my arm now. As we were considered sex slaves, sometimes as many as five soldiers would rape me, and I became pregnant. It was a very difficult birth, because I gave birth in the bush. The soldiers wouldn't let me go and the very day I gave birth, several soldiers raped me," she told Amnesty.

The human rights group said the problem had been exacerbated by the fact that the DRC's one-year-old transitional government has been indifferent to the problem of sexual violence and had made no attempts to arrest or imprison rapists. It added that the government, headed by President Joseph Kabila, had been "far too slow" in setting up medical care and counselling to help the rape victims, who were usually also tortured.

There are only two hospitals that can treat rape victims in the eastern Congo, where most of the fighting has taken place. Most of the treatment for rape victims has been provided by humanitarian aid agencies rather than the government, and even the agencies warn that they are not able to reach all the people who need help. Médecins Sans Frontières estimates that in some regions, it is helping only 5 per cent of women who have been sexually abused. In many cases, women were raped as they walked to medical centres to seek treatment.

Health groups warn that the rapes have caused a massive increase in the rate of HIV/Aids infection. More than 20 per cent of the population in eastern Congo is estimated to be infected, and more than half of the population could catch the virus within the next 10 years, making the rate of infection one of the highest in the world. As militias and soldiers from neighbouring

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countries move back home, they will spread the infection.

Stephen Bowen, Amnesty International's campaigns director, said: "Rape in eastern DRC is a human rights and a health crisis. Countless women and girls are in desperate need of treatment but no organised or comprehensive response has been developed to assist them."

Many of the victims have since been abandoned by their husbands and shunned by their communities. Soldiers from the Burundian FDD militia raped Eki, 50, in February 2003 while her husband was out fishing.

She said: "The soldiers wanted money and when I told them I had no money, they slapped me and threw me to the ground. And there, in front of the children, two soldiers each held one of my legs, another slapped my face while a fourth soldier raped me. When my husband returned he accused me of being an FDD woman and abandoned me, leaving me alone with the children."

The six-year war in the DRC began after Rwanda invaded the north and east of the country, saying it wanted to flush out Hutu militias who fled to the DRC after the Rwandan genocide. More than three and a half million people have died of violence, starvation and disease, and the armies of seven foreign countries have been involved in the fighting.

A peace agreement was signed last year, but there have since been two attempted coups and militias continue to attack and rape civilians.

[Source](#)