

Atrocities beyond words

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A barbarous campaign of rape

EVERYTHING in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country almost the size of western Europe, is on a scarcely imaginable scale—including the violence. Among the beautiful mountain vistas, terraced hillsides and lush tropical greens of eastern Congo, a bitter, decade-long civil war that officially ended in the rest of the country in 2003, and that has claimed several million lives as a result of fighting and disease, burns on in the eastern border provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu. A ceasefire signed in the town of Goma in January between the government and more than a score of militias has so far done little to ease the plight of civilians in the east. All sides—government troops, says the United Nations, as well as the militias—continue to use rape as a weapon of war on a barbarous scale.



Most victims, as ever, are women and girls, some no more than toddlers, though men and boys have sometimes been targeted too. Local aid workers and UN reports tell of gang rapes, leaving victims with appalling physical and psychological injuries; rapes committed in front of families or whole communities; male relatives forced at gunpoint to rape their own daughters, mothers or sisters; women used as sex slaves forced to eat excrement or the flesh of murdered relatives. Some women victims have themselves been murdered by bullets fired from a gun barrel shoved into their vagina. Some men, says a worker for the UN's Children's Fund (Unicef), have been forced to simulate having sex in holes dug in the ground, with razor blades stuck inside.

Sometimes the motive is revenge for attacks by rival militias, sometimes it is ethnic cleansing and on other occasions an effort to undermine the morale of the enemy by spreading shame, injury and disease. The trauma and appalling injury suffered by women and men who survive such assaults cripple families and whole villages. In eastern Congo up to 80% of reported fistula cases in women are thought to result from rape attacks. The epidemic of violence also spreads HIV/AIDS.



According to a report published in October by the UN secretary-general in an effort to get governments to do more to protect civilians caught up in this and other conflicts, in the first six months of 2007 there were 4,500 cases of sexual violence reported in South Kivu alone. As a rule of thumb in such situations, says the UN, for every rape that is reported, as many as ten or 20 cases may go unreported.

Rape in warfare is nothing new. Congo has long had a culture of violence and an almost non-existent judicial system. Though rape is supposedly illegal, often it is the victim who is shunned. Neither army nor militia commanders seem to see rape as a serious offence and so take no action against their marauding soldiers. Some fighters are said to believe that the rape of a

virgin bestows invincibility in combat. But these are not random acts by misguided or crazed individuals, says the UN; they are a “deliberate attempt to dehumanise and destroy entire communities.” Kate Eshelby

But the men with guns don't listen

That process is proceeding apace. Since early last year an upsurge in violence has displaced some 550,000 people from their homes and villages in eastern Congo. The sprawling, hellish camps for displaced people that dot the road from Goma north to Rutshuru, their shelters made from branches lashed together, leaves and plastic sheeting, offer little protection. Not even the UN's more than 17,000 blue helmets and military observers, and close to 1,000 police (together its largest peacekeeping operation in the world), can hope to put an end to violence in so vast a region that is barely accessible by road or air.

And the Goma ceasefire? Pressure to observe it would be a start, even though not all armed groups signed up. Among those that did not are Hutu rebels from over the border in Rwanda who helped perpetrate the genocide there in 1994 and caused it to spill over the border into Congo. On April 23rd, 63 international and Congolese NGOs signed an appeal urging the UN to appoint a high-level special adviser on human rights for eastern Congo.

The idea is to help draw world attention to the plight of civilians, whose suffering is at least as extreme as anything witnessed in the better-publicised conflict in Sudan's western region of Darfur. The hope is that outside governments, the African Union, the European Union and the United States may offer political and financial support. Since all UN members have promised to observe a fundamental “responsibility to protect” their citizens from war crimes and crimes against humanity, focusing world attention on such crimes in eastern Congo is perhaps the least outsiders can do.