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Democratic Republic of Congo: Mass rape leaves a public health crisis

The scale of rape in eastern DRC represents a human rights and health crisis requiring both an immediate and a long term response. Tens of thousands of survivors are today suffering. Many are dying needlessly, said Amnesty International in a new report launched from Kinshasa today.

The report: *Democratic Republic of the Congo: Mass Rape - Time for Remedies* documents cases of brutal sexual violence and highlights the lack of effective access to adequate medical care as one of the most pressing needs of survivors.

The Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the international community must take immediate measures to facilitate access to medical care for thousands of rape survivors and ensure that the rehabilitation of the health care system in the DRC is made a priority.

"We are now more than one year on from the installation of a transitional government in DRC. Yet this government and the international community has done very little to address the human needs of the Congolese people, especially in the war-ravaged east. The time is now overdue for essential and effective programs of reconstruction and reform to begin, including particularly of the national health care system."

"It is impossible for survivors to access decent medical care -- a further violation of their human rights," said Amnesty International.

Tens of thousands of women, girls, children and even babies, as well as men have been systematically raped and tortured in eastern DRC where over twenty armed groups have been fighting for control of the land and its resources. Some of the victims have suffered multiple rapes and other forms of sexual violence on two or three separate occasions during the war by different forces. Others have been raped by up to twenty-five combatants or used for months or years as sex slaves.

The rapes are often accompanied by sexual torture with, for example, bayonets, sharpened-sticks inserted into the woman's vagina or even gunshots to the genital area.

Survivors interviewed by Amnesty International gave horrifying accounts of the rape they have suffered at the hands of warring factions and their struggle to obtain medical care. As one recounted: " /

fell seriously ill after being raped for the first time in October 2002. I really needed medicine. Since there are no medicines at the local health centre, I decided to walk to the town and search for treatment. On the road I was stopped by two soldiers. I told them I was sick and on my way to get medical treatment because I had been raped. But one of them said 'It makes no difference' and they threw me to the ground, and raped me again there on the road. Since then, I am extremely ill but there is nowhere I can get treatment around here."

While countless women and girls are now in desperate need of treatment and many are traumatized by their ordeal, no organized or comprehensive response has so far been developed to assist them.

In the DRC, millions of civilians are suffering and dying from the injuries and traumas of many years of conflict, while the health care infrastructure is unable to offer even the most basic treatment. Across eastern DRC, there is a clear lack of trained doctors, including gynaecologists and nurses, as well as a massive shortage of equipment and drugs. Only international humanitarian and some national Congolese NGOs, as well as some UN agencies are trying to respond to the needs of tens of thousands of women and girls.

Amnesty International is concerned that the DRC government and the international community have been far too slow in fulfilling their obligations to protect the human right to health for survivors and the Congolese population. "The DRC government and the international donor community should establish an emergency programme for the medical and psychological care of survivors," the organization said.

The longer-term restoration of a sustainable state health care system should also become a priority. "An assessment mission, composed of mixed DRC and international medical experts and health care managers, should be formed as quickly as possible to evaluate the needs of the DRC's national health care system. The findings of this assessment mission should form the basis of a joint national and international plan, with dedicated international donor assistance, for the priority reconstruction of the DRC's health system," Amnesty International urged.

The other needs of the rape survivors and victims of other forms of sexual violence must also be addressed. As a result of the stigma attached to rape, survivors often suffer rejection by their communities and abandonment by their husbands. Women are left as the sole carers of themselves and their children and, generally, cut off from economic means of survival. For those survivors, the current incapacitated judicial system in the DRC offers no justice or redress for the crimes they have endured.

"The DRC government must assume its responsibility to prevent, punish and eradicate sexual violence, and demonstrate that such behaviour is not tolerated," Amnesty International said.

A coordinated national and international effort to improve security in the eastern provinces is a priority. The government must also take measures to prevent survivors from being subjected to social and economic exclusion, and facilitate their search for justice.

"Unless such crucial steps are rapidly taken, tens of thousands of known and anonymous victims will continue to suffer." the organization concluded.

Amnesty International's global campaign to Stop Violence Against Women is working to end this and other hidden human rights scandal.

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