

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ACT 77/095/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 310
8 December 2004

Embargo Date: 8 December 2004 00:01 GMT

Women's lives and bodies -- unrecognized casualties of war

Women and girls bear the brunt of armed conflicts fought today both as direct targets and as unrecognized "collateral damage". *Lives Blown Apart* a new report in Amnesty International's campaign, Stop Violence Against Women, calls for global action to challenge both the violence and the failure of governments to prevent it.

"Patterns of violence against women in conflict do not arise 'naturally' but are ordered, condoned or tolerated. They persist because those who commit them know they can get away with impunity," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

The report lays out the global picture revealing a systematic pattern of abuse repeating itself in conflicts all over the world from Colombia, Iraq, Sudan, Chechnya, Nepal to Afghanistan and in 30 other ongoing conflicts. Despite promises, treaties and legal mechanisms, governments have failed to protect women and girls from violence.

"Women and girls are not just killed, they are raped, sexually attacked, mutilated and humiliated. Custom, culture and religion have built an image of women as bearing the 'honour' of their communities. Disparaging a woman's sexuality and destroying her physical integrity have become a means by which to terrorize, demean and 'defeat' entire communities, as well as to punish, intimidate and humiliate women," said Irene Khan.

On top of this it is women and children who are forced to flee their homes. It is women who care for the sick and injured and it is women who have to collect food and water - tasks and situations that put them at further risk of abuse.

Rape survivors suffer not only from psychological and emotional trauma, from the impact on their health and the risk of HIV/Aids, but also from the fear that they will be ostracized by their families and communities if they are publicly identified as a rape victim.

"In the community, they made such fun of me that I had to leave the village and live in the forest.[..] I am hungry, I have no clothes and no soap. I don't have any money to pay for medical care. It would be better if I died with the baby in my womb," Sanguina was raped twice during the DRC conflict.

Justice is key to stopping the violence and when the International Criminal Court begins its first prosecutions, it will open a new avenue for women to access justice. Justice is not just a technical tool but

has a concrete impact. It confirms that rape and sexual violence are crimes, restores dignity and feelings of self worth and it delivers redress. Justice is also a vital step to prevent the crimes from happening again, it sends a signal to those who would commit violence that it will not be tolerated.

"It is absolutely pivotal that one of the first prosecutions by the ICC next year includes crimes of violence against women. A strong global message must be sent that violence against women will be vigorously pursued. Firm action by the ICC will help shame states into promoting action through their national courts," said Irene Khan.

However the ICC cannot deliver justice without political support. The success of an ICC prosecution will also depend on the cooperation it receives from governments on practical issues, including the assistance it receives during investigations, the sharing of evidence and the protection of witnesses who may be at risk.

"Women's lives and their bodies have been the unacknowledged casualties of war for too long. Tools to tackle the violence exist, but justice for women victims of war will only be delivered if world leaders are ready to do more than just make pious statements condemning rape and sexual violence. They must adopt an agenda for action, centred on the ICC and complemented by universal jurisdiction through national systems," said Irene Khan.

The report highlights how the fight for women's security and human rights is jeopardised by increasing militarization and the introduction of new security agendas to fight global terrorism. US led security doctrines have stretched the concept of "war" into areas formerly considered as law enforcement promoting the notion that human rights can be curtailed in the name of security.

Despite the impact of conflict on women and girls they are still excluded from the peace negotiation tables. Often it is the men who initiated the war who take decisions on how peace should be built and introduced.

"Women have a crucial role to play in re-building secure communities and countries. All over the world women are challenging violence, discrimination and silence. Without women's active involvement in any peace process there can be no security, no justice and no peace," said Irene Khan.

Amnesty International is presenting an agenda for action at global, regional, national and local level:

The ICC must be allowed to act effectively and deliver justice to women and girls. If the Security Council is serious about ending violence against women in conflict it can refer cases to the ICC, when governments fail to do so.

Governments must give their political support to enable the ICC to work effectively. This includes ratifying the Rome Statute of the ICC, implementing the Rome Statute into national law so that perpetrators can be prosecuted for these crimes in national systems, sharing information with the ICC, and providing protection for victims and witnesses.

Governments must publicly condemn violence against women and girls in any circumstances, issuing clear warnings or instructions to their forces that violence against women will not be tolerated.

The international community: all governments, the UN and relevant international bodies must ensure that women play a key role in the design and implementation of all peace-building initiatives.

All parties and the UN must provide immediate and effective assistance to survivors of violence against women, including emergency health care programs and rehabilitation.

"We have to mobilize global outrage - to challenge the violence, support those women who suffer and put pressure on those who can bring about change. It is the power of individual women and men that drives change," said Irene Khan.

The report is part of Amnesty International's global campaign Stop Violence Against Women. For more information please visit our web site: <http://news.amnesty.org>

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