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Burundi: Women under attack

Sexual violence has been widely used during Burundi's 10-year civil war to terrorize and humiliate the population. While no statistics exist to specify the number of assaults per year – many instances are believed to go unreported due in part to the stigma attached to sexual violence – sources agree that rape has increased alarmingly during the past year.

Many women are raped during military operations or reprisals, or during night-time raids by government soldiers, armed political groups and criminal gangs who attack civilian homes, looting and raping. The pervasiveness of this violence suggests that at times it has been employed strategically as a weapon of war by government and opposition forces.

Victims of rape not only suffer the physical effects of the brutality, but may also be socially excluded, abandoned and deeply traumatized. Police, local authorities and even the justice system have treated rape victims' claims with disregard, even contempt, and have perpetuated the impunity of perpetrators.

Medical services in the country remain woefully under-funded and insufficient. Access to health care for some is impossible.

The suffering of Burundian women must stop now.

Link

Rape - the hidden human rights abuse: [further information](#)

Quote

"I was going with three children to get water when a soldier stopped us on the road. The children managed to escape, but I fell and he caught me. He took me to a church, which they had turned into some kind of bar with food and alcohol everywhere. The soldier raped me in the church, and he told me I would be blessed because it was a holy place...Another one refused to rape me. The first soldier forced a bottle of beer inside of me. I started bleeding and shouting. The soldiers covered me with a military coat and left me outside the church to die."

Amélie, widow, aged 30.

Image caption

Women and children have been systematically attacked during Burundi's 10-year conflict

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Take action

Take action

Please write to the President of Burundi, urging him to make the prevention of sexual assault, the provision of care and treatment for victims and the bringing to justice of perpetrators a national priority:

Letter

Dear President

I am deeply concerned by widespread sexual violence against women in Burundi, which has been allowed to become an entrenched feature of Burundi's human rights crisis, largely because of the failure of government authorities to bring to justice the perpetrators.

As a result of the context of armed conflict and the widespread discrimination against women in Burundi, thousands of women have suffered grave human rights abuse at the hands of all the parties to the ten-year-long civil war, and rape is believed to be on the increase.

I am alarmed by reports that victims who seek justice are currently confronted by a system that ignores, denies and even condones violence against women and protect perpetrators. There is no doubt that the impunity which the security forces have enjoyed for rape and other human rights violations, and the lack of accountability of armed political groups, has been a key factor in allowing rape and other forms of sexual violence to reach the current alarming proportions.

I appeal to you to take a strong public stance on violence against women sending a clear message that it is neither inevitable nor acceptable and that those responsible will be brought to justice.

To this end, I urge you to :

- build the capacity and integrity of the security forces and judiciary to ensure that allegations of rape and other crimes of sexual violence by the security forces are promptly investigated and where founded, the alleged perpetrators are brought to justice.
- transfer the jurisdiction for human rights violations committed by military personnel on active duty, particularly against civilians, to ordinary civilian courts;
- ensure that women and girls in all areas have free access to testing for sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, as well as emergency contraception and post-exposure prophylactic drugs to prevent infection.
- give greater priority and resources to developing, supporting and promoting education programs targeting the public and community leaders on the importance of not stigmatizing women victims of violence and allowing them to speak out and seek help.

Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace. I urge you to urgently address violence against women in Burundi, including the background widespread discrimination against women.

Yours sincerely,

Appeals to

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Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République / Your Excellency

Background article

Title

Burundi: Rape - the hidden human rights abuse

Text

Rape has become an entrenched feature of Burundi's 10-year armed conflict and human rights crisis because the perpetrators – whether government soldiers, members of armed political groups, or private individuals - have largely not been brought to justice. Rape has, however, also been exacerbated by widespread discrimination against women and its consequences have been aggravated by poverty, internal displacement and a failing health system.

Rape is not confined to the areas most affected by the conflict. Domestic rape and rape of young girls, sometimes in the belief that it will provide protection or cure from HIV/AIDS, is also common and appears to be increasing.

Victims of rape not only suffer the physical effects of the brutality—wounds, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and even death resulting from their injuries—but may also be socially ostracized, abandoned and deeply traumatized. Police, local authorities and the justice system have largely treated rape victims' claims with disregard, even contempt, and perpetuated the impunity of perpetrators. The likelihood of bringing a successful case against the perpetrator—if and when the woman is actually able to identify him—is slight indeed. The odds against increase substantially if the alleged perpetrator is a member of the government security forces.

Medical services in the country remain woefully under-funded and insufficient. Interventions by humanitarian organizations have enabled women in some areas to receive this medical care, including free post-exposure prophylactic drugs to prevent HIV infection, in the immediate aftermath of the rape. However, in practice, these services are not available in many provinces, particularly to women who live far from health centres or in areas of conflict. Sometimes the medicines are just not available. Many people still do not know that such care or drugs exist.

In some areas, religious figures and local authorities have encouraged families to accept and support rape victims, but profound issues of stigma still remain. Some women reportedly refrain from seeking medical treatment because of the risk that they will subsequently be identified as rape victims in their community. The epidemic of rape and women's inability or unwillingness to find treatment following sexual assaults are undoubtedly contributing to the intensification of the HIV/AIDS crisis in Burundi.

Despite recent political progress towards political settlement of the armed conflict, rape and sexual violence is continuing, and urgent action is required. The proliferation of small arms

has increased the risk of violence, including violence against women, within communities which is likely to continue after any future end of armed conflict.

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