

Model letter

Government action: Letter-writing to the Minister of Gender, Family and Child, Geneviève INAGOSI

Letter-Writing Action to the Minister's office in Kinshasa

Ministre Geneviève INAGOSI KASSONGO
Ministère du Genre, Famille et L'Enfant
Kinshasa
République démocratique du Congo

Dear Minister,

I write to express my deep concern about the situation for human rights defenders, particularly women human rights defenders, in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Amnesty International has documented numerous cases of intimidation, death threats, arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment, and unlawful killings of human rights defenders throughout the DRC. The weakness of state infrastructure and the prevalence of rape and sexual violence in the eastern provinces by armed groups and elements of the national army exacerbate the climate of insecurity for women human rights defenders.

We note your extensive report published by the Ministry of Gender in October 2013 on the extent of sexual violence in DRC between 2011 and 2012. You stress the high rate of sexual violence in areas of armed conflict, citing approximately 7,000 cases in North Kivu in 2012. Amnesty International has interviewed dozens of women human rights defenders who document cases of sexual violence and provide psychological, social, and legal assistance to many such survivors of sexual violence.

It is worrying that these activists in North Kivu have been broadly forced to stop their monitoring activities, operate clandestinely, or risk their life for reporting abuses committed by both armed groups and elements of the national security forces. Many women human rights defenders told Amnesty International that they cannot return home as they have been identified as a 'human rights activist' in their towns and fear reprisals. One woman human rights defender based in Bweremana, North Kivu province explained that members of the FARDC visited her office in early March 2013 and threatened to kill her if she continued to report cases of rape and sexual violence. If human rights defenders can't speak up, then the whole community is at risk.

There are currently no active state initiatives which provide effective support to human rights defenders in North Kivu. Rather than being perceived as a threat by state elements, women human rights defenders should be seen as partners in your objective to eliminate violence against women and to seek justice and reparations for survivors.

Amnesty International is also concerned that, one year later, there has been very slow progress in the investigation and prosecution of suspected perpetrators of the widespread rape and sexual violence that occurred in Minova, South Kivu in late November 2012, reportedly by members of the armed forces. There is a dire need for justice for this crime: impunity fosters cycles of violence and violations and prevents survivors and their families from gaining accountability and reparations.

Activists around the globe are calling on world leaders to address abuses faced by women in militarized zones and are marking 29 November 2013 as the International Women Human Rights Defender Day. Amnesty International joins the calls by Congolese women's groups to ask you to:

- Call for the prosecution of those responsible for the widespread sexual violence in Minova in late November 2012 to progress without undue delay and in accordance with fair trial standards.
- Increase your engagement with women human rights defenders, including through genuine and regular consultations, and publicly acknowledge the role of women human rights defenders in areas of armed conflict as allies in the struggle against gender-based violence.
- Ensure state initiatives that would support human rights defenders, such as the Liaison Entity, the Protection Cell for human rights defenders, and the National Commission for Human Rights are activated and implemented throughout the DRC.

Yours sincerely,