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Côte d'Ivoire: Women and girls forgotten victims of conflict

Amnesty International today revealed the horrifying extent of sexual violence against women and girls taking place in the context of the current conflict in Cote d'Ivoire, saying that the scale and brutal nature of the attacks are vastly underestimated.

"Hundreds -- if not thousands -- of women and girls have been and continue to be the victims of widespread and, at times, systematic rape and sexual assault committed by a range of fighting forces," said Véronique Aubert, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

In its report released today, *Côte d'Ivoire: Targeting women – the forgotten victims of conflict*, Amnesty International said that many women and girls are the victims of gang rape or are abducted and forced into sexual slavery by fighters. Rape is often accompanied by beatings and torture -- often committed in public and in front of family members. Some women have even been raped next to the corpses of family members.

"Women and girls -- some as young as ten years old -- are targeted mostly on ethnic or political grounds," said Véronique Aubert. "As symbols of the 'honour' of their communities, they are raped to humiliate the women, the men in their families, and their entire community. To our knowledge, none of the perpetrators of these crimes has ever been brought to justice."

"Rape and other forms of sexual violence have been used so extensively and with such impunity that we can only conclude that government security forces and armed opposition groups have been using these crimes as part of a deliberate strategy to instil terror in the civilian population," said Véronique Aubert.

Some of the worst abuses against women and girls are committed by mercenaries, notably from Liberia, who are attached to Côte d'Iviorian armed opposition groups in the west of the country. Several women interviewed by Amnesty International said that the fighters who attacked, abducted and raped them "spoke English".

Survivors are often stigmatized and abandoned by partners or families -- condemned to extreme poverty, often with dependent children.

Although no accurate statistics are available, it is widely believed that rape and sexual violence committed in the context of the conflict have worsened the HIV/AIDS crisis in Côte d'Ivoire substantially.

Victims of sexual violence are often unable to access what health care facilities do exist. Those living in areas controlled by the Forces Nouvelles are cut off from virtually all national public health services. Others are reluctant to travel due to the costs such travel entails and the serious risk they may be victimized again. In order to reach facilities, most women would have to pass through a series of roadblocks -- the location of many survivors' original rapes.

In its report, Amnesty International outlined several recommendations aimed at eliminating sexual violence against women and girls in Côte d'Ivoire. The recommendations relate to both the investigation of such crimes and ensuring effective judicial remedies, including compensation and rehabilitation.

"Rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by combatants or fighters during an armed conflict -- whether international or non-international -- are crimes against humanity and war crimes under international criminal law and should be treated as such," said Véronique Aubert. "Eliminating sexual violence must be a priority for any plan aimed

at finding a peaceful solution to the current crisis in Côte d'Ivoire."

Background
In September 2002, an armed uprising led to the most serious political and military crisis in Cote d'Ivoire's history since independence from France in 1960. Following a failed coup attempt, the country was divided in two, with the South controlled by the government and the North now held by a coalition of armed opposition groups called the New Forces (*Forces Nouvelles*).

The two sides are separated by a buffer zone controlled by more than 12,000 international troops, including UN peacekeeping forces and French troops. On 4 March 2007, an agreement was signed by President Laurent Gbagbo and the leader of the New Forces under which a new government is to be set up within five weeks. The agreement also foresees the gradual dismantling of the buffer zone and calls for progress on the main points of contention such as a census of the electorate, the disarming of rebels and their integration into the regular army.

To see a full copy of the report in English, please go to: http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engafr310012007
To see a full copy of the report in French, please go to: http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/fraafr310012007

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