

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 19/005/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 263
10 November 2004

Embargo Date: 10 November 2004 00:01 GMT

Central African Republic: Hundreds raped and neglected

The international community should provide human and material resources and ensure that the Government of the Central African Republic (CAR) protects and promotes the rights of women and girls not to be subjected to physical, psychological or sexual violence, Amnesty International said today in a new report on mass rape in the CAR.

For several months at the end of 2002 and in early 2003, hundreds of women and girls in the CAR were subjected to widespread rape, sexual assaults and other forms of violence. Most of the rapes took place north of Bangui, particularly in an area locally known as PK12 (*Point kilometre douze*) and PK22 (*Point kilomètre vingt deux*).

The report - *Central African Republic: Five months of war against women* - documents numerous acts of rape committed by combatants from the CAR, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Forces of the *Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo* (Movement for the Liberation of Congo - MLC, a Congolese armed opposition group) were allied to the then government of President Ange Patassé, while Chadian troops backed his opponent and current President François Bozizé.

Amnesty International's findings gathered by its researchers in late 2003 strongly suggest that, during those five months, acts of rape committed by all sides, but especially by MLC combatants, were systematic and widespread. The perpetrators enjoyed impunity and remained at liberty to commit further human rights abuses, including rape.

Girls as young as eight years old and women as old as 60 were raped, according to human rights and humanitarian organizations that dealt with rape victims in late 2002 and early 2003. Many were attacked in their homes, while fleeing the combat zones or at roadblocks. They were raped in front of their husbands, children or parents. Some women and children died as a result. Some relatives, including husbands, who attempted to prevent the attacks are reported to have been threatened, assaulted or killed. In some cases children were forced to have sex with their mothers, sisters or other female relatives.

The government did nothing to protect the victims and denied that these abuses had occurred.

According to numerous sources in Bangui, the rapes perpetrated by MLC combatants were partly intended to punish the women for alleged assistance to the Bozizé-led combatants. It appeared also to have been a deliberate tactic to humiliate the men and demonstrate their powerlessness to protect their women and families.

Following an outcry in late 2002 by human rights and humanitarian organizations about

widespread rapes, the government of President Patassé initially denied the abuses. It appeared that the government denied allegations of rape in order not to alienate its main allies who were the main alleged perpetrators - members of the MLC. Although the government subsequently acknowledged the truth of the allegations, no meaningful action has since been taken to bring the suspected perpetrators to justice.

In November 2002 the MLC reportedly acknowledged the abuses. In areas of the DRC controlled by the MLC, military courts tried and convicted the armed group's combatants accused of disciplinary offences and human rights abuses. None were charged with rape. The current CAR authorities have not begun proceedings to seek the cooperation of the DRC authorities in order to identify suspected perpetrators with a view to bringing them to justice or to lodge a suit against the MLC leadership. By October 2004 no one had been indicted in connection with the rapes that occurred in late 2002 and early 2003.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are offences in the Central African Penal Code. Amnesty International is concerned that a failure to set a minimum sentence gives rise to a possibility of abuse or overly lenient sentences. International law requires states to address persistent violations of human rights and take measures to prevent their occurrence.

"When states routinely fail to respond to evidence of sexual violence and abuse of women and girls, they send the message that such attacks can be committed with impunity. In so doing, states fail to take the minimum steps necessary to protect the right of women and girls to physical integrity," Amnesty International said.

According to human rights and humanitarian workers in Bangui, both male and female victims of rape have been severely traumatized by the experience. Social workers believe the trauma is bound to affect their relationships with others in their community for a very long time. Some may never recover from it.

The victims are often afraid of stigmatization or feel too embarrassed to testify about their ordeal. Rape engenders shame for the victims, their spouses and members of their immediate family. The spouses generally tend to reject them so as not to be associated with the victims who are often regarded by members of their community and spouses as impure or even as having consented to sex and therefore immoral. In some cases, spouses fear that the victims may have been infected with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Fearing stigma and rejection by their husbands if their testimonies became public, few Muslim women were prepared to talk about their experiences to human rights and humanitarian organizations. When specifically asked by AI researchers about rape perpetrated in their area, leaders of the Muslim community denied that any women had been raped there. This suggested that the stigma also affected male members of the community whose wives or daughters had been raped.

Following reports of widespread rape, the UNDP offered to fund a project to assist survivors of rape. The project, which started on 28 November 2002, focused on identifying survivors and providing them with emergency medical care. Medical care included treatment for physical injuries sustained by the survivors and tests for HIV and other STDs. Survivors were also offered psychological support to overcome the trauma suffered by them, their families and their husbands or partners.

The Central African authorities should take educational, administrative and judicial measures to combat and eventually eliminate violence against women.

"Remedies to women who have suffered such violence should include prompt, effective, independent and impartial investigation and access to justice; medical care; reparation for harm suffered; and access to factual information concerning the violation," the organization urged the CAR authorities and the international community.

The government should institute a competent, independent, impartial and adequately resourced commission of inquiry to carry out a thorough countrywide investigation into the crime of rape committed by combatants, especially in late 2002 and early 2003. It should seek human and material resources from the international community to support such an initiative.

The government should seek the cooperation of the DRC Government and MLC leaders in order to ensure that the commission of inquiry can interview members of the MLC who were deployed in the CAR between October 2002 and March 2003 with a view to identifying the perpetrators and ultimately bringing them to justice.

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