

Bloggers Banquet

Variety of features published in Irish and other media outlets

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[Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo](#)

Irish Times, Tuesday October 9th

Ombeni is late. School starts in 20 minutes and she still has to get her son Daniel's books sorted, make his lunch and do a few odd jobs around the house. Her home is a two-room mud shack, in a honeycomb like complex of corrugated iron and twisted branches dug into the hills surrounding Bukavu, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

It's a half hour walk from her front door to Daniel's school, where she fixes his collar and gives him a kiss goodbye. He gives a quick look around to make sure none of his classmates are looking, and returns her affection. Ombeni continues her journey another half mile down the road, to her own classroom. This is her first year back at school, and her headmaster says she is a model pupil - "if only everyone was like her". By right, Ombeni should be nearing the end of her college life now, perhaps fending off marriage requests or applying for teaching posts in the city. But her schooling, and her life's journey were brutally interrupted almost five years earlier.

Back then she was a typical fifteen year old schoolgirl with dreams of college and a better life. Her home was a village in the countryside, where, when she wasn't studying, she helped in the fields. It was while out working one evening that rebel forces captured her carefree fifteen-year-old innocence. For months she became their slave, both sexual and physical, as they lived in various wooded compounds along the Rwandan border. Heavily pregnant, and near death due to lack of food, the rebels decided to return her to her village so her parents could watch her die. She didn't. And now, five years on, she is picking up the pieces of a fragmented life. It hasn't been easy. Locals are wary of her son Daniel, thinking he will grow up and assume the same characteristics as his father. Ombeni says she can feel suspicious eyes on her every time they step outside, and unless she can get Daniel away from the village, she fears for his safety. Daniel is oblivious, as any four-year old should be. He likes school and gets on well with everyone in the playground. Next year his mother will start training in a local university to be a teacher. Two years after that, she hopes to have enough money to leave the village and get a house somewhere safe. A fresh start. Despite everything, she considers herself fortunate.

For an increasing population of silent victims though, life in DRC has become a hellish

pattern of sexual and physical torment. Along the eastern border region, a daily horror show is playing itself out, bolstered by the ambivalence of the international community and the political vacuum created by decades of regional conflict. The perpetrators include the Interahamwe, the Hutu fighters who fled neighboring Rwanda in 1994 after committing genocide there; the Congolese army; a random assortment of armed civilians; even U.N. peacekeepers, and increasingly, local civilians. Christine Schuler Deschryver, who works for a German aid organisation and has been a staunch and stubborn advocate for victims, says the perpetrators are difficult to identify. "All of them are raping women," she says, "It is a country sport. Any person in uniform is an enemy to women."

The problems have their roots in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when thousands of victims and perpetrators fled across the border. Upwards of 10,000 FDLR forces remained, living in forested areas and terrorising local populations at their will. Rwanda doesn't want them back, and even if they did, many refuse to return. The Congolese army it seems has neither the collective heart nor the political will to forcibly remove them, and with many soldiers not receiving pay for months on end, they too are guilty of looting and pillaging. So the forces remain, intent on the sexual and social destruction of the local population. And so far they are succeeding on a spectacular scale. For those who are apprehended, there is little impunity, thanks to antiquated gender laws. The attacks grow more numerous and sadistic by the day and the normalisation of sexual violence continues largely unabated.

"Darfur is nothing compared to what's going on in the Congo," says Schuler Deschryver, who despite constant death threats, continues to raise the plight of Congolese women. "My father was the founder of the National Park in Rwanda, which is home to rare silver back gorillas," she says, "During the war here, just one silver back was killed. And when it happened, within 48 hours millions in funding was sent to ensure the rest of the gorilla population was protected. Why isn't the same done with our women? I'll tell you why, because in the eyes of the international community animals have more value than humans in this part of the world."

Christine's anger is also felt a few miles away, on the outskirts of Bukavu, where Dr. Mukwege, an obstetrician for over 20 years attempts to deal with the aftermath of sexual violence. He runs Panzi Hospital, an institution set up in 1999 in response to the emergency crisis after the so-called African War, and situated on a large rambling site, housing over 350 patients. Each day, 10 new cases are admitted, some as young as nine years, so badly damaged that reconstructive surgery is very often required. The victims sit on benches, lining urine soaked corridors, alone and frightened. On eye contact, there is nothing. No expression, no acknowledgement, no smiles - just a fleeting confirmation that behind their eyes, a pained suffering lies deep.

Dr Mukwege can't say for certain if the attacks are on the increase. In general, the hospital estimates that they see just 10% of all sexual violence crimes, but certain patterns are developing. Attackers are now identifiable by their manner of attack - one group, after raping the woman or girl, inserts the barrel of a gun into her vagina and shoots, thus destroying her vagina, bladder, rectum and causing massive blood loss. Some force males at gunpoint to rape mothers or sisters, often in front of the whole community. A large percentage of the attackers are HIV positive, and knowingly infect their victims. These aren't just random acts of grotesque inhumanity - what's happening in Eastern Congo is the systematic sexual and social destruction of whole populations. And very little, it seems, is being done to stop it. "I have seen men literally lost," says Dr Mukwege, from his offices at Panzi, "emotionally ruined and unable to go on after witnessing the destruction of their wives and the resulting destruction of their families. They are permanently haunted by thoughts going through their head - 'I raped my wife and family and didn't stop it.' Some men flee and abandon their families. In cases where the perpetrators don't kill their victims outright, they kill them slowly and painfully, not just physically, but psychologically and emotionally. It is the destruction of society."

I'm not the first journalist to visit Panzi - CNN, BBC and Oprah have all passed through in recent months, yet Dr Mukwege says nothing has changed. They still turn away patients on a daily basis, and those responsible are seldom brought to justice.

"I have spoken to everyone from the international media who have visited, but still the rapes continue," he says, "I have to keep hope otherwise I'd take off my shirt and stop my work. I know the situation can be resolved if people really get involved and international political will is behind it. We cannot ignore what's happening here and portray it as barbaric African culture, as it is sometimes portrayed."

The sense of exasperation is palpable, and as Dr Mukwege is called away, victims who have lined up outside hobble into the room to tell us their stories. Sixteen-year-old Chibalonza Nsinire was asleep in her house when the Interahamwe came. After tying her hands, they led her to a forest and over the course of three days, took turns raping her and other women from her village. After being raped, the women were forced to prepare meals for the forces, using food pillaged from their own houses. Mugoli Muhamiri was expecting wedding guests when she answered a knock at her door six months ago. Instead of welcoming relatives, a group of men poured into her house and began a rampage. She was tied up so that her hands and legs were spread, and the men took turns raping her. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of her husband's throat being slit, and two of her children being mutilated. They were two years old. She says she counted seven men raping her, before she lost consciousness. Now she clings to her only surviving child, Stephen, who is unaware of the HIV disease

that infects his mother's body. "I have been given great medical support here, but I know one day soon I have to die," she says, "I cannot keep the medicine for the HIV in my stomach because I have no food. I feel bad for my child who remains, because he will have no mother and no father. That brings great sorrow to my heart." The final victim to speak with us is heavily pregnant fifteen-year-old Furaha Tajiri from the Ninja province. The forces came for her at night, tied her hands and started beating her and her parents repeatedly. "I then saw them take my parents and kill them," she says, "After that they took me with them to the forest. They started raping me there - I counted seventeen who attacked me. I stayed in the forest for six months and each day I was raped by two men." The next morning Furaha gave birth to a baby boy. When we visited, she was distraught, and in need of food. Without a husband or family to support her, she was only too acutely aware that much hardship lies ahead.

All over the Eastern Congo, the stories were of the same horrific magnitude. There is very little hope in this part of the African continent. Little in the way of happy endings, or positive outcomes while words such as rehabilitation and justice are no longer part of the daily vocabulary. My visit was assisted by Trócaire, an experienced Irish aid organisation, who support 10 partner organisations in the region and are currently expanding their programme on gender-based violence into Bukavu. Trócaire, like many others, believe a UN force should be resourced to deploy troops to patrol those areas that are particularly prone to attack (e.g. the village of Kaniola which has been attacked multiple times already in 2007) and increase its protection of vulnerable communities, notably women and girls. Night patrols, firewood patrols, and patrols of known market routes/ unsafe areas where women and girls are particularly vulnerable to attack need to be deployed. The organisation also believes that the Government of DRC has a responsibility to seek a solution to the current conflict in Eastern DRC, and to do so while respecting human rights. The international community has a responsibility to support the Government of DRC in this.

For many working on the ground the destruction is total and the task often overwhelming. Efforts to deal with the problem are only grazing the surface, in a country rich on resources but poor on relief. Less than fifty NGO's ply their trade on the ground in Eastern Congo, in contrast to Rwanda, which is something of an NGO haven. Some speak of greater advocacy and more lobbying, while the victims desperately need food, medicine, rehabilitation and reassurance.

In the genocide museum in Kigali, Kofi Annan is quoted as feeling remorseful towards the atrocities committed in 1994, when one million Rwandans died on the U.N.'s watch. The international community could have and should have done more he infers. Yet 17,000 UN troops are stationed in DRC, and within a stone's throw of their bases, the most vulnerable in that society are being routinely destroyed.

Last month U.N. Humanitarian chief John Holmes was in Bukavu. He too called to Panzi Hospital, and expressed horror when he heard the stories and surveyed the conditions. He also met Christine Schuler Deschryver. Normally an articulate and measured advocate, her diplomatic savvy deserted her. "I told him what is happening here is a holocaust. I was very aggressive, I said, you are in the Congo, so what are you doing? You came to the hospital and like everyone you cry. Like everyone you leave. And like everyone, we never hear from you again."

For information about Trócaire's work or to make a donation log onto www.trocaire.org or call 1850 408 408.

Side Panels

Gender-Based Violence and the DRC:

A particularly brutal and disturbing element of the violence in eastern Congo is the prevalence of gender-based violence (known as GBV) as a weapon of war. Gender-based violence is an integral part of armed conflict and war throughout the world and is used systematically to attack, destroy and humiliate women, their families and entire communities. It is an insidious crime that is often surrounded by silence due to its sexual nature and the stigma and shame that generates.

In Eastern DRC, particularly in the province of South Kivu, sexual and gender-based violence is at extreme levels. In the first six months of 2007 alone, the government, UN and civil society recorded 4,500 sexual violence cases - widely believed to be only a snapshot of the true situation. According to the UNFPA, UN Population Fund, which carried out an assessment in September/October 2006 in the province, 22,160 cases of gender-based violence were identified. The perpetrators of these crimes include the Interahamwe militia groups who have been based in the DRC since 1994, the armed forces and the police.

What They Say:

Paul Kagame, Rwandan President

"While our continent has been consolidating peace and security, there are persistent

problem areas that need attention. In the Great Lakes region, forces that committed genocide in 1994 continue their destructive operations. They rape, murder, terrorize and plunder with impunity."

Joseph Kabila, President of DRC.

"In the interest of humankind we are prepared to make sacrifices imposed by collective responsibility. In return we call for fair compensation so as not to jeopardize our own development."

Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, following a visit earlier this year:

"The situation of women in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, or the Congo) is about the worst situation I've seen of women anywhere in the world. The kind of atrocities that are being committed on women's bodies is nothing short of femicide. It is an all-out, systematic pattern of destruction toward the female species."

Posted by Brian O'Connell at [3:44 PM](#) _

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About Me

Brian O Connell

Based in Cork City, I have been a full time journalist since 2000. I mostly write features for a number of Irish and international publications. Currently writing a book on the great houses of Ireland with the Knight of Glin - I also contribute to radio and television.

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