

091210 Level of Brutality Against Women and Girls in Congo Increasing; UN Must Do More to Protect Them

Kinshasa, Dec. 10, 2009 — Women and girls in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo are experiencing increasingly brutal sexual assaults and the UN peacekeeping mission, mandated to protect them, is not doing an adequate job, says the International Rescue Committee, a leading aid group assisting thousands of rape survivors in Congo.

For more than a decade, the bodies of women and girls have been used as a battleground for armed groups waging war in Congo. This year alone, thousands of women and girls have been raped, attacked and abducted in North and South Kivu and the situation is growing worse.

“Mutilation and torture are becoming common tactics in sexual assaults in Congo and more children are being targeted,” says Sarah Spencer, who directs the IRC’s sexual violence aid and prevention programs in Congo. “We’re assisting increasing numbers of women and girls who tell us horrific stories of gang rape, abduction by armed groups and torture, including having guns, wood or glue inserted into their bodies.”

Spencer says the IRC is also hearing more reports of family members being killed on the spot when they try to stop the attacks.

Four out of five women who come to the IRC for help report their assailant to be a member of an armed group— either part of the government forces or one of the rebel groups. In areas such as Walikale, Masisi and Kalehe in the Kivus, women are being targeted by all armed groups in retaliation for their communities’ alleged support for opposing forces.

“Rape is not just a by-product of the conflict in Congo; it is a combat strategy systematically used to terrorize and humiliate and it cannot be tolerated to achieve a larger military goal,” says Spencer.

The Security Council has identified the protection of civilians as the top priority for the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo. However MONUC, as the force is known, has not been able to sufficiently safeguard vulnerable civilians. Equally troubling, the UN itself has become directly involved in the conflict through its support of the Congolese army in Kimia II, a military operation against the rebel group, FDLR. This operation, which began in early 2009, has continued despite widespread reports of atrocities being committed by government soldiers. Indeed, recent UN reports confirm that members of the Congolese army have been responsible for acts of sexual violence.

The IRC commends the UN’s early November decision to disengage its support to some units of the Congolese army allegedly responsible for human rights abuses, but says it’s not enough.

“At a minimum, it should be common practice for the UN to distance itself from all groups perpetrating sexual violence,” says Spencer.

Until peace is restored in Congo, the UN peacekeeping mission must act quickly to improve protection of women and girls. As the UN Security Council considers renewing MONUC’s mandate, the IRC urges the Council to:

- (1) Ensure that protection continues to be the number one priority of the MONUC mission and adopt rigorous strategies for MONUC to protect women and girls
- (2) Provide adequate resources to expand MONUC’s protection capacity
- (3) Require MONUC end support to military units within the Congolese government that have committed acts of sexual violence and other atrocities
- (4) Initiate a political dialogue to seek non-military solutions to the conflict

By the International Rescue Committee