

## UN refugee agency dismayed by impunity for endemic rape in DR Congo

UN News Center



Women cook at a centre for victims of sexual violence in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

23 April 2010 – The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**) today spoke out against the large number of rapes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), voicing concern at the impunity with which the attacks are being carried out.

On average, 14 assaults have been recorded daily over the past three months, but “we fear that the real numbers could be much higher considering that many survivors keep silent for fear of being ostracized,” agency spokesperson Melissa Fleming told reporters in Geneva.

UNHCR, she **said**, is “disturbed by the lack of justice and prevailing impunity.” At least 200,000 cases of sexual violence have been recorded in the country in the past decade.

With sexual violence being among the most serious of crimes, it must be treated as such and survivors should be able to report incidents without fear of reprisal, Ms. Fleming stressed.

Over one third of the recorded cases are in the volatile North and South Kivu provinces in the country’s far east, home to 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 100,000 of whom live in UNHCR camps.

According to the UN Population Fund (**UNFPA**), more than 8,000 women were raped by warring factions last year in the two provinces.

Although the mainly ethnic Hutu rebel militia, known as the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) – who have been operating in the Kivus since the 1994 Rwandan genocide – are thought to be responsible for most of the rapes, members of the national army are also guilty of sexual abuse in North and South Kivu provinces, according to UN experts.

In many cases, women are raped when they leave their villages or camps to collect firewood, water and other items necessary for survival.

To prevent such attacks, UNHCR has distributed fuel-efficient stoves and firewood in North Kivu to some 4,200 families so that women do not need to venture beyond safe areas.

The agency is also working to follow up on rape cases by providing counseling, medical treatment and legal advice.

Last year, UNHCR gave legal assistance to 145 survivors in South Kivu. “Through our support, these families were able to file complaints in local courts,” Ms. Fleming noted.

While most of these cases are still ongoing, in 24 instances, people have been found guilty and sentenced to prison terms of up to 10 years, and some have been ordered to pay compensation.

“This represents a significant development for justice but overall the number of cases in which criminal charges are being brought is tiny compared to the vast scale of the problem,” the UNHCR spokesperson underlined.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, recently wrapped up a week-long visit to the country.

Sexual violence is not exclusively African and even less so Congolese but “a result of conflicts and war and the absence of peace in the DRC,” she said. “It is possible to fight sexual violence and find solutions; we must fight against impunity.”

[More than 8,000 women raped last year by fighters in eastern DR Congo – UN](#)