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16 Days of Activism: The forgotten victims of conflict in the Congo

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A group of displaced women making handicrafts in eastern Congo.
Credit: UNHCR/D.Nhengwe

Tomorrow, December 10 marks the end of 16 days of activism to end violence against women, an international campaign. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, is taking the opportunity to draw attention to its work, alongside local partners, in challenging the very high number of rapes occurring in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Twenty-eight-year-old widow Kahindo is lucky to be alive after being attacked and abused by armed men while fleeing her village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country with one of the highest rates of rape in the world.

The young woman and her six children ran into a group of men not far from the village in eastern DRC's volatile North Kivu province. "My reaction was a sigh of relief, thinking we were not going to run anymore," Kahindo recalled. "I was wrong."

She was led away from her children and then "six armed men stripped me naked. They began to rape me one after the other until I went into a coma," an emotional Kahindo told UNHCR near the North Kivu capital, Goma. "They left me for dead."

Today, almost four years later, this forcibly displaced woman sometimes feels that she might as well have died. In between sobs, she told of the terrible price she has paid. "Medical tests showed that I also contracted HIV," she said, adding: "The impact of rape is not just. The stigma that I face is not just, either."

The widow believes, "I was raped as a punishment for what I am. Those men wanted to degrade me and insult my family, dignity, my culture and everything I stand for."

“ The best strategy to winning this war is to prevent rape from taking place. ”

Karl Steinacker, coordinator of UNHCR operations in eastern DRC

Her story is appalling, but by no means isolated. According to UN figures, almost 3,500 females were raped by soldiers, militiamen and civilians during the first six months of this year in eastern DRC, compared to some 4,800 for the whole of 2008. The real figures are believed to be higher because many victims do not come forward. During a visit to North Kivu last August, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the widespread sexual violence against women in the conflict-swept region "a crime against humanity."

The forcibly displaced are particularly vulnerable in an area where hundreds of thousands are living with host families or in camps run by UNHCR despite the formal end of war in the DRC in 2003. Civilians live under the constant threat of armed men who pillage, rape, burn houses and confiscate food rations.

Resources:

Policy and guidance:

- ▶ Security and humanitarian response: technical policies of the UNAIDS Programme
- ▶ Security and humanitarian response: key operational guidelines of the UNAIDS Programme
- ▶ Refugees and internally displaced people - Technical policies of the UNAIDS Programme
- ▶ Refugees and internally displaced people - Key operational guidelines of the UNAIDS Programme
- ▶ Gender and HIV - umbrella policies
- ▶ Gender and HIV - operational guidelines

Related information:

- ▶ Democratic Republic of the Congo
- ▶ Key populations: Refugees and internally displaced people
- ▶ Key populations: Women and girls
- ▶ Gender

Cosponsors:

- ▶ UNHCR

Press centre:

- ▶ Statement by Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, on occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women 25 November 2009

Feature stories:

- ▶ UNHCR chief pledges to keep AIDS response a priority (03 December 2009)
- ▶ Violence against women and HIV (10 November 2009)
- ▶ UNAIDS partners in new Clinton Global Initiative to address sexual violence against girls (25 September 2009)

These women are very much in the mind of UNHCR and its local implementing partners, such as Women for Women International (WWI) and Search for Common Ground, during the 16 days of activism to end violence against women.

WWI has a project in the DRC to help those who have been raped. "We are making a difference in the lives of rape survivors," said Jose Rugamba, a WWI counsellor based in Goma. "But we cannot say the phenomenon has diminished," she added.

Lena Slachmuis, director of Search for Common Ground, said years of war had radicalized attitudes towards women and this was obstructing attempts to combat sexual violence in the DRC. "That is why the scourge of gender-based sexual violence will not reduce, or end, anytime soon."

Most women argue that the failure to jail and punish convicted offenders has led to a culture of impunity and to growing misogyny. "Twenty years is usually the jail term for offenders. But here in Congo, a rapist can be released after paying the equivalent of US\$3 to a prison warden," claimed one woman.

Sexual violence can also have a devastating effect on family relationships. Rape survivors are often rejected by family members and their communities, who fail to appreciate the physical and psychological trauma of rape. Changing mindsets will take a long time.

"The best strategy to winning this war is to prevent rape from taking place," said Karl Steinacker, coordinator of UNHCR operations in eastern DRC. That will be a tough task, and one that must tackle immunity and help spread awareness.

Under a UNHCR-sponsored programme, Search for Common Ground is trying to do the latter. The United States-based non-governmental organization has been going through towns and villages in eastern and south-eastern provinces screening films and videos on the issue of sexual and gender-based violence.

Slachmuis said the mobile cinema has an impact because the subjects of the films are real people. By allowing the victims of sexual violence to speak out, she said, "We are giving space for interaction and debate on issues people consider taboo, but which should be openly discussed to demystify the issues."

In partnership with other agencies, UNHCR is also assisting rape victims through counselling, medical treatment, micro-finance projects and reintegration activities.

For UNAIDS, this issue is a major concern and its [Outcome Framework 2009-11](#) has stopping violence against women and girls as one of nine priority areas.

► HIV in humanitarian crises: Opportunities and challenges (12 August 2009)

► Addressing the HIV-related needs of "people on the move" (19 June 2009)

► Challenging violence against women a key task for newly launched Caribbean Coalition on Women, Girls and AIDS (06 March 2009)

Publications:

► Partnering with Men to End Gender-based Violence: Practices that work from Eastern Europe and Central Asia ([pdf](#), 1.75 Mb.)

► Women and Health: Today's Evidence, Tomorrow's Agenda

► UNAIDS Outcome framework 2009-11 ([pdf](#), 396 Kb.)

