

Symbol of Unhealed Congo: Male Rape Victims

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GOMA, Congo — It was around 11 p.m. when armed men burst into Kazungu Ziwa's hut, put a machete to his throat and yanked down his pants. Mr. Ziwa is a tiny man, about four feet, six inches tall. He tried to fight back, but said he was quickly beaten down.

"Then they raped me," he said. "It was horrible, physically. I was dizzy. My thoughts just left me."

For years, the thickly forested hills and clear, deep lakes of eastern Congo have been a reservoir of atrocities. Now, it seems, there is another growing problem: men raping men.

According to Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, United Nations officials and several Congolese aid organizations, the number of men who have been raped has risen sharply in recent months, a consequence of joint Congo-Rwanda military operations against rebels that have uncapped an appalling level of violence against civilians.

Aid workers struggle to explain the sudden spike in male rape cases. The best answer, they say, is that the sexual violence against men is yet another way for armed groups to humiliate and demoralize Congolese communities into submission.

The United Nations already considers eastern Congo the rape capital of the world, and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is expected to hear from survivors on her visit to the country next week. Hundreds of thousands of women have been sexually assaulted by the various warring militias haunting these hills, and right now this area is going through one of its bloodiest periods in years.

The joint military operations that began in January between Rwanda and Congo, David and Goliath neighbors who were recently bitter enemies, were supposed to end the murderous rebel problem along the border and usher in a new epoch of cooperation and peace. Hopes soared after the quick capture of a renegade general who had routed government troops and threatened to march across the country.

But aid organizations say that the military maneuvers have provoked horrific revenge attacks, with more than 500,000 people driven from their homes, dozens of villages burned and hundreds of villagers massacred, including toddlers thrown into open fires.

And it is not just the rebels being blamed. According to human rights groups, soldiers from the Congolese Army are executing civilians, raping women and conscripting villagers to lug their food, ammunition and gear into the jungle. It is often a death march through one of Africa's lushest, most stunning tropical landscapes, which has also been the scene of a devastatingly complicated war for more than a decade.

"From a humanitarian and human rights perspective, the joint operations are disastrous," said Anneke Van Woudenberg, a researcher for Human Rights Watch.

The male rape cases span several hundred miles and possibly include hundreds of victims. The American Bar Association, which runs a sexual violence legal clinic in Goma, said that more than 10 percent of its cases in June were men.

Brandi Walker, an aid worker at Panzi hospital in nearby Bukavu, said, “Everywhere we go, people say men are getting raped, too.”

But nobody knows the exact number. Men here, like anywhere, are reluctant to come forward. Several who did said they instantly became castaways in their villages, lonely, ridiculed figures, derisively referred to as “bush wives.”

Since being raped several weeks ago, Mr. Ziwa, 53, has not shown much interest in practicing animal medicine, his trade for years. He limps around (his left leg was crushed in the attack) in a soiled white lab coat with “veterinaire” printed on it in red pen, carrying a few biscuit-size pills for dogs and sheep.

“Just thinking about what happened to me makes me tired,” he said.

The same is true for Tupapo Mukuli, who said he was pinned down on his stomach and gang-raped in his cassava patch seven months ago. Mr. Mukuli is now the lone man in the rape ward at Panzi hospital, which is filled with hundreds of women recovering from rape-related injuries. Many knit clothes and weave baskets to make a little money while their bodies heal.

But Mr. Mukuli is left out.

“I don’t know how to make baskets,” he said. So he spends his days sitting on a bench, by himself.

The male rape cases are still just a fraction of those against women. But for the men involved, aid workers say, it is even harder to bounce back.

“Men’s identity is so connected to power and control,” Ms. Walker said.

And in a place where homosexuality is so taboo, the rapes carry an extra dose of shame.

“I’m laughed at,” Mr. Mukuli said. “The people in my village say: ‘You’re no longer a man. Those men in the bush made you their wife.’ ”

Aid workers here say the humiliation is often so severe that male rape victims come forward only if they have urgent health problems, like stomach swelling or continuous bleeding. Sometimes even that is not enough. Ms. Van Woudenberg said that two men whose penises were cinched with rope died a few days later because they were too embarrassed to seek help. Castrations also seem to be increasing, with more butchered men showing up at major hospitals.

Last year, Congo’s rape epidemic appeared to be easing a bit, with fewer cases reported and some rapists jailed. But today, it seems like that thin veneer of law and order has been stripped away. The way villagers describe it, it is open season on civilians.

Muhindo Mwamurabagiro, a tall, graceful woman with long, strong arms, explained how she was walking to the market with friends when they were suddenly surrounded by a group of naked men.

“They grabbed us by the throat and threw us down and raped us,” she said.

Worse, she said, one of the rapists was from her village.

“I yelled, ‘Father of Kondo, I know you, how can you do this?’ ”

One mother said a United Nations peacekeeper raped her 12-year-old boy. A United Nations spokesman said that he had not heard that specific case but that there were indeed a number of new sexual abuse allegations against peacekeepers in Congo and that a team was sent in late July to investigate.

Congolese health professionals are becoming exasperated. Many argue for a political solution, not a military one, and say Western powers should put more pressure on Rwanda, which is widely accused of preserving its own stability by keeping the violence on the other side of the border.

“I understand the world feels guilty about what happened in Rwanda in 1994,” said Denis Mukwege, the lead doctor at Panzi Hospital, referring to Rwanda’s genocide. “But shouldn’t the world feel guilty about what’s happening in Congo today?”

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