

The attacks are sadistic and the brutality with which they are carried out defy comprehension. Impunity has replaced law and order and it appears the international community has lost its mandate to stem the continuous and gruesome use of rape as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hence, *New African Woman* is asking, who will heal Congo's women?

Whowill heal Congo's women?

By Belinda Otas

TRADITIONALLY, MARCH IS THE time of the year when women are celebrated in different parts of the world on International's Women's Day and Mother's Day. Amidst our celebrations, hundreds of thousands of women in Eastern Congo are either being attacked or recovering from endemic sexual violence. To date, over 250,000 rapes have been reported during the protracted war, which started 13 years ago and has cost more than 4m lives.

Rape victims are grotesquely mutilated

with guns, bayonets and risk becoming HIV positive, leaving them destroyed.

Charité was raped in front of her family who were then brutally murdered as she was forced to watch. Then her eyes were destroyed so she could not recognise the attackers. Mary cannot remember the number of men who raped her and stuck corn cobs in her vagina, which led to infection. To date it has been impossible to repair her fistula due to her weak condition.

These are just two of the many horror stories coming out of Heal Africa, an organisation based in Goma, DRC, and known for its work in combating sexual violence in the region.



"The leaders need to ask, What is happening to our women and girls? What's the future for them?"

It is one of two internationally renowned centres helping women, the other being the Panzi Hospital, based in South Kivu.

Marie-Claire Faray Kele is a Congolese women's rights activist who believes sexual violence is used as a tool of humiliation and subjugation, paralysing the community to submit themselves to those who wield power. At the heart of DRC's war is the nation's minerals, which 50 years ago made it one of the richest countries in Africa but are today the source of pain for the women who make up the fabric of its society. That being the case, the UN recently appointed Margot Wallstrom, a special envoy tasked with intensifying efforts to end sexual violence against women and children in conflict regions of Africa. She says, "Rape is not cultural but criminal." But will she be able to bring the perpetrators who have gone unpunished to justice?

According to UNICEF, there are more than 1,000 rape cases each month and UN reports claim that over 8,000 women were raped during fighting in 2009. For the militias and government troops who carry out these crimes, it seems rape has become a casual recreational act with which they make their point. They discriminate against no one based on age, gender or tribe. Such is the savagery of the attacks, as demonstrated by the July 2010 gang-rape of an estimated 300 women, young girls and baby boys by rebel soldiers over a four-day period in Luvungi town, Eastern DRC, that the country was dubbed "the rape capital of the world" by a senior UN official. The North and South Kivu regions of Eastern DRC have the highest rape counts in the world – with over 25 women being raped each day and the Congo is now described as the "most dangerous place in the world to be a woman". In November 2010, it was reported by the BBC *Newsnight* programme that a recent study showed that 39% of women and 24% of men had been raped. However, male victims, for fear of stigmatisation and shame, hardly come forward. Hence there are numerous undocumented cases.

While bringing an end to the epidemic of sexual violence is crucial, victims also need to be rehabilitated, and that is the premise on which Heal Africa works. Founded in 1994 by Dr. Kasereka and Lyn Lusi, its primary aim is to medically intervene and help people through its holistic approach to health-care and various programmes that it



runs. Judy Anderson is the executive director of Heal Africa. She grew up in the Congo but shares her time between Goma and the US. Anderson says, "Heal Africa is the strongest sign to the Congolese people that people care for them." The Heal Africa hospital specialises in orthopaedic and fistula repair surgery, which is needed by women who suffer a permanent tear in the vaginal and/or rectal wall, a common injury sustained by female victims of rape and gender-based violence in the Congo. Since 2003, the hospital has performed an estimated 2,000 fistula repair surgeries to help women who have been left incontinent by their attackers, and assisted over 10,000 survivors of sexual violence.

Compounding the psychological trauma rape victims face is rejection from their families. Heal Africa, with the help of Congolese Lawyers, created the Gender and Justice initiative to get people to re-examine their attitudes towards women and challenge villages to view sexual violence as a community issue not just a women's issue. Anderson explains: "To treat someone medically and then send them back into the same situation is not going to change anything and their situation might get worse. So, we started working with the idea of introducing a conversation into the community to look at what's happening, examine people's attitudes towards [rape] and where it comes from. What are the proverbs saying from the different tribes, what does the Bible and the Qur'an say, and what does the law say?"

Heal Africa is not alone in its quest to

"The future of Africa is in the women's hands. Only African women will be able to rebuild their strength and resilience, but the solidarity of women in the rest of the world is a huge supporting factor"

help bring healing to the lives of women affected by rape. Women for Women International is an NGO founded by Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi American, herself a victim of war. It has been at the forefront of helping women and girls in war-torn regions to rebuild their lives by providing financial and emotional support, jobs, leadership and business skills, and educate them about their rights. It currently operates in four African countries, including the DRC. Brita Schmidt, the UK campaign and policy director, says, "The strategic role we play is one of providing tools for women to empower themselves. We do not create dependency, we focus on independence and autonomous decision-making." Asked about the action the international community must take in the wake of recent rape sprees, Schmidt adds, "The Congolese women are very clear and articulate about what is needed: more women involved in the peace negotiations and peacekeeping. At the same time as strengthening women's voices, we also need to invest in their economic empowerment. There won't be any

The medical and psychological impact of women's rape stretches across generations

peace without development and no development without peace, and an investment in greater security for women."

Fabienne Planese, who has worked at Heal Africa since September 2009, believes to bring about a reduction in the number of rapes, the war must end. "To stop this violence, a whole new way of thinking and change of mentality towards the value of women will have to take place if we want to experience a noticeable change," she says. Anderson adds that to end the war requires real determination from those in power to address the situation behind the protracted war. "The central government would have to put their life on the line. Unless that happens at a political level, I don't see much changing," she says.

Confronted as to who is responsible for bringing healing to the Congolese women, Anderson says, "The leaders need to ask, What is happening to our women and girls? What's the future for them? There is a huge amount that can be done at family, community and local level if people were more concerned about the future than the past. It's time for the leaders of the different communities to say we can choose something different." Schmidt adds, "The future of Africa is in the women's hands and only African women will be able to rebuild their strength and resilience, but the solidarity of women in the rest of the world is a huge supporting factor without which it won't be possible."

The indomitable strength of the African woman is ever-present, for it is recognised that without her, Africa has no future. ■

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