

Canada's responsibility in advancing women's roles in peacebuilding and defending human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo¹

The conflict that raged in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1996 to 2003 was the world's deadliest since the Second World War. Despite an official end to the fighting, violence and insecurity still prevail in the eastern region of the DRC, primarily driven by competition to control access to valuable minerals. The exploitation of, and trade in, minerals by armed groups and the military is causing serious human rights abuses against civilians. The most shocking abuse is the prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls.

The United Nations Mapping Report that investigated human rights abuses in the DRC between 1993 and 2003 states: "Sexual violence was frequently used to terrorize and subjugate the population ... Public rapes, gang rapes, systematic rapes, forced incest, sexual mutilation, disembowelling (in some cases of pregnant women), genital mutilation and cannibalism were all techniques of war used against the civilian population."

The extent that sexual violence continues to occur is unprecedented. In 2008-2009, 30,000 people, mainly women and girls, were raped. This equates to approximately 40 rapes a day. In the eastern province of South Kivu, a woman is raped every two hours. UN-backed government troops, rebel soldiers and local militia are all guilty parties. There are serious concerns that UN peacekeepers are not doing enough to protect the victims.

The prevalence of sexual violence is such that civilians are also increasingly engaged in the practice, with one report suggesting a seventeen-fold increase in the number of rapes carried out by civilians.

In this context, sexual violence is a prescribed guerrilla terror tactic and weapon of war. It has become a strategic element in military offensives. It is used because it rips apart the bonds of community by destroying traditional family structures, increasing the spread of HIV and damaging the local economy.

It is estimated that 60% of combatants in the DRC are HIV-infected. The spread of the disease is therefore inevitable, becoming a death sentence for countless numbers of women and girls. Impunity, because of inadequate legal structures, contributes to the effectiveness of sexual violence as a strategy of war. Perpetrators are rarely brought to justice – 12 trials have been held to date in response to rapes committed between 1993 and 2003.

Civil society is active in the DRC and provides a voice for rape survivors so that they are not perceived as merely passive victims. The Synergy for Fight Against Sexual Violence and Promotion of Defense of the Rights of Women and Girls (SALVIS/PDF) is a coalition of 35 women's groups in the DRC, including KAIROS' human rights partner Héritiers de la Justice (HJ). HJ coordinates women's programs and a gender-based legal clinic and teaches survivors about political participation and advocacy. While these groups are occasionally threatened by authorities, ultimately they are shaping the discourse around the fact that rape is not just a "women's issue" but an issue for everybody to address.

¹ This fact sheet is informed by, among other sources, the collaborative research of the Africa Canada Working Group of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation.

In this context, KAIROS respectfully makes the following recommendations to the government of Canada:

- ✓ **Implementing UNSC1325** Internationally, Canada has an important role to play in promoting the application of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of peacebuilding as an effective strategy to resolve conflict and build lasting peace. Specifically Canada should:
 - immediately integrate Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security with its Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force programming and other governmental activities as they relate to the DRC; and
 - assist the DRC with the implementation of its own Action Plan: *Plan d'action du gouvernement de la République Démocratique du Congo pour l'application de la résolution 1325 du Conseil de Sécurité des Nations Unies*.
- ✓ **Supporting civil society** The Canadian government needs to increase financial support to women's human rights and civil society organizations working in zones of conflict. An integral part of this support is increased Canadian overseas development assistance to community-based human rights education and training programs for women. In the DRC, Canada needs to:
 - channel Canadian funds either directly to women's organizations in the DRC, or through Canadian civil society groups working in partnership with these organizations, to strengthen their capacity to prevent violence, help victims, and fight against impunity; and
 - promote the work of national and international CSOs (civil society organizations) whose focus is on advocating women's rights and their increased participation in peace and political processes.
- ✓ **Ending Impunity** Canada must work to end impunity for sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo by:
 - adding a significant presence of Canadian women military police to the small contingent of Canadian personnel already working through the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) to better assist in building judicial capacity and strengthening legal mechanisms to curb the current impunity; and
 - building on the visit of then Governor General Michaëlle Jean to the region in April 2010, establishing specific and bilateral relations with the departments working on sexual violence, in particular the Department of Justice, to put an end to impunity in that field.
- ✓ **Holding accountable the resource industry** The Canadian government must establish mechanisms to guarantee that Canadian resource extraction companies operating in areas of internal armed conflict are not contributing to the perpetuation of human rights violations and sexual violence. We call on the Canadian government to commit to binding, legally enforceable and monitored standards for Canadian mining companies operating in the DRC and to end Canadian taxpayer support if violence against women is abetted in their spheres of influence.



KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives is a joint venture of eleven Canadian churches and religious organizations dedicated to ecological justice and human rights.

