

# "Not Women Anymore..."

## The Congo's rape survivors face pain, shame and AIDS

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By Stephanie Nolen

It took Thérèse Mwandeko a year to save the money. She knew she could walk the first 40 kilometers of her journey, but would need to pay for a lift for the last 20.

So she traded bananas and peanuts until she'd saved \$1.50 in Congolese francs, then set out for Bukavu. She walked with balled-up fabric clenched between her thighs, to soak up blood that had been oozing from her vagina for two years, since she had been gang-raped by Rwandan militia soldiers who plundered her village in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Finally, she arrived at Panzi Hospital.



At Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, two rape victims await vaginal surgery / photo by Stephanie Nolen

Here, Thérèse takes her place in line, along with 80 women, waiting for surgery to rebuild her vagina. Dr. Denis Mukwege, Panzi's sole gynecologist and one of two doctors in the eastern Congo who can perform such reconstructive surgeries, can repair only five women a week. The air is thick with flies. It reeks from women with fistula: rips in the vaginal wall where rape tore out chunks of flesh separating the bladder and rectum from the vagina. Yet Thérèse, 47, is happier than she's been in years.

"Until I came here, I had no hope I could be helped," she says.

Across the DRC are tens of thousands of women like this: physically ravaged, emotionally terrorized, financially impoverished. Except for Thérèse and a few fortunate others, these women have no help of any kind: Eight years of war have left the country in ruins, and Congolese women have been victims of rape on a scale never seen before.

Every one of dozens of armed groups in this war has used rape as a weapon. Amnesty International (AI) researchers believe there has been more rape here than in any other conflict, but the actual scale is still unknown.

"They rape a woman, five or six of them at a time — but that is not enough. Then they shoot a gun into her vagina," says Dr. Mukwege. "In all my years here, I never saw anything like it. ... [T]o see so many raped, that shocks me, but what shocks me more is the way they are raped."

Each armed group has a trademark manner of violating, he explains. The Burundians rape men as well as women. The Mai Mai — local defense forces — rape with branches or bayonets, and mutilate their victims. The Rwandans, like those who attacked Thérèse, set groups of soldiers to rape one woman.

At Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, two rape victims await vaginal surgery / photo by Stephanie Nolen

The ward where Thérèse waits for surgery is run by a social worker, Louise Nzigire. The women tell her they are "not women anymore." They are often too physically damaged to farm, or bear children, and there is such stigma associated with rape in Congo — where female virginity is prized and the husband of a rape survivor is considered shamed — that rape survivors are routinely shunned by husbands, parents and communities.

Nzigire believes rape has been a cheap, simple weapon for all parties in the war, more easily obtainable than bullets or bombs: "This violence was designed to exterminate the population," she says quietly.

The Congo war has claimed more lives than any conflict since the end of World War II, yet receives almost no attention outside central Africa. An estimated 4 million people have died here since 1996 — the vast majority not by firepower but starvation or preventable diseases, as people hid in the jungle to escape the fighting.

It began when Rwanda's Tutsi government sent troops over the border to pursue Hutu militias responsible for the 1994 genocide, since many Hutu had escaped to the impenetrable Congolese bush. When the then-Zairian army offered little resistance, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame formed a hasty alliance with a Congolese rebel group attempting to overthrow dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Tutsi-run Burundi and neighboring Uganda saw a lucrative opportunity, and sent troops to help the putsch.

The rebels took Kinshasa in 1997, installing Laurent Kabila as president. But the next year, Rwandan and Ugandan troops turned on Kabila, so he called in Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe to back his army. All of Congo's neighbors joined the war, which gave them a chance to indulge in a frenzy of looting diamonds and other minerals, in which Congo is abundant.

After a 2002 peace deal, a fragile, transitional government holds power, in a uniquely Congolese power-sharing: President Joseph Kabila (thrust into the job at age 29 after his father's 2001 assassination) shares power with four of the major warlords whose militias have wrought havoc for the past years. This is peace enough to placate international

donors, who've poured money in to prop up this flimsy government and to repair roads and phone lines in the capital — and reassure international mining companies, who are reopening up shop all over the country.

But beyond Kinshasa's city limits, there is little sign the war has ended. In the east, where the worst hostilities were fought, a half-dozen armed groups still control territory, holding civilians hostage. Here there is no rebuilding, no phone service, no electrical grid, no roads. Hospitals, when they still stand, have been looted of everything from beds to bandages. No government employee — teachers, judges, nurses — has been paid in 14 years.

There is a United Nations peacekeeping mission charged with maintaining order, but it has 12,000 soldiers for an area the size of Western Europe (the U.N. mission to tiny Kosovo, by contrast, had 40,000 troops); furthermore, the troops lack the ability to move outside town centers, while the militias move freely in the forests.

The people who live out here have been rendered feral by the war. Their homes have been burned, their possessions pillaged, men shot, women and girls raped, boys abducted to serve as soldiers. Any survivors took refuge in the forest, living naked, eating grubs and roots. This season, for the first time in six years, people in most of the eastern provinces have returned to their fields and planted crops.

Shami Alubu, 21, came out of the jungle and back to the town of Kibombo last year, although she can't go home. In early 2002, while working in her fields, she was snatched by Mai Mai militants, who dragged her into town, then kept her there for a full day, beating and raping her with guns and sticks. The whole time, she was within earshot of her 7-month-old son Florent, who was sobbing wildly.

When it was over, she limped back to her house — but at the sight of her, her husband ordered her away. "It was like he thought I wanted to go with the Mai Mai," Shami says bitterly.

Shami's town, Kibombo, changed hands a half-dozen times during the war: the Rwandan army, then the Mai Mai, then Rwandans again. Every time new troops seized Kibombo, they set out systematically to rape. When the soldiers lost the town to a new militia, they often dragged dozens of women with them as they fled, holding them as sexual slaves and cooks in their jungle retreats until the next time they raided the town.

Today, Shami is thin and hunched; she breathes with difficulty. "Maybe I have AIDS," she murmurs.

An estimated 30 percent of the women raped in Congo's war are infected with HIV; as many as 60 percent of the combatants are believed to have the virus. Shami also suffers continual pain in her shredded vagina, but has had no medical help since the rape. There is a hospital in Kibombo, with six wards: Four are empty; two each contain three iron bed frames, stripped of any mats. The director, Jean-Yves Mukamba (the only doctor for this

region of 25,000 square kilometers) knows he is surrounded by women suffering raging venereal infections, HIV, prolapsed uteruses, torn vaginas.

"I think it was a large majority of the women here who were raped, almost all of them. But I can't help them with just my bare hands," he says. When he decided, late last year, to consult with sexual-violence victims, more than 100 women turned up the first morning.

"I had nothing, not even antibiotics, to give them." Not that antibiotics would have helped much: "Most cases were traumatization of the genitals: These women had been raped with a tree branch or the barrel of a gun, or a bayonet. When you see a woman who was forced by 10 men — the trauma..."

The doctor holds out his thin hands, as if to push the memory away.

Nor is it just Kibombo. "The women rely on a national health system that has been totally destroyed," says Andrew Philip, coauthor of an AI report on the Congo : "They walk for days...then are charged for health care because none of the doctors or nurses is paid [by the state], and it's beyond the means of most patients."

A typical doctor's visit costs about 70 cents. Although the government now collects substantial revenues on exports, particularly diamonds, it insists it cannot afford to pay nurses or doctors, or abolish consultation fees. Dr. Mukamba has not received so much as a Band-Aid from Kinshasa in two years.

Legal assistance is even rarer than medical help. There have been fewer than a dozen prosecutions of sexual assault in the eastern DRC. Many rape survivors know where their assailants are; in some cases, they see them every day. But large parts of the country lack judges, lawyers, police or detectives.

Staff that are present often answer to the militias, which still control large chunks of territory. No senior officer of any military (as well as the national armies of Rwanda , Uganda and Burundi , which committed thousands of rapes) has ever been held accountable for sexual violence committed by his staff.

There is yet another problem. "Most women won't pursue this legally, because they are afraid it's not over. They figure that when the militia is back in power, they will be targeted," explains Emiliane Tuma Sibazuri, who heads a women's group supporting rape survivors in the eastern town of Kasongo.

"They think, 'If I give my name to try to get justice, then when they come back, I will be attacked, or my family.' All we can do is try to help them forget."

The grossly underfunded U.N. mission is in little position to assist. Last October, when the mission went to the Security Council to ask for additional soldiers and money, it won

a laughably small increase. Then, weeks later, came the revelation that U.N. peacekeepers themselves are contributing to Congo's frenzy of sexual assault.

The U.N. said that 150 allegations of sexual abuse were reported committed by peacekeepers (from Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, South Africa, Tunisia and Uruguay) in Congo, and that there were likely hundreds more that would never be reported; commanders were allegedly resisting measures to curb such abuses. Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced there was "clear evidence that acts of gross misconduct have taken place."

Furthermore, U.N. investigators found that peacekeepers and civilian workers were paying an average of US \$2 for sex with women in populations they were assigned to protect, or bartering for sex with food, basic supplies or a fictitious promise of work in safe, well-guarded U.N. compounds.

A recent International Rescue Committee survey, conducted in all regions of the Congo , found that 31,000 people a month are still dying, almost all for preventable reasons. But as the delicate peace inches out across the country, more people emerge from the jungle, and more women like Thérèse Mwandeko are able to make their way to a hospital.

"We treat one, and send her home to the village," says Dr. Mukwege, "and she returns with five more."