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MAKE FORCED MARRIAGE A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

The UN must protect conflict zone 'bush wives.'

By Donald Steinberg

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NEW YORK - Nearly a decade after Angola emerged from a civil war that killed half a million people, one image from my work there continues to haunt me: that of young women huddled in the shadows in rebel demobilization camps.

They all told the same story. They believed in the rebel movement, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and its leader, Jonas Savimbi, and ran off to join the rebels. While there, they fell in love with a UNITA freedom fighter, got married, and had a child. Now, they had no interest in returning to their villages and families.

But it didn't take much investigation to find out that these women had been kidnapped from their villages, forced into sex slavery, and were too ashamed to return to their villages. Despite the best efforts of international aid agencies to assist them, it was clear that most of their lives had been permanently shattered.

The phenomenon of "bush wives" plagues many of the world's conflicts. In northern Uganda, for example, an estimated 1 in 6 young girls in the war-affected region have been kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army.

The pattern has existed under a veil of silence. The abused women rarely come forward to challenge their abusers. Until recently, there have been no mechanisms within peace agreements for addressing these and other sexual abuses against women.

Most peace agreements have been built on amnesties provided by the warring parties to each other. This usually means that men with guns forgive other men with guns for crimes against women.

But there is good news emerging from an obscure source: the Special Court for Sierra Leone. This court was set up to address war crimes committed during Sierra Leone's murderous civil war in the '90s. It was previously best known for its courageous indictment of Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, who is now on trial at The Hague.

Earlier this year, the special court ruled in a landmark case that the soldiers in Sierra Leone's rebel Armed Forces Revolutionary Council who forced young girls into marriage committed a "crime against humanity."

The trial court judges were deeply moved by the testimony of expert witness Zainab Bangura, who confirmed that, " 'bush wives' were constantly sexually abused, physically battered during and after pregnancies, and psychologically terrorized by their husbands."

Labeling forced marriage a crime against humanity has a number of important effects. It allows the international community to step in and prosecute whether or not local laws and legal authorities wish to pursue the cases. It validates the suffering of these women and at least partially removes the shame in such cases.

Perhaps most important, it helps remove the stigma of "victimization" of women in conflict that has led to their systematic exclusion

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It would not be feasible, nor necessarily wise, to try each rebel soldier engaged in this practice as an international war criminal. In some cases, the best option will be through indigenous healing and a forgiveness process. Elsewhere, more formal Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, as used in South Africa or Sierra Leone, may be more appropriate.

Still, the decision to label forced marriages as a crime against humanity and the implicit threat of international prosecution has given important new impetus to the development and use of these mechanisms.

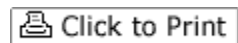
The action of Sierra Leone's Special Court is just a first step. The entire international justice system, including the International Criminal Court, must pursue the high-level perpetrators of these crimes. The United Nations and other international peace negotiators should insist on measures to address the phenomenon, including reintegration assistance and psychosocial counseling.

The UN Security Council has an opportunity to step up on June 19 when – under Americas' presidency – it debates the issue of sexual violence in conflict. It should use this platform to formally classify bush marriages as a crime against humanity. Only then will the bush wives in Angola and elsewhere be able to step from the shadows and reclaim their lives.

Donald Steinberg, deputy president of the International Crisis Group and a board member of the Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children, served as US Ambassador to Angola from 1995 to 1998.

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