



International

Stronger Action Urged to Stop Conflict-Zone Rape

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By Rich Daly
WeNews correspondent

In response to the heavy toll of sexual violence in war-torn regions, a gathering of international leaders on Wednesday pressed U.N. member states for more concrete steps to aid victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS)--Each month the 1,100 women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are raped--on average.

The scale of sexual violence in the strife-torn nation has made the eastern region of the Congo exhibit A in the growing push by female leaders to organize a worldwide response to what many see as an expanding "tool of war."



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"What is happening in the DRC is different in its scale and scope than anything we have ever seen," Melanne Verveer, U.S. ambassador-at-large for Global Women's Issues, said Wednesday in Washington, D.C. She spoke at a forum on United Nation's efforts throughout the world to stop such crimes.

The forum was held at the Aspen Institute, a non-partisan, non-profit foundation.

Speakers at the event included representatives from the U.S. State Department, the European Commission and the United Nations.

The call for attention and action on the issue of sexual violence is driven by a growing understanding that rape is no longer simply a byproduct of war but, rather, is used in many places as a deliberate tactic designed to demoralize and intimidate communities.

Destroying Social Acceptance

The use of sexual assault--often accompanied by disfigurement to mark the victim-- permanently damages the victims' social acceptance. Spouses and relatives often reject them afterward, which contributes to the destruction of entire families and communities.

Sexual violence in conflict zones has become so pervasive that its threat to individual victims as well as entire communities and nations and



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requires an international response, said Margot Wallstrom, vice president of the European Commission.

"It has to be put to the fore because it destroys societies," Wallstrom said. "Even if there is eventually peace (in war-torn countries), what kind of society does this leave behind?"

International response has so far been limited to two U.N. resolutions adopted in 2000 and 2008 that highlighted aspects of the problem and called for warring sides in conflicts to take steps to protect women and girls from sexual assault.

However, according to the U.N., implementation of the measures has been weak.

Combatants continue to leave female civilians unprotected and only a few war-torn countries have improved prosecutions and created female policing units.

U.N. Attention Later This Month

The U.N. Security Council is expected to consider later this month steps to better implement the 2008 resolution.

The issue of sexual violence may not receive the attention and priority focus from world leaders that it deserves, Wallstrom said, because it is an uncomfortable topic that politicians may avoid or downplay for different reasons.

Women's rights activists around the world, she added, need to communicate the issue and pressure their leaders to take action on the issue.

Ines Alberdi, executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women told the forum that the U.N. resolutions have begun to change the attitude that sexual assault is an inevitable byproduct of war.

However, she agreed that more concrete steps are needed, including making women's security a primary component in all U.N. peace-keeping actions.

Alberdi called for sanctions on countries that allowed widespread use of sexual violence and for the U.N. to encourage member nations to adopt laws that recognize the destructive force of sexual violence.

Rich Daly is a writer in Washington, D.C.

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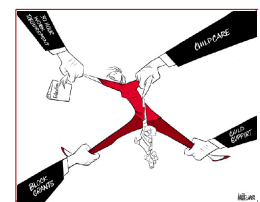


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