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US must act on violence against women

By Bill Delahunt | November 28, 2009

WHETHER IT'S the Congo, Darfur, Afghanistan, Albania, or elsewhere, young girls are sold as sexual slaves, forced into marriage, or are burned with acid if they try to attend school. Rape is increasingly used as a weapon of war. The victims of this violence often suffer the added humiliation of being forced to flee their homes or abandon their children. In many cases, victims are ostracized and left to fend for themselves when they most desperately need help. In some areas, females are stoned for the "crime" of being abused.

Tragically, these are not isolated incidents. The United Nations reports that one of every three women worldwide will be physically or sexually abused in her lifetime. The World Health Organization says this violence can affect as much as 70 percent of all women and girls in some countries. It causes grave harm, not just to the victim but to her family and community as well.

This year, congressional hearings examined this epidemic of violence against women. During our investigations, we found that the nations with the worst track record in preventing violence against women are also counties that are the most unstable and are breeding grounds for terrorism. We also learned that a crucial way to limit the spread of terrorism, and boost our security at home, is to make the protection of women around the world a priority.

Given the urgency of the crisis, I plan to introduce the International Violence Against Women Act. It will make ending violence against women a high priority and an integral component of American foreign policy. The act would build on our success with the Violence Against Women Act, which created a key national network of programs, including domestic violence shelters, rape crisis programs, and other support services. The results are significant: USA Today recently indicated that the rate of reported rapes in the United States has hit a 20-year low. Violent crime as a whole is decreasing.

It's an approach that needs to be replicated around the world. The new law would make the United States a world leader in developing a comprehensive strategy to reduce violence where it is most severe. It would build a global network for groups that are already working to stop the horrific abuse of women. It would authorize funds for survivor services and to train local health care providers and police officers to address this violence more effectively. More important, it would change the attitudes that tolerate the abuse of women that is critical to stopping this epidemic.

As a nation, we need to realize that we can do something about violence against women around the world. Passage of the act will not only save lives, but will improve US security at the same time.

Bill Delahunt is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Oversight Subcommittee and represents the 10th District of Massachusetts. ■

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