

Press conference statement
Nairobi, Kenya: Thursday, 13 September 2007, 3:00 p.m.

Stephen Lewis* calls for a new UN initiative to end sexual violence in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

On Monday of this week, John Holmes, the UN Emergency Coordinator and Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs returned from a trip to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and characterized sexual violence against women as “almost unimaginable”. He termed it a “weapon of terror”, adding that the intensity and frequency is worse than anywhere else in the world.

That’s pretty strong language coming from a UN official, many of whom are given to the sonorous dispassion of diplomacy. But as frontal were the words of John Holmes, he was positively reserved compared to others.

Nor were the words a revelation. They were simply the latest installment in an ongoing litany of horror.

Last month, August 6th to be exact, Eve Ensler, celebrated author of “The Vagina Monologues” held a press conference to seek support for the Panzi hospital in Bukavu, DRC, where women who have been subjected to sexual violence are treated. She had just completed a visit to eastern Congo, and wrote an extraordinary magazine piece which began with the words, “I have just returned from hell. I am trying for the life of me to figure out how to communicate what I have seen and heard in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ... How do I convey these stories of atrocities ... How do I tell you of girls as young as nine raped by gangs of soldiers, of women whose insides were blown apart by rifle blasts and whose bodies now leak uncontrollable streams of urine and feces?”

There follows an incomparably blood-chilling account of interviews with survivors of rape and sexual violence ... violence so insanely savage as to reverberate with Hitlerian brutality. When I read Eve Ensler, I was shaken to the core.

Interestingly, in advance of Eve Ensler, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council, felt exactly the same way. Just a week earlier, July 30, 2007, the rapporteur, Professor Yakin Erturk, returned from an official visit to the DRC conducted between July 16th and July 27th.

In a public statement, preliminary to a full report, she writes of the roaming gangs of psychopaths in the eastern Congo: “The atrocities perpetrated by these armed groups are of an unimaginable brutality that goes far beyond rape. The atrocities are structured around rape and sexual slavery and aim at the complete physical and psychological destruction of women with implications for the entire society ... Women are brutally gang raped, often in front of their families and communities. In numerous cases, male relatives are forced at gun point to rape their own daughters, mothers or sisters. Frequently women are shot or stabbed in their genital organs

after they are raped. Women who survived months of enslavement told me that their tormentors had forced them to eat excrement or the human flesh of murdered relatives.”

I note that this is the language of a formally-appointed UN rapporteur, delivered to a formal UN body. Absolutely nothing has come of it.

In February of 2007, here in Nairobi, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in conjunction with the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) published an astonishingly comprehensive and powerful monograph, with extensive narrative and searing photographs, titled “The Shame of War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict”. It is, without doubt, one of the finest publications, in content and analysis, that the United Nations has produced in many a year.

The monograph followed an earlier publication by OCHA/IRIN in 2005, called “Broken Bodies, Broken Dreams”, an initial compilation dealing with gender-based violence. The point to be made is that even though both texts covered sexual violence in several war zones, the material dealing with DRC was enough to sound the highest-decibel alarm.

For example, this excerpt from *The Shame of War*: “As a result of the systematic and exceptionally violent gang rape of thousands of Congolese women and girls, doctors in the DRC are now classifying vaginal destruction as a crime of combat. Many of the victims suffer from traumatic fistula --- tissue tears in the vagina, bladder and rectum. Additional long-term medical complications for survivors may include uterine prolapse (the descent of the uterus into the vagina or beyond) and other serious injuries to the reproductive system, such as infertility, or complications associated with miscarriages and self-induced abortions. Rape victims are also at high-risk for sexually transmitted infections.”

Alas, OCHA and IRIN were simply repeating, in 2007, what had been endlessly hammered home in the previous years. On November 13th, 2006, the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, ran a story under the headline “Hundreds of Thousands Raped in Congo Wars”, reporting on just one province in eastern DRC, South Kivu, where 42,000 women had been treated for rape. In October, 2006, UN Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping, Jean-Marie Guehenno, reported that “In the eastern Congo, over 12,000 rapes of women and girls have been reported in the last six months.”

But Jean-Marie Guehenno well knows that the number of rapes that go unreported are usually ten or twenty times higher than those that come to official attention, and vastly higher still during a war. Indeed, USG Guehenno was about to receive a report from the Human Rights Division of his own peacekeeping operation in the Congo, known as MONUC, that surveyed “The Human Rights Situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the period of July to December, 2006.” In the section of the report headed “Sexual Violence”, there is a catalogue of depraved and ferocious assaults on women that makes the blood run cold.

Thus: “Despite all initiatives undertaken to counter sexual violence ... rape continues to be widespread throughout the country.”

Thus: “Throughout the country, young and old women, pregnant women and girls as young as six were allegedly raped at roadblocks and in private homes, on their way home from school or in the fields.”

Thus: “In Ituri, where the local population suffers hardships caused by the continuous military operations against armed groups ... the (security forces) have carried out brutal acts of sexual violence in a legal vacuum without being held responsible for their actions.”

There’s more, much more.

It’s no wonder, then, that Jan Egeland, the former UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, told the Security Council in September of 2006 that sexual violence in the DRC was a “cancer that seemed to be out of control.” He went on to note that the “Congo is the world’s deadliest crisis since the Second World War. Yet Congo’s immense suffering has gone virtually unnoticed by the outside world.”

At the outset of 2006, however, it did not escape the notice of the highly-esteemed medical journal, *The Lancet*. In the issue of January 7th, there appeared a learned article, “Mortality in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: a nationwide survey”. The authors examined mortality rates between January 2003 and April 2004, and came to the conclusion, by extrapolation, that the total death toll, 1998-2004 was 3.9 million. It would doubtless be closer to 5 million today. In the introduction to the article, the authors argue that “... the war began in 1998 and quickly engulfed the country in a conflict characterized by extreme violence, mass population displacements, widespread rape, and a collapse of public health services. The outcome has been a humanitarian disaster unmatched by any other in recent decades, but one that has drawn little response from the international community.”

It is a self-evident truth that there is a terrifying pattern here, evolving over many years, and the most terrifying component of that pattern, the one unbroken stream of nightmare continuity, is the sexual violence.

Jan Egeland, ever-engaged, ever-enraged, ever-eloquent, knew what was happening. And so it was, on June 21st, 2005, that he poured his heart out on the occasion of another report to the Security Council:

”Mr. President, the recurrent use of sexual violence is arguably one of the worst global protection challenges due to its scale, prevalence and profound impact. Often ostracized by their communities, survivors have to battle with the physical injuries, trauma and stigma of such violence for the rest of their lives. Although we repeatedly condemn such violence, it persists virtually unchallenged. Far from making general progress, we have in too many places regressed. We have information of more and more women being attacked, younger and younger children are victims of these atrocities.”

He goes on to say: “I could provide a devastating catalogue of violations, but let me highlight ... where sexual violence is at its worst. In North Kivu, in the DRC, a local NGO just reported over 2,000 cases of gender-based violence in the month of April (2005) alone. An estimated 50%

were committed against minors. MONUC estimates at least 25,000 cases of sexual violence a year in North Kivu alone, just one region of the DRC. The cultural breakdown and the disintegration of the line of command in the armed forces, has resulted in a culture of violence in which sexual violence had become endemic. If this is not stopped, such violence will have terrible long-term ramifications for Congolese society, threatening future peace and stability. The United Nations have recognized this as one of our highest priorities. More forceful action should have been taken earlier.”

Well, action wasn't taken. It's entirely beyond belief that this war on women excited virtually no response from the United Nations. The establishment of MONUC is hardly a complete answer. Indeed, as has been shown by the United Nations itself, the situation for women --- more than two years later --- has progressed from despair to doomsday even as the UN forces are in the country.

And no one can claim ignorance. Not only was the Security Council regularly briefed (what an indictment of the five permanent members), but journalists and human rights organizations around the world had maintained a relentless drumbeat of concern.

In my own country of Canada, Stephanie Nolen of the Globe and Mail wrote searing stories of sexual violence in the eastern Congo, based on first-hand reporting. On November 27, 2004, the Globe headlined her story “The War on Women”, followed by the cutline: “... in battle-weary Congo, Stephanie Nolen finds that all the warring factions have one tactic in common: brutal, mass rape”. The article constituted a comprehensive review of what was happening in the eastern Congo, and no one who read it could come away unmoved. Then, in a special piece filed for Ms. Magazine in the spring issue of 2005, Nolen dealt with the very hospital and the very doctor that Eve Ensler reported on last month. She wrote of individual women mercilessly scarred by rape: “Across the DRC are tens of thousands of women like this: physically ravaged, emotionally terrorized, financially impoverished ... Eight years of war have left the country in ruins, and Congolese women have been victims of rape on a scale never seen before.” And later in the article: “An estimated 30 per cent of the women raped in Congo's war are infected with HIV ...” She quotes Dr. Mukwege, the sole gynecologist at the Panzi hospital in Bukavu: “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 ... In all my years here, I have never seen anything like it ... to see so many raped, that shocks me, but what shocks me more is the way they are raped.” Further on, Nolen speaks of another hospital in Kibombo, where the only doctor, Jean-Yves Mukamba “... knows he is surrounded by women suffering raging venereal infections, HIV, prolapsed uteruses, torn vaginas.” She quotes the doctor: “Most cases were traumatization of the genitals: These women were raped with a tree branch or the barrel of a gun, or a bayonet. When you see a woman who was forced by ten men --- the trauma ...”

What is so incredible about the inertia and passivity of the international community is the weight of evidence they had before them, and the total blank indifference with which the evidence was treated.

In 2004, Amnesty International produced a 39-page treatise titled “Democratic Republic of Congo: Mass Rape – Time for Remedies”. It makes very tough reading. But it’s almost unimaginable that it would engender almost no response whatsoever.

The study opens with what has now become a predictable preface: “In the course of the armed conflict in eastern DRC, tens of thousands of women and girls have been victims of systematic rape and sexual assault committed by combatant forces. Women and girls have been attacked in their homes, in the fields as they go about their daily activities. Many have been raped more than once or have suffered gang rapes. In many cases, women and young girls have been taken as sex slaves by combatants. Rape of men and boys has also taken place. Rape has often been preceded or followed by the deliberate wounding, torture (including torture of a sexual nature) or killing of the victim. Rapes have been committed in public and in front of family members, including children. Some women have been raped next to the corpses of family members.”

In the section on “Rape: A Weapon of War”, the report quotes a doctor: “In peacetime, the demands on Congolese women are limitless; but in this war, the most insane fantasies have found their expression. When seven soldiers rape a woman or little girl, and thrust a knife or fire shots into her vagina, for them the woman is no longer a human being, she is an object. And since there are no longer any laws or rules, combatants pour out their anger and their madness on to women and little girls.”

The Amnesty International report, with its unendurable accounts of victims of sexual violence -- brought to the attention of all governments -- is a tour de force of analysis, and of recommendations for the United Nations, the peacekeepers (who, agonizingly enough, themselves became implicated in episodes of rape and sexual abuse), the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the surrounding African states, the bilateral donors, the NGOs. As history has shown, those who could intervene, primarily the governments of the international community, remained impassive. It forces one to think of the meaning of misogyny.

I cannot, however, conclude this partial review of reports, statements and documents, without noting a 114-page monograph, produced back in June of 2002 by Human Rights Watch, entitled “The War Within the War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo”.

It is absolutely definitive, amassing a torrent of evidence to make the case that everyone subsequently mirrored. If we had paid any attention to Human Rights watch more than five years ago, we would have saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and diminished the inexpressible agony for millions of others.

The evidence presented by Human Rights Watch is unassailable. Again, after chronicling an infinite number of examples of sexual violence, rooted in hatred and power, HRW makes recommendations to every entity from the United Nations to the International Criminal Court. That was back in 2002, based on evidence gathered in 2001.

It is impossible to imagine what those past five years have been like for the women featured in those accounts.

Throughout this exegesis, and particularly in regard to the article by Eve Ensler with which I began, I have refrained from quoting the most terrible and dreadful of the crimes against women and girls. But lest there is anyone who is somehow unconvinced of the monstrous nature of what is transpiring, on a daily basis, in the eastern Congo, I shall quote but one piece of testimony from the Human Rights Watch report. As though one were watching an x-rated film, a warning must be given to the reader.

I quote: “ In some cases, rapists react with extraordinary cruelty to any efforts to resist their assault. One mother described the treatment of her daughter, Monique B., aged twenty, who was engaged to be married:

“On May 15 of this year (2001), four heavily armed combatants --- they were Hutu --- came to our house at 9 p.m. Everyone in the neighbourhood had fled. I wanted to hide my children, but I didn't have time. They took my husband and tied him to a pole in the house. My four-month-old baby started crying and I started breastfeeding him and they left me alone.

They went after my daughter, and I knew they would rape her. But she resisted and said she would rather die than have relations with them. They cut off her left breast and put it in her hand. They said, “Are you still resisting us?” She said she would rather die than be with them. They cut off her genital labia and showed them to her. She said, “Please kill me.” They took a knife and put it to her neck and then made a long vertical incision down her chest and split her body open. She was crying but finally she died. She died with her breast in her hand.”

The entire world is preoccupied with Darfur. Understandably. But it must be said that between ten and twenty times the number of people have died in the eastern Congo as have died in Darfur. There are more displaced persons in the Eastern Congo than in Darfur. Darfur has been going on for four years; the eastern Congo has been ravaged for ten. And nowhere on this planet is there such a holocaust of horror visited on women and girls.

I'm not suggesting that we choose between the two. That would be invidious nonsense. I am suggesting that the time has come to realize that what is happening in eastern Congo is an abomination, the extent of which exists nowhere else. It's also necessary to realize that the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has no capacity (and it would appear, no inclination) to do anything about the carnage in the eastern region.

The United Nations has a principle called the Responsibility to Protect, a principle that calls for intervention by the outside world when a sovereign state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizenry. “R2P” absolutely and unequivocally applies to the destruction of the human rights of women in the Congo. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the Security Council has not the slightest intention of invoking “R2P”.

I would therefore say to UN Emergency Coordinator John Holmes that along with visits to the eastern Congo to verify what others have known for more than five years, he and the Secretary-General have to face a truly unpleasant reality: neither the United Nations nor the international community has the faintest idea what to do about the catastrophe for women in the Congo.

Where the Congo is concerned, all the Security Council is really concerned about (as evidenced in their most recent discussions) is questions of troop numbers, arms embargoes and sanctions. Rape is not on the agenda.

We could construct all kinds of typical UN responses to the ongoing tragedy: give eastern Congo a profile equivalent to Darfur, with a similar involvement of the Secretary-General; have the Secretary-General meet with the International Criminal Court to invoke the use of rape as a crime against humanity in the issuance of scores of indictments; ask the Security Council to address the issue of the culture of impunity; argue for a doubling or trebling of the MONUC troop complement; establish a host of health facilities with trained professionals to treat the victims of sexual violence. The list of predictable recommendations could go on ad infinitum.

But it's all short of the mark. It's all achingly slow, and when action is finally taken, it's inadequate. And it all misses the point: there is no precedent for the insensate brutality of the war on women in the Congo. The world has never dealt with such a twisted and blistering phenomenon. That is not to say we weren't given ample clues of a trend that was headed for this crescendo. From Bosnia-Herzegovina to Rwanda to Sierra Leone and Liberia, modern-day conflicts have employed the terrorist tactic of rape as a weapon of war. And the male instinct to unleash feelings of rage and frustration on women is hardly unfamiliar. But the capacity for brutality by so many perpetrators – and on the flip side, the capacity for indifference by so many witnesses – is the ugly apex of a trend gone unchecked. The international community has applied lacklustre remedies to similar, if less extreme crises of sexual violence in the past, and with little effect. It falls somewhere between inhumane and criminally negligent to pretend that remedies that have proven inadequate under less extreme conditions will somehow solve the problem in the Congo. The old nostrums won't work. There must be dramatic departures.

Just look at MONUC. It has the highest numbers of any UN Peacekeeping operation: as of the beginning of this year there were 16,475 in the military contingent, 719 military observers, 304 military police, 2,114 civilian personnel, and with astonishing impotence, they've simply watched the war on women accelerate. More, it's under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter operation: MONUC has the right and obligation to employ arms to protect civilians from physical assault ... but do they act on that obligation where sexual assault is concerned? For civilian women who need protection against rape, Chapter Seven is a travesty. And it costs over a billion dollars a year.

The natural inclination, then, simply to increase troop numbers, is less than an answer. It's especially not the answer when the training has been insufficient to prevent those self-same troops from engaging in intermittent violence against women themselves.

Nor have the United Nations agencies been able to do more than ameliorate, ever so slightly, the victimization of the women of the eastern Congo. Yes, from time to time, as in the case of UNICEF, they draw attention to the most flagrant and chaotic aggression. But the momentary profile of gender-based insanity doesn't begin to have permanence.

Let me readily admit that I don't know what will work. But as the former Envoy on AIDS in Africa, I know that crises driven by the oppression of women do not simply fade away if they're

ignored. They explode. In the 1980s and well into the 90s, we allowed the whirlwind of AIDS transmission to tear through the African continent, aided and abetted by aggressive, often violent male behaviour that has never been targeted for elimination in a systematic, uncompromising way. The AIDS virus thrives on sexual violence. Sexual violence thrives on armed conflict. As if either one was not devastating enough, these two malevolent realities have joined forces to declare war on the women of the Congo. If we don't do something, and soon, HIV/AIDS and violence against women are destined to win. And having chosen to do nothing, the world community will be to blame.

It seems to me that the Secretary-General should be instructed to draw together from every part of the world women who are expert in sexual violence, who have given their lives to the study of rape, its causes and consequences, women who can collectively draw up a series of responses to the Congo. Men in high places have applied a spectacular lack of energy, interest, insight and ideas to ending Congo's war on women; it's time that they turned this crisis over to women. You can be absolutely certain that the approach of the President of Liberia, or the President of Chile would be vastly different from anything presently lurking in the minds of men.

The expertise of women offers the world its best shot at a solution to the war on women. The United Nations secretariat should be humble enough to seek the answers from outside. The inside has failed. The Congo is strewn with the mutilated bodies of that failure.

Allow me to say that what has come to pass in the eastern Congo is an inevitable result of marginalizing 52% of the world's population, and permitting multilateralism to turn its back on gender equality. AIDS and rampant sexual violence are just two of the resulting pandemics; one doesn't need a crystal ball to predict that we're in store for more. That's why we so desperately need an international agency for women. There must be a voice, tenacious, indefatigable, unrelenting, well-financed, that never lets the world forget the indignities and human rights abuses visited on women. No one can say with certainty that had a women's agency been around in 2001, the bleeding landscape of the Congo would have been different in 2007. But at least there would have been a fighting chance. At least the voices raised on the outside would have had allies on the inside. And at least the voices on the inside, like those of Jan Egeland, would not have been shouting into the void.

With a UN women's agency of strength, one headed by an Under-Secretary General, with a billion dollars a year, and gender experts on the ground -- preventing crises that haven't yet happened, and ending the ones that have -- the women of the Congo might have some glimmers of hope.

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* Stephen Lewis, former UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa and current Co-Director of AIDS-Free World, is on a visit to Kenya, South Africa and Lesotho in his role as Chair of the Board of the Stephen Lewis Foundation.