

Peacekeepers Must Protect Women

Contributed by Stephen Lewis
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Stephen Lewis warns UN military commanders who gathered on May 27th 2008 at Wilton Park in West Sussex, England to discuss their role in protecting women targeted or affected by armed conflict: peace is a mere illusion wherever bullets have stopped, but rape continues.

West Sussex, England — At the heart of this conference there lies an unassailable truth: if sexual violence is not addressed during the course of a conflict, then sexual violence will haunt the post-conflict period, and make of the ostensible peace a mockery for half the population.

Three days ago, I returned from Liberia. While in the country, I met with President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, with senior officials of the Ministry of Health, with the Minister of Gender, with the leadership of the Clinton Foundation, with the consultant who drafted the legislation for the special court to try sexual offences, with the UNICEF Representative and significant numbers of the UNICEF staff. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to meet with UNMIL, but the UN Mission in Liberia and its peacekeeping forces were inevitably a part of every conversation.

The context of my discussions is encapsulated in the words of the Deputy UN Envoy for the Rule of Law in Liberia when she said, as recently as May 20th: “We cannot expect the future leaders of Liberia, the doctors, nurses, and engineers of Liberia to be brought up amongst men who are rapists and women who are angry, degraded, frightened, depressed, embarrassed and confused.”

She was speaking about the contagion of sexual violence that currently engulfs the country and causes such intense concern. The statistics are horrifying: a recent study by UNICEF indicated that more than fifty per cent of all reported rapes are brutal assaults on young girls between the ages of ten and fourteen. The gender advisor in UNICEF felt that the percentage was probably on the rise, and it’s feared that increases in the HIV rates among female youth will not be far behind. The Minister of Gender showed me figures for March, 2008, indicating that the majority of reported rapes in that month were committed against girls under the age of twelve, some under the age of five, and she narrated stories of gang rape so insensate and so depraved that it reminded me of exhibits in a Holocaust museum. A further survey, of all fifteen counties in the country, found that girls and boys were united in their conviction that young girls were the most endangered group in Liberia, and incredibly enough, that there was no place and no time of day or night where adolescent girls could be considered safe.

Predictably, President Johnson-Sirleaf is thunderstruck by the force of the sexual violence. In a very real sense she is staking the integrity of her tenure on her ability to confront and subdue the war on women.

But how did it come to this? UNMIL has been in the country since 2003 … it has a large contingent of women peacekeepers: it has an Office of the Gender Advisor and of the Advisor on HIV/AIDS; it has gender mainstreaming built into the mandate; both the UN Envoy and the Deputy UN Envoy are women; and the resolution of 2003 which constituted UNMIL incorporated Security Council Resolution 1325 which --- you will agree --- was supposed to guarantee the involvement of women in the peace-keeping processes, but more important, guarantee women protection and security from gender-based violence and violations of human rights.

Clearly all that hasn't worked in Liberia, where things for women and girls are getting worse. Where did we go wrong?

My own view, and the view of the organization to which I belong --- AIDS-Free World --- is that peacekeepers and force commanders alike have to take sexual violence much more seriously. It is simply untenable to argue that the responsibility to keep the warring parties at bay transcends every other human imperative. It doesn't. You may succeed in manufacturing a semblance of peace, but for the women of the country, the conflict continues in the most painful and eviscerating of ways.

In the case of Liberia, it isn't a matter of a contentious mandate: as I said, Resolution 1325 is built into the obligations of peacekeeping. Anyone would argue that when a peacekeeper in the field knows of acts of sexual violence having been committed, or has reason to believe that acts of sexual violence have been or will be committed, then he or she has the obligation to intervene or, to use the language of the day, the "responsibility to protect".

But let me be even clearer about this. Peacekeepers aren't mere passive observers of the human family. Peacekeepers move into a country; they learn its social architecture; they watch the roiling political terrain on a day-to-day basis. They come to know the foibles, to know the extremes, to know the anomalies. More often than not, they can tell when trouble is brewing. They can intuit when men might hurtle out of control. They have the pulse of the culture. When it unravels, they're there to bear witness. I'm saying that when patterns of sexual violence emerge, peacekeepers are rarely surprised. In some cases, they alone have anticipated the atrocities in the offing. And with that knowledge comes obligation. With that insight comes responsibility. It isn't enough to stop the shooting when the raping continues apace. The only worthwhile armistice restores peace for the entire population, male and female. There can be no satisfaction in claiming a truce or a peace treaty which is soaked in the carnage of the women of the land.

Conventional wisdom says that it is the Security Council's job to set policy, and the peacekeepers' job to follow it. But that's too easy. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations, and its military contingents in-country, should be hollering from the rooftops whenever they feel that their role is somehow constrained. If you need more troops, ask for them. If you need more training, ask for it. If you require a larger contingent of police officers, insist on it. If, in the field, you see sexual mayhem in place, then after intervening, take the names of individual soldiers and witnesses and seek investigation and indictments from the International Criminal Court. If the UN's Member States won't comply, then call a press conference and tell the world that women are being sacrificed on the altar of myopic parsimony, or perhaps more accurately, on the altar of Pavlovian sexism.

There is nothing facetious in this; I'm absolutely serious. The United Nations cannot allow the terrible assault on women to continue, while crouching behind the ambiguity of mandate. That, I remind you, is what the Department of Peacekeeping Operations did between January and April of 1994, in the perverse struggle with UN Force Commander General Romeo Dallaire over "rules of engagement". And there followed the deaths of eight hundred thousand Rwandans and the start of the war in the Congo.

In the DR Congo, it is now estimated that 5.4 million people have died since the end of the Rwandan genocide. That conflict was finally supposed to have been resolved by a peace engagement of January last. To some extent, the battles stopped. But as always, just as in Liberia, the war never ends for women.

In the case of DR Congo, the role of peacekeepers could not be clearer. The words of the Security Council resolution of December 21st, 2007, extending the mandate of the UN Mission in the Congo, MONUC, were absolutely unequivocal: Paragraph 18 "Requests MONUC, in view of the scale and severity of sexual violence committed especially by armed elements in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to undertake a thorough review of its efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence, and to pursue a mission-wide strategy, in close cooperation with the United Nations Country Team and other partners, to strengthen prevention, protection, and response to sexual violence, including through training of Congolese security forces in accordance with its mandate, and to regularly report, including in a separate annex if necessary, on actions taken in this regard, including factual data and trend analyses of the problem";

That sounds very much to me as though the Security Council knew full well that things were off the rails where sexual violence was concerned, and this was an explicit instruction to MONUC to get its act together. In that regard, it's significant that the Security Council went even further: the final clause of the resolution requires the Secretary-General himself to report on the issues covered in Paragraph 18.

To be sure, I can't pretend to know exactly what lay in the minds of the Security Council members, but these things I do know: Dr. Denis Mukwege, who heads the Panzi Hospital for survivors of rape and sexual violence in the Eastern city of Bukavu, told me when we met in New Orleans three weeks ago, that although the steady flow of raped women has slowed somewhat since the January accord, it continues in shocking numbers; the UNICEF staff in the field agree that things are still in the realm of nightmare for women, who live lives haunted by the fear of being violated, tortured, mutilated, infected with HIV. And who expected anything different, when the countless women who have suffered such demonic sexual violence were not sitting at the peace table last January, and were not signatories to the agreement . . . a direct violation of Resolution 1325? Who can claim to be surprised by reports from Congolese NGOs on the ground, who say that in the country's so-called peacekeeping period, women are still too frightened to leave their homes?

When Under Secretary-General John Holmes said the Congo was the worst place in the world for women, he was right. When Eve Ensler, the noted author of the *Vagina Monologues* wrote of the Congo that she had just "returned from hell"; she was right. When my co-Director of AIDS-Free World, Paula Donovan, visited in November, and observed that the war being waged against women "may well be the most savage display of misogyny ever orchestrated in a conflict zone"; she was right.

Terrible, unspeakable things have been done to the women of DR Congo. I want simply to argue that MONUC has it within its mandate to end the reign of terror. If it so chooses, MONUC can also have it within its power to end the reign of terror. Whatever MONUC feels it lacks to protect the women of the Congo --- numbers, police, equipment, training, time, leadership, resources --- let them demand it. And if those demands aren't met, let them tell the world that madness is at work and it knows no end.

Normally, one would turn to the Secretary-General of the United Nations for help in this difficult situation. But how can we have trust?

The Secretary-General gets commendably engaged when it comes to Burma or the price of food, but where is the same sense of throbbing agitation when it comes to sexual violence? This is a Secretary-General who should be insisting on the invocation of the "Responsibility to Protect"; in the Congo, but fails to do so. The defense and protection of the rights of women do not come instinctively to him. This is, after all, a Secretary-General who granted immunity to the former High Commissioner for Refugees, when a claim of sexual harassment against him reached a New York court.

I remember that when the Secretary-General was first appointed, he told a group of NGOs that his learning curve on gender was virtually vertical. A year and a half later, the upward climb appears to have stalled at the bottom of the graph.

No, if we are to turn things around, with or without the help of the Secretary-General, the peacekeepers must lie at the heart of the transformation. How excellent that would be. Resolution 1325 would finally be liberated from the dustbins of the Security Council, and women, without fear, could take hold of their collective destiny. You can be sure there would be no vacillation.

If all the peacekeepers were women, and the men of a country were under pervasive sexual assault, do you think the women would simply observe the carnage? Not a chance. And they wouldn't need a Security Council Resolution to tell them what to do.

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