

Testimony of Eve Ensler
before the Senate Foreign Relations' Subcommittees on African Affairs and International
Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women's Issues

“Confronting Rape and Other Forms of Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones”

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Good afternoon, I am here on behalf of countless V-Day activists worldwide, and in solidarity with my many Congolese sisters and brothers who demand justice and an end to rape. I thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I am here because you—the United States government—are the most powerful government in the world. You have great influence in the Great Lakes region of Africa. It can be your legacy to inspire and provoke the world community to put an end to the worst femicide on the planet.

As some of you may know, my play *The Vagina Monologues* led me into the world of violence against women and girls. Everywhere I traveled with it scores of women lined up to tell me of their rapes, incest, beatings, mutilations. 1 out of 3 women on this planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime.

It was because of this that over 11 years ago we launched V-Day, a worldwide movement to end violence against women and girls. The movement has spread like wildfire to 130 countries, raising 70 million dollars. I have visited and revisited the rape mines of the world, from defined war zones like Bosnia, Afghanistan, Haiti to the domestic battlegrounds in colleges and communities throughout North America, Europe and the world. My in box and heart have been jammed with stories every hour of every day for over a decade.

I am here today to tell you that nothing I have heard or seen compares with what is going on in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When I returned from my first trip there nearly 2 years ago, I was shattered. I had crossed over to another zone in my psyche. I am not sure I will ever get back.

Upon my return, still in a state of initial madness, I was unphased by all those who said the world was not interested in the Congo, all those survivors and activists I had met in Bukavu and Goma who had been working for years with their counterparts in the Congolese Diaspora throughout the world. Those like Dr. Mukwege, a Congolese OB/GYN and founder of the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu who has been sewing up women's and little girl's vaginas for 12 years as fast as the militias are ripping them apart. I was unphased by the cynicism and doubt as any new zealot. The world simply hadn't gotten the necessary information. No world government, no leader, no body of the UN could turn its back, could sit and do nothing when they heard what I had heard, seen what I had seen. In 12 years, 6 million dead Congolese. 1.4 million displaced. Hundreds and thousands of women and girls raped and tortured. Babies as young as 6 months, women as old as 80, their insides torn asunder. No one could rightly ignore femicide--the systematic and planned destruction and annihilation of a female population as a tactic of war to clear villages, pillage

mines of their coltan gold and tin, and wear away the fabric of Congolese society. No one could turn their back on Beatrice, a lean, pretty woman who was found in the forest after a soldier shot a gun in her vagina. She now has tubes instead of organs, or Lumo who was raped by over 50 men in the course of one day and has had nine operations and still has fistula, or Honorata who was taken by militia and tied to a wheel upside down then was raped and raped and over by so many soldiers she lost count—they called her “the queen”, or Sowadi who watched the soldiers choke and smash the skulls of her children then was forced to watch her best friend’s child cut from her pregnant belly and after they were forced to eat the dead cooked baby or die. It goes on and on. Women who were being raped as they watched their husbands being slaughtered, women watching their daughters being raped, sons being forced to rape their sisters and mothers, husbands watching their wives be raped. Sons being raped. All this happening for 12 years, all this happening right now as I speak.

I believed that just telling their stories, speaking these words, would be enough to propel those with power into action. I have traveled everywhere these last two years speaking out to the Security Council, the Secretary General, parliaments, world leaders. With many others I have pleaded for more peacekeepers asking over and over when the so-called 3000 troops who are supposedly on their way to DRC will ever show up? Asking when the powers that be might flex their diplomatic muscle in the best interest of the Congolese people by advocating for a political solution to the largest conflict since WWII.

I have felt a murderous lethargy in the halls of power. I have heard members of the European Parliament say they had no idea it was even happening. I have been in situation after situation where the serving of protocol trumps the saving of human lives. I have heard empty promises and straight out lies. I have waited as those that have the power to change this situation work through bureaucracy and hierarchies so that months and months pass and nothing is ever done. And then when it is all too late, ill conceived plans made in back rooms are rushed into play that bring more violence and rapes but get labeled success by the world community. Witness the recent joint military operations against the FDLR (the remnants of the Hutu genocidaires) by the Congolese and Rwandan troops in January, now be touted in the west as a success. A success for whom? We know the action was a failure, as rather than neutralizing the FDLR, it scattered them, emboldening them to rape and pillage with reckless abandon.

The women we work with in Goma at the Heal Africa hospital are reporting 500 raped women have arrived each month since January. The UN Secretary General’s recent report says 36 women are raped a day in Eastern Congo. Now, all of South Kivu is clenched, sleepless as they wait for the next nightmarish incursion. Even the MONUC officials themselves do not hold back when talking about their lack of faith in the situation on the ground--during a recent security briefing about South Kivu one Colonel said publicly that the joint operation of MONUC and the Congolese army will be a huge disaster that will most probably end in terrible tragedy because strategy, logistical support, and funding for soldiers was lacking, not to mention that the vast, dense forest proves to be a difficult place to win. Even Alan Doss, Special Representative of the General Secretary of the United Nations in DRC, admitted on Radio Okapi that he needs more men if the mission is ever to succeed.

What these policies or strategies indicate, (if we can call them that, as strategies usually imply a

vision of outcome and consequences) and what the last ten years of policies indicate, is the profound indifference and shocking disregard for the lives of the Congolese people, in particular women and girls on the ground.

There is something sinister afoot.

I was there in Bosnia during the war in 1994. When it was discovered that there were rape camps and that thousands of women were being raped as a strategy of war. I watched the rapid response of the western world community. After all these were white women in Europe being raped. Within two years there was adequate intervention. It has been 12 years in the DRC. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls raped and tortured. I can only believe now that we are dealing not just with the terrible legacy of genocidal colonialism in the DRC, the core impact of it now lodged in the DNA of the worst perpetrators, but more disturbingly the Congo has become not the “heart of darkness,” but the “heart of racism”-- the place where the world’s disregard, its indifference towards black people and particularly black women has completely manifested.

Is it because the powers that be care more about power and resources and money? Is it that coltan, the mineral that keeps our cell phones and computers in play, is more important than the bodies and souls of little Congolese girls? International mining companies have significant economic investment in the DRC and I fear they privilege economic interest over the bodies of women. We in the west with our cell phones and play station and computers filled with minerals extracted on the bodies of women. We in the West leaving the women in the forests to be raped and tortured. Is it the British and US guilt over terrible inaction in Rwanda (which allowed genocide), which now allows them to turn a blind eye to Rwanda’s role in the femicide and murder of the Congolese?

Is it simply that the UN and most governments are run and controlled by men who have never known what it feels like to have bayonet shoved up their vagina or who have never lost a bladder and rectum and then had to wait for months for a pouch for their urine and feces so they could be freed from sitting in a wretched smell exiled from everyone and everywhere? Is it that they won’t allow themselves to imagine what this feels like? Or is it that patriarchy has so normalized violence against women that none of this shocks or disturbs them? Is it that they know that for patriarchy to continue, for them to keep their power, this violence must continue as well?

What is happening in the DRC is the worst violence towards women in the world. If it continues to go unchecked, unstopped, if there continues to be complete impunity it sets a precedent, a standard, it expands the boundaries of what now becomes permissible to do to women’s bodies in the name of exploitation and greed everywhere. Already it is spreading. Just this week I received an email that documented that Congolese soldiers are kidnapping and selling young Congolese girls between 12 and 16 years of age to Angolan soldiers. This impunity sends a signal to the world that the bodies of women and children will be the new battleground on which cheap wars will be fought. It says the international community is willing to sacrifice African women and girls to get the resources it needs. And we know as resources become more precious, more and more women, first the poor and marginalized, then the rest will be sacrificed.

Women in the Congo are some of the most resilient women in the world. They need protection. I ask you—fund a training program for Congolese women police officers. Address our role in plundering minerals and demand that companies trace the routes of these minerals. Make sure they are making and selling rape-free-products. Put pressure on Rwanda, Congo, Uganda and other countries in the Great Lakes region to sit down with all the militias involved in this conflict to find a political solution. Military solutions are no longer an option and will only bring about more rape. Most of all support the women. Because women are at the center of this horror, they must be at the center of the solutions and peace negotiations. Supply funds for women's medical and psychological care, for educational and economic empowerment. Women are the future of the DRC. They are her greatest resource.

Yet, in Eastern Congo, 1100 women are being raped each month. More Noella's are being raped as I speak. Where is the United States? I implore you - lead the world. Take action. Make this your mission.

Let the Congo be where we ended femicide, the trend that is madly eviscerating this planet—from the floggings in Pakistan, the new rape laws in Afghanistan, the ongoing rapes in Haiti, Darfur, Zimbabwe, the daily battering, incest, harassing, trafficking, enslaving, genital cutting and honor killing. Let the Congo be the place where women were finally cherished and life affirmed, where the humiliation and subjugation ended, where women took their rightful agency over their bodies and land. Where the US led the world in standing against against rape and femicide, where the US stood for women.