

## **Exclusive: Inside The Congolese Army's Campaign Of Rape And Looting In South Kivu**

Victims and witnesses provide IRIN with dozens of horrifying first-hand accounts of violent sexual assault.

### [IRIN News](#)

Her face was tired and bruised, her arms bone-thin, her dress torn in several places. "Look at my body," she whispered. "Is this the body of somebody who is normal?" There was a short pause before she responded herself: "This is death."

The 36-year-old, who asked not be named, is one of dozens of women to accuse soldiers battling a new insurgency in the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern South Kivu province of rape and sexual violence.

The abuses documented by IRIN began in late September after government soldiers reoccupied areas briefly captured by a new alliance of local Mai-Mai militias called the National People's Coalition for the Sovereignty of the Congo (CNPSC).

The CNPSC is one of three Mai-Mai coalitions that have recently emerged in eastern Congo, an area mired in conflict since the mid-1990s, when the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide fled there, triggering two regional wars.

The coalitions say they are fighting against Congolese President Joseph Kabila, who refused to step down and hold elections last year when his constitutionally mandated two-term limit expired.

An agreement between the government and opposition, reached last December, stated Kabila would leave office and hold elections by the end of 2017. But Congo's electoral commission now says that a vote will not be held until December 2018.

In September, the CNPSC launched a fresh offensive in the Fizi region, capturing a string of strategic villages before attempting an audacious naval assault on Uvira, the second largest town in South Kivu.



***Congolese soldiers have been repeatedly accused of human rights violations***

The group was eventually driven back by MONUSCO, the UN's peacekeeping mission, which deployed attack helicopters to protect the town.

Congolese army moves in

As the Mai-Mai coalition withdrew from nearby villages, Congolese soldiers began systematically raping women and arbitrarily arresting young men, according to dozens of interviews IRIN conducted over several weeks with victims and witnesses.

In Makobola, 15 kilometres south of Uvira, the representative of a local peace organisation said at least 25 women were gang raped by Congolese soldiers over the course of one day in late September, after the army retook the town.

Sat in a small, two-roomed hut, away from the main road where soldiers lounged around in a makeshift barracks, four women took turns to tell their stories. They all spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from the army and stigmatisation by friends and families.

The still-bruised 36-year-old woman said she was gang raped by soldiers alongside her 65-year-old blind mother at 10 in the morning. The attack was so brutal she said her mother was subsequently paralysed from the waist down and died shortly afterwards.

“She couldn’t move; she couldn’t even go to the toilet,” the woman said.

Nearby, a 35-year-old mother-of-four said she was stopped by soldiers outside her home at 10am while taking her two-year-old son to the toilet. The soldiers asked where her husband was. When she replied that he was travelling, they accused her of collaborating with the rebels.

“They told me, ‘You are telling us this because your husband is Mai-Mai and you have sent him to the bush’,” she said.

The soldiers stole her phone and money hidden in her underwear before entering her house. “They said, ‘Today we will rape you until you regret being alive’,” she recalled.

Five men then raped her in front of her children until she fell unconscious.

“I woke up to the sound of my children shouting Mama, Mama!,” she said.

In a restaurant on the main road through Makobola, five women tried to hide but were caught and raped by 15 soldiers, according to the peace organisation representative.

One of the women, passing through the town to visit a hospital further south in Baraka, subsequently died. Another was hospitalised after being penetrated with a wooden object.

The owner of the restaurant told IRIN the five women were eventually freed after she paid soldiers the equivalent of around \$100.

“After what happened, I felt very bad,” she said.

At another restaurant, an owner said she was raped at night on 11 October, after soldiers accused her of providing a place for Mai-Mai to sleep. Two more women inside her restaurant were also raped, with soldiers shooting into the air to stop them screaming. The soldiers then stole \$130, leaving the owner broke.

“I have nothing to restart my business,” she said.

Further south in Sebele, another village in the Fizi region, three men were killed by Congolese soldiers and eight women raped after the the army regained control, according to village deputy chief Elias Feruzi.

The rebel alliances

The CNPSC label has been in use since late 2013 but only recently gained traction when Babembe warlord William Amuri Yakutumba rallied behind it.

Yakutumba’s group, Mai-Mai Yakutumba, is the largest component of the CNPSC, which claims to unite several Mai-Mai groups and has expanded into the western end of Fizi Territory as well as Maniema and parts of southern Shabunda.

Yakutumba and the Babembe have a long, fractious history with the region’s Banyamulenge community, who are ethnic Tutsi and often perceived as “foreigners”.

Ethnically targeted massacres have occurred on both sides over the past two decades. **Analysts say** the presence of a small number of Banyamulenge commanders in units deployed against the CNPSC, could aggravate these tensions.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring North Kivu province, another coalition called the National Movement of Revolutionaries (MNR) has also recently emerged to take advantage of the current political crisis. It includes several ethnic Nande Mai-Mai leaders from groups including Corps du Christ and Mai-Mai Mazembe.

MONUSCO sources told IRIN that the MNR also includes allies from the Allied Democratic Forces, a Ugandan rebel group accused of **the attack** earlier this month on a UN military base near Beni that left at least 14 blue helmets dead.

The CMC, a third new coalition, brings together various factions of Nyatura, a Congolese Hutu militia. The coalition was recently able to take over a **large amount of territory** in Kalehe when army units withdrew to fight the CNPSC.

The strong anti-government rhetoric of the coalitions marks a shift in direction for Mai-Mai groups, which have traditionally focused on local grievances and ethnic rivalries. It

remains to be seen whether they will be capable of building popular support outside their usual constituencies.

“At the moment, none of them represent a major national threat, and, given geographical distance, ideological divergence, and the risk of co-option, it appears unlikely they will merge into something bigger,” said Christoph Vogel, a researcher on Congo at the University of Zurich.

Nonetheless, fighting in both North Kivu and South Kivu continues to cause massive population displacement and major problems for Congo’s overstretched, demoralised army. Areas retaken from the CNPSC are now covered with army checkpoints, where soldiers harass and extort money from the local population.

In the South Kivu town of Mboko, which was occupied by the CNPSC for a week, locals told IRIN that soldiers subsequently looted houses, including a compound belonging to the Congolese NGO GEADES, and that they continue to rob people at night.

A 32-year-old teacher in Mboko said he was robbed by a soldier on a recent evening.

“The soldier put his gun on my chest and said, ‘You are a Mai-Mai; you must say your last prayers.’ He then put his hands in my pocket, took out two phones and money and told me to run.”

#### Arrests and extortion

In Sebele, deputy chief Feruzi said 30 young men had been arrested and accused of being Mai-Mai since September.

“[The soldiers] use it as an excuse to extort money,” he explained. “Once people are arrested they have to pay [\$100] to be set free.”

IRIN also received reliable reports of arbitrary arrests of young men in Simbi, Mboko, Lukoke, and Fizi town, where 20 youths were arrested while watching a football match on 23 October and some were subsequently tortured.

In many villages, locals said the actions of Congolese soldiers are helping to build sympathy for the CNPSC.

After the coalition withdrew from Mboko, dozens of young men and children were recruited into the group, while others told IRIN they would consider joining in the future.

“There are two options people have here,” said the teacher. “Go to Tanzania and join the refugee camps or join the Mai-Mai and fight for the country.”

“His image comes into our minds and we start running”

Rapes victims spoke of their trauma, the stigma they felt in speaking about it, and their anger at the impunity as the abuse continues.

A 39-year-old woman from Sebele said she was raped alongside her 14-year-old daughter at 3pm in late September while farming in a nearby field. Her account was confirmed by medical certificates.



*Congo gender violence survivor*

“Today, whenever we go to our field and reach the place where the soldier raped us, his image comes into our minds and we start running,” said the women.

The Congolese NGO, Solidarity of Volunteers for Humanity, told IRIN that several women were also raped in Lulimba and the mining town of Misisi, both sites of recent clashes between the CNPSC and the army.

A reliable report from local researchers, shared with IRIN, claims that eight women were also raped by soldiers on 8 November in the hills above the village of Sangya. The women were asked what they knew about the Mai-Mai before being assaulted.

According to the same report, on 10 November, a woman arrived at Mboko health centre claiming she had been raped by two soldiers who accused her of providing information to the Mai-Mai. That followed two other cases of rape in Mboko, reported on 6 October.

In Makobola, women told IRIN the soldiers responsible for the attacks remain in the village and continue to rape women despite the cases being reported to army commanders.

“The rapes are still going on in the fields,” said the peace organisation representative. “Because of stigmatisation, women don’t say anything. They are afraid of being abandoned by their families.”

The women said they are now too afraid to farm or leave home at night. Some said they have decided to flee the country.

“I am waiting for some money and then I will go [to Tanzania],” said the 35-year-old mother-of-four.

A spokesperson for the Congolese army in South Kivu did not respond with comment in time for publication.