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Leaders, Activists Launch Campaigns to End Sexual Violence in South Sudan

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Many cases of rape are reported in the world's newest country, South Sudan. Government forces, unidentified armed groups, and rebel fighters are suspected of these crimes. Yet not one individual has been arrested or sentenced to prison for rape this year. That information comes from the Voice of America (VOA) program South Sudan in Focus. South Sudan in Focus is a joint effort of VOA and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

On Wednesday, a top African Union (AU) official made an appeal to South Sudan's government. Bineta Diop called on government officials to arrest and punish soldiers who sexually abused women during the three years of conflict in the country. She said punishing those responsible for sexual abuse against women will guarantee security and self-respect for South Sudanese women.

Diop is the AU's Special Envoy for Women, Peace and Security. She met this week with South Sudan's Minister of **Gender**, Child and Social **Welfare**, women activists and others in the city of Juba. They talked about how women's rights can be protected in South Sudan, despite ongoing fighting.

Diop said the AU has launched a campaign aimed at reestablishing the **dignity** of women in South Sudan.

The chairperson of the AU Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, is directing the campaign. She is a former wife of Jacob Zuma, South Africa's president. "It's time for us to silence the guns in South Sudan," Dlamini Zuma said. "It's time for us to restore peace in this country," but especially to bring back "the dignity of women in South Sudan."

16-day campaign against sexual violence

Bineta Diop called on national, state, and local officials across South Sudan to enforce the law and arrest and punish criminals who violate women's rights. She said that the African Union stands firmly with South Sudanese women who launched 16 days of activism against sexual violence. She said the AU wants women to have a say in finding solutions to the country's widespread problem of sexual abuse.

In Imatong state, women's rights activists have been using the 16-day program to talk directly to men about sexual violence.

They are also campaigning for more women to be appointed to local and state government positions. They say women serving in these positions can influence decisions and policies. The activists say the reason rapists are not punished is because men control decision-making positions. And, the men do not arrest other men for crimes like rape.

High-ranking women seen as key

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Imatong state lawmaker and activist Angela Achiro said women must hold office at all levels of government.

"For instance, at the county level, we would like to see a female commissioner. In Imotong state, we have 12 counties, but no woman is appointed county commissioner," she said. Achiro said women employed in the military or police are only offered jobs as office cleaners, tea makers and messengers, while uneducated men are given higher positions. Achiro also said if a woman headed the army, she would enforce the law and prevent government soldiers and rebel forces from raping women.

Davidika Ikai heads an organization called Itwak. She said having women in high local and state positions will help ensure that girls are registered in school and stay there. She believes that educating girls is the only thing that will end sexual violence in South Sudan.

'A lot more needs to be done'

Mary Cummins heads the office of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, or UNMISS. She said dealing with the problem of sexual violence will be a long and difficult process.

"A lot more needs to be done," Cummins said. It is very hard work for women to succeed in a male-controlled society, she added.

There have been an average of 30 rape cases per month this year, and those are only the ones that are reported.

Many South Sudanese women do not report a sex attack because they do not want to be rejected by their communities.

Jacob Atari, Imatong state Education, Gender and Social Welfare Minister, said there is a need to get many organized forces involved, "especially soldiers and some men, so that we can talk about these things...to the people who are violating it."

I'm Bryan Lynn.

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