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## **DR CONGO: EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE STILL ESSENTIAL**

The launch of a new strategy on sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is welcome, but numerous challenges remain. The strategy, which is part of the Congolese government's stabilization plan for eastern DRC, has unintentionally led to a loss of attention and funding to address sexual violence in more conflict-affected areas. Further, poor coordination and lack of engagement with local groups are hindering the overall response. To ensure a truly comprehensive approach to combating and responding to sexual violence in the DRC, donor governments need to support the new strategy while ensuring that emergency needs are met.

### **TRANSLATE RHETORIC INTO ACTION**

Greater international attention to the issue of sexual violence in the DRC has still not translated into improvements in the lives of the most vulnerable women. While the U.S. sent its top diplomat to Goma in order to meet with survivors, and the new United Nations (UN) Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict chose the DRC for her first official mission, the focus has remained on helping women who can access the provincial capitals for assistance, rather than those in insecure rural areas. The amount of attention the issue has received has also not been reflected in funding allocations.

According to statistics from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), there were over 17,500 incidents of sexual violence in the DRC in 2009. A far greater number of cases go unreported, the majority likely to be in conflict zones where access is difficult. There is an increase in the number of civilian perpetrators in UNFPA's statistics from 2009, a consequence of years of brutal conflict and almost total impunity for sexual violence. But in areas of ongoing conflict the vast majority of perpetrators are still armed men, many of them members of the Congolese military.

The Congolese government has passed laws on sexual violence and has announced a zero tolerance policy for the military, but implementation is very poor. The

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the Deputy Special Representative to the Secretary General/Rule of Law must ensure coordination between the humanitarian and stabilization response to sexual violence.
- The UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the UN Refugee Agency must ensure that the emergency response to sexual violence is systematically addressed and funded through the protection cluster.
- UNICEF must fully engage Congolese organizations in the multi-sectoral assistance component of the strategy.
- International donors, particularly the U.S., should commit funding to support the STAREC sexual violence strategy and the Humanitarian Action Plan.
- The U.S., other donor countries, and the UN should pressure the Congolese government to seriously address sexual violence in eastern DRC, particularly the issues of impunity and security sector reform.

government has not yet demonstrated the political will to address key issues like impunity for high-level commanders and reform of the military, nor has it dealt with the underlying causes of the conflict in eastern DRC. Without addressing the root causes of the conflict, the issue of sexual violence will remain unresolved.

## **COORDINATE THE NEW STRATEGY WITH THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE**

High-level interest from donor governments and the UN led to the development in 2009 of a comprehensive strategy on sexual violence. But the strategy, as part of the government's stabilization plan, is limited in its ability to address the needs in conflict zones.

Despite some pockets of stability in eastern DRC leading to increased returns of displaced people, new displacements and incidents of sexual violence in conflict-affected areas are on the rise. Although the conflict continues, pressure from the Congolese government and donors has led to an overall shift towards more stabilization programming in the DRC.

The comprehensive sexual violence strategy initially developed by the UN has been incorporated into the government's stability plan for the east (STAREC), and validated in the Congolese government's own broader long-term national strategy on gender-based violence (GBV). The engagement of the Congolese government in the STAREC sexual violence strategy is a positive step. However, the government is a party to the ongoing conflict and members of the Congolese military are some of the worst perpetrators of sexual violence in the east. This raises serious concerns about how a government-led strategy can address issues of sexual violence in a conflict setting.

The sexual violence strategy covers five key components with designated UN leads and government focal points: combating impunity, security sector reform (SSR), prevention and protection, multi-sectoral assistance for survivors, and data and mapping. A Sexual Violence Unit was created within the UN Mission to the DRC (MONUC) to oversee implementation of the strategy. A STAREC pooled fund was established and coordination structures were set up at the national and provincial levels for each component (with the exception of SSR at the provincial level).

The component working groups replaced the previous coordination structure of the GBV sub-working group led by UNFPA. However, the activities of the component working groups, as part of the STAREC strategy, will mainly focus

on selected areas which could benefit from more stabilization programming. The working groups are not set up to address sexual violence in emergency settings, as the previous sub-working group did. As a result, there is no longer a forum to quickly organize an operational response in case of a new crisis or to take up advocacy.

One example of the types of emergency needs that women in the Congo face is in the health sector. Access to adequate medical assistance for survivors of sexual violence remains extremely difficult. While survivors can receive free medical care in the provincial capitals in eastern DRC, most conflict-related sexual violence is taking place in remote areas. Refugees International (RI) met with one displaced woman who had been gang-raped in the conflict-affected area of Walikale and was forced to walk in the forest for two weeks in order to reach transport to Goma, since she could not access free medical care closer to home.

Survivors such as this woman need to access medical services within 72-hours in order to benefit from post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits, but many medical facilities in conflict-affected areas outside of the provincial capitals lack PEP kits. Although the effectiveness of the previous sub-working group on GBV was sometimes questioned, it had the mandate to quickly take up advocacy on emergency issues such as the lack of PEP kits in conflict zones. But with the new component working groups, given the cumbersome structure and limited geographic focus, there is concern that emergency responses will not be mobilized adequately.

The protection cluster, led by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), must take greater responsibility for responding to sexual violence in an emergency. The Deputy Special Representative to the Secretary General/Humanitarian Coordinator (DSRSG/HC), as the lead on the humanitarian response in the DRC, in conjunction with UNHCR, must ensure that the emergency response to sexual violence is systematic in the protection cluster. The DSRSG/HC and the DSRSG/Rule of Law (which oversees the Sexual Violence Unit) should also ensure that there is coordination between humanitarian and STAREC programs.

## **INVOLVE LOCAL GROUPS**

Another serious impediment to the current response to sexual violence in the DRC – both in conflict areas and in more stable zones – is the lack of support to local civil society organizations. Donor governments, UN agencies, and international organizations must engage with Congolese organizations and previous coordination structures must be

built upon if the STAREC sexual violence strategy is to succeed and the emergency needs of women are to be met.

Prior to the establishment of the new component working groups through the STAREC sexual violence strategy, local groups assisting survivors were coordinated as part of the UNFPA-led *Initiative Conjointe*. UNFPA has been justifiably criticized for its weakness on humanitarian work, and it needs significant re-organization and a prioritization of humanitarian work within its headquarters if this is to change.

Despite criticisms of its implementation, the *Initiative Conjointe* succeeded in building up local networks for information sharing, coordination, and referrals. UNFPA helped to set up local coordination structures including provincial and local committees on the fight against sexual violence and sub-commissions that organized local-level work on health, psychosocial, legal, and socio-economic assistance to survivors. These structures are currently not part of the STAREC sexual violence strategy's coordination system, except under the component of data and mapping, which limits the important role local groups were previously playing in the response. Local groups are crucial for information-sharing but also in sectors such as prevention and socio-economic reintegration, two areas which remain neglected in the current response to sexual violence.

With the new strategy, UN leadership in the DRC has announced that former local coordination structures are now disbanded. UNICEF has been given the lead on the multi-sectoral assistance component. However, there has been insufficient communication between UNICEF and local organizations that were part of the *Initiative Conjointe*. RI spoke to numerous local groups who felt extremely discouraged by their apparent exclusion from the new strategy. One representative from a local group summed up the feelings of many when she told RI that she saw the STAREC sexual violence strategy as just "a political construction for funding for international agencies." This perception must be overcome.

Given the fact that the STAREC sexual violence strategy is meant to lead to more government and local ownership, it is imperative that local groups are engaged more formally. UNICEF should take the lead to ensure that local groups and their coordination structures become an integral part of the implementation of the STAREC sexual violence strategy and that partnerships are made between international and local groups in the activities under the multi-sectoral response.

Congolese organizations also remain vital for any emergency response to sexual violence. In areas unsafe for international organizations to access, local partners can

intervene on their behalf. In situations where there is no international presence, local groups often take the initiative to respond on their own. In Hombo North in Walikale territory, RI met with a woman who had felt compelled to assist the many displaced women taking refuge in her community who were survivors of sexual violence. She provided them with the little assistance she could gather, but felt that more training and guidance, especially on psycho-social support, would be invaluable. She told RI that she felt overwhelmed by the work she was doing, and yet she was the only one able to respond. Local groups must receive more support to respond to emergencies effectively.

## SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

The STAREC sexual violence strategy is an important initiative that needs increased donor support to have an impact. However gaps in coordination and in the overall focus of the strategy are leading to poor implementation.

Donor government representatives complained to RI that for the initial \$5 million funding allocation for the STAREC sexual violence strategy – which was only for limited areas of South Kivu province and Ituri district – projects submitted were not creative and failed to demonstrate a new comprehensive approach to addressing sexual violence. Implementing agencies told RI that they could not start new projects to address the ongoing gaps with such a minimal amount of funding. The selection of projects was also conducted in such a rush that the new component working groups did not have time to identify priority areas for response and develop a coordinated plan. Donors need to build time into the process for the component working groups to draw up comprehensive strategic plans for their sectors.

While the first projects have yet to start, as the strategy moves forward the component working groups must evolve from being purely focused on funding to become a forum for strategic discussions, with all actors involved whether or not they are applying for financial support. For the next allocation, geographic areas beyond South Kivu and Ituri must be targeted. UNICEF is developing minimum standards for the sexual violence response and donors must ensure that these standards are implemented quickly.

One of the biggest impediments to the implementation of the strategy remains the lack of accurate data on services and incidents. Under the strategy UNFPA is responsible for data collection on incidents of sexual violence and mapping of services, but the agency currently lacks the resources to complete this task. In addition, donors, other

UN agencies, and international organizations remain wary of supporting UNFPA because of concerns about the agency's past performance. To improve the incidents-mapping, UNFPA must implement the GBV Information Management System, a database developed and validated at the global level by UNFPA, UNHCR, and the International Rescue Committee. Donors must also either fully support UNFPA in its data and mapping role or designate another UN lead.

The role of the MONUC Sexual Violence Unit to date has been primarily to serve as a focal point rather than as a coordinator and it remains significantly understaffed. With the new coordination structure there are five component meetings but no forum where all of the outcomes from the working groups meetings are pulled together. The Sexual Violence Unit must take a stronger leadership role to ensure there is overall coordination of the working groups. The wider role of MONUC (soon to be reconfigured as MONUSCO) in prevention and response to sexual violence also cannot be forgotten. Any premature withdrawal of MONUC/MONUSCO before peace and stability is achieved puts women at even greater risk of sexual violence.

## DEDICATE FUNDING TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Ironically, there appears to be fewer resources for sexual violence programs since the launch of the strategy. Several donors told RI that they are holding off providing funding for activities in the STAREC sexual violence strategy to see if the first projects will be successful. Given the minimal resources available to both STAREC and the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP), which is currently less than 30 percent-funded, the response to sexual violence will be condemned to failure if donors do not commit substantial funding.

During the most recent allocation of funding for the HAP, humanitarians were misinformed that they could not apply for sexual violence funding through the humanitarian pooled fund. The assumption was made that funding for sexual violence projects would only be available through the STAREC pooled fund. This was incorrect, but as a result, no proposals were submitted to the emergency humanitarian fund. Humanitarian agencies now do not have enough funds for their sexual violence projects and RI was informed that several humanitarian organizations did not seek STAREC funding because it is a government-led strategy focused mainly on stability activities. The DSRSG/HC should address the gap in humanitarian fund-

ing for sexual violence through a special allocation of the humanitarian pooled fund.

Although the U.S. does not contribute to pooled funds, it is coordinating its bilateral activities with the strategy. However, the U.S. needs to ensure that reporting on its projects feed directly into the STAREC strategy discussions. The U.S. should be commended for its increased attention on sexual violence in the DRC and its requirement in recent requests for funding proposals for grantees to work with and build the capacity of local groups. While the \$17 million announced by Secretary Clinton in 2009 for sexual violence programs was welcomed, much of that funding was not newly-allocated. Increased U.S. resources could support neglected activities in the strategy such as prevention and ensure that emergency needs are still met. The U.S. should also ensure that there is coordination across government agencies on its funding for sexual violence programming.

## CONCLUSION

The STAREC sexual violence strategy is an important step forward that must be supported by donors. But the issue of sexual violence in the DRC cannot be resolved in isolation of the wider conflict. While there are emerging stable areas that do need support and the STAREC strategy can be useful in that regard, there is a growing concern in the DRC that donors are shifting funding too quickly away from the emergency. As one UN official told RI, "An area doesn't become stable because you decide it in an office."

Ultimately the Congolese government must take up its responsibilities to address sexual violence in the DRC. The U.S. and other donors must pressure the Congolese government to bring to justice high-ranking commanders of military units responsible for sexual violence, to commit to serious reform of the Congolese military, and to fully implement the 2006 law on sexual violence. The UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, can also play an important role in pushing the Congolese government to take action on sexual violence. As one Congolese woman leader told RI, "We were very happy that Hillary Clinton came to Goma. But it's not normal that the U.S. and other countries send delegations of their foreign ministers to meet with sexual violence survivors here, while the Congolese government fails to engage in addressing this issue in its own country."

*Advocate Camilla Olson and Senior Advocate Melanie Teff researched the issue of sexual violence in the DRC in May 2010.*