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Sexual Abuse “a Cancer” in Congo: U.N. Official

By Reuters

UNITED NATIONS — A senior U.N. official on Friday called sexual abuse a “cancer” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and told military and civilian leaders they had to condemn it publicly and prosecute offenders.

In an address to the U.N. Security Council on his recent trip to the Congo, Jan Egeland, the U.N. emergency relief coordinator, said thousands of women and girls had been raped by soldiers in the nation's national army.

“Sexual abuse has become a cancer in Congolese society that seems to be out of control,” Egeland said. “Military and civilian authorities are still virtually unaccountable for crimes against civilians.”

Egeland said he told President Joseph Kabila to publicly condemn the abuse and to fire or demote the perpetrators. But Kabila replied that “contradictions” in the transitional government made it difficult for him to act.

Kabila faces a runoff for re-election against Vice President Jean-Pierre Bamba on October 29.

At Panzi hospital in Bukavu in eastern Congo, Egeland said more than 1,000 raped women have been treated this year, and “we don't know how many more suffer without treatment in inaccessible parts of the province” of South Kivu.

“One woman told me how she had been raped repeatedly for more than a week by a group of soldiers who kept her bound so tightly through the week that she had permanently lost the use of her hands,” Egeland said.

Panzi hospital, the Congo's only specialized rape clinic, has dealt with more than 10,000 cases in the last seven years, Reuters reported from Bukavu. The clinic has performed surgery on more than 1,000 mutilated women, some of them requiring three or four painful operations.

Eastern Congo is among the regions plagued by armed militias and an undisciplined and unpaid army terrorizing civilians despite the end of a civil 1998-2003 war.

Egeland said that the Security Council and nations helping reform Congo's

military and police “must exert more forceful pressure” to end abuse and violence against civilians.

Although some military prosecutions have occurred, often as a result of efforts by U.N. peacekeepers in the Congo, “far too little is being done,” Egeland said.

The 1998-2003 war killed some 4 million people through conflict, hunger and disease. Although the war is nominally over, an estimated 1.7 million Congolese are still homeless, fleeing attacks by militia groups and the army.

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