

Congo's Warring Factions Leave a Trail of Rape

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

BURHALE, Congo — They had walked through the banana groves and up the empty red dirt roads. Among them was a mother of two, clutching a child at her breasts, a pregnant woman holding her belly, a girl in a tattered blue school uniform skirt.

By any measure, the war in this country is among the cruelest in the world, and these are the survivors of one of its cruelest weapons. They and countless others have been raped by soldiers spreading terror through the countryside; of this group, only the 13-year-old girl, who screamed with all her might as her attacker grabbed and tore at her clothes, had been spared.

The three sought help at a mobile medical program at a long-abandoned health clinic in this small town in eastern Congo. They came to get tested for AIDS, get checkups for the babies and talk for a while with someone who would listen. The medical convoy brought a doctor, a lab technician and two midwives, and the women of Burhale had sent word through the banana groves and had gone to fetch those they knew to be in need of help. They were not hard to find: the fighting between armed factions claiming control of this region over the last couple of months has left a trail of rape victims.

In Bukavu, the nearest big city, an average of 20 village women a week trickle into Centre Olame, a church-run rape victim center. On a recent morning, Mathilde Mahindo, who runs the center, pored over data from the week before. The victims ranged in age from 17 to 48. Most had been raped several times, one by 10 men. The husband of one victim was abducted. Another woman was raped with her mother.

Every week for nearly five years, Ms. Mahindo, has stared at lists like this one. She still cannot explain why it is happening, nor how to exorcise it. Discussing sex is taboo in Congolese society, Ms. Mahindo said, and talking about sexual assault is even less acceptable. There are no rituals in the culture to remove the stain of rape — not from the victim, her family or her community.

"Rape doesn't have a place in the culture," she said. "Even if everyone wants to close their eyes and ears, we have to create a scandal. Because what is it for? It is to exterminate a community."

No one knows how many have been raped during Congo's four-year war. It is clear that especially in this part of the country, South Kivu Province, sexual attacks have become endemic and have gone virtually unpunished, as soldiers from one armed group after another have seized villages, pillaged homes, taken women and girls at the point of a gun or knife. Neither 4-year-old girls nor 80-year-old grandmothers have been spared. Judging by the new cases before the mobile medical clinic, many have been raped by several men.

For women in rural eastern Congo, rape is an occupational hazard. Here women work the fields. They trek for miles to fetch water and firewood. They walk to and from market, usually on long empty stretches of country road or through dark forests. Doctors, social workers and investigators say all armed groups in the region are guilty of the crimes, from Rwandan factions to Mai-Mai militias supported by Congo's government to the Hutu fighters who work alongside them.

"It is just such an effective tool to harass, intimidate, terrorize the population, to keep people on the move," said Karin Wachter with the Bukavu-based office of the International Rescue Committee, an American aid agency. "It is also the issue of impunity. There are no consequences for their actions."

Leaders of the main factions have begun to acknowledge the rapes. But though they say they punish wrongdoers, the leaders lay most of the blame at their enemies' feet. Few, if any, face prosecution in a country where basic government functions have all but collapsed.

In a recent interview in Bukavu, the political chief of the Mai-Mai group, Masa Walimba, boasted of two soldiers who had been executed for rape and looting. He said his opponents, a Rwandan group called the Congolese Rally for Democracy, which controls South Kivu, were the worst offenders.

The South Kivu provincial governor, Xavier Cirimwami also cited an incident from the enemy camp: an ethnic Hutu combatant, he said, had snatched a baby from its mother's back, and used it to beat the woman before raping her. "I know my military is disciplined," Mr. Cirimwami said of the forces of his Congolese Rally for Democracy. "There are just a few cases of rape or robbery, and those we punish."

Rights groups, with United Nations officials, have begun a campaign for stronger prosecution, including encouraging women to testify against the accused and lobbying the leaders of the armed factions to take action against the perpetrators. Rape is a war crime, prosecutable under international law.

At the mobile clinic here, the thought of punishment for rapists was met with skepticism. Just the other day, a father of two girls, ages 12 and 14, who had been raped, marched into the barracks of the Congolese Rally for Democracy and demanded justice. The local commander took the rare step of throwing the accused in jail, clinic workers said, but who knew for how long. "Maybe in one week they will say he ran away and they will release him," Dr. Étienne Mugula said.

Across eastern Congo and most noticeably in South Kivu, rape or the threat of rape has scattered villagers, spread disease and split families.

Valeria Mwanamutumumu, a 40-year-old widow, was raped in front of her 12-year-old daughter on a Wednesday morning in March. That day, hearing gunshots coming closer to her house, she crawled under her bed and told her children to keep quiet. Two soldiers

dragged her out by her legs and raped her, one after the other. They kicked her for good measure and with a gun at her chest, threatened to kill her as she screamed. Her children knew not to protest. If they did, the eldest, a 12-year-old girl, would be next.

The young girl visiting the clinic today was assaulted not far away from that attack on a Wednesday afternoon in May. She was at home alone when a uniformed soldier began shooting outside. He stormed in and started tearing off her clothes. The girl said she screamed at the top of her lungs, which was hard to imagine this afternoon as she whispered her story to a doctor, her eyes downcast, scratching the wooden stool under her. The soldier got scared and left, she told the doctor, who could do little more for her than offer anti-anxiety medication.

In this village, clinic workers said, girls do not like to go to school anymore; they are afraid of what will happen on the long walks there. Some women are terrified of going to the fields or fetching firewood. Some sleep in the banana groves, thinking they are safer there than at home. Many of those who have been raped have left their villages altogether, in terror or in shame.