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## Reports of Rape and Torture Inside Zimbabwean Militia

By MICHAEL WINES

BULAWAYO, Zimbabwe — Last March, Debbie Siyangapi took the pulpit in an Anglican church here in Zimbabwe's second-largest city and confessed her darkest secret to several hundred worshippers. Within an hour, she had donned a nun's habit as a disguise and slipped out of the church through a side entrance, literally fleeing for her safety, said Ms. Siyangapi and human rights groups that are now sheltering her.

For Ms. Siyangapi's secret was not merely her own. Her appearance was also testimony to one of the least documented — and most brutal — practices of the military enforcers of Zimbabwe's authoritarian government, enforcers from whom she now has to hide. Ms. Siyangapi told listeners that month that she had been abducted from a Bulawayo street market in November 2001 and forcibly enrolled in the National Youth Service, a ragtag, government-run paramilitary group formed three years ago by the government to stifle growing political dissent among Zimbabwe's civilians.

Her duties, however, were not political: during her nine-month stay in a training camp and later at a paramilitary base, she said, she was raped almost nightly, sometimes several times a night, by some of the hundreds of young male conscripts there.

To the extent she had proof, she offered it to the crowd: a 6-month-old baby girl named Nocthula, or Peace.

"At night, they removed the globes from the light sockets," Ms. Siyangapi, 22, said in an interview at a hide-out in South Africa, to which she fled after escaping Bulawayo in July. "Sometimes there were 10 boys. They didn't leave until 3 a.m. If you cried, you were beaten."

Ms. Siyangapi is one of the few women to speak publicly about the prevalence of rape and other sexual atrocities in the Zimbabwe military. But a growing number of human rights groups have charged in recent months that forced sex and sexual torture are routine elements of life for men and women alike in the Youth Service, used as both a reward and a punishment.

In a report issued in September, the Solidarity Peace Trust, a faith-based group of southern African human rights activists, accused the youth paramilitary group of sanctioning "the rape, and multiple rape, of young girls by boys undergoing training with them and by their military instructors."

"The resulting pregnancies and infections with sexually transmitted diseases, including H.I.V., not only devastate the lives of the youth concerned but are creating a terrible legacy for the nation," the report stated.

Amnesty International documented cases of rape within the Youth Service in a report released in April. The Amani Trust, perhaps the most active human rights group currently in Zimbabwe, has estimated that as many as 1,000 women are being held in Youth Service camps as sexual servants. The trust, an affiliate of the International Council for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, assists victims of political violence.

Anthony P. Reeler, a former director of the trust who has been barred from entering Zimbabwe by the government, said it was difficult to say how prevalent rape was within Zimbabwe's military and paramilitary because so few instances were reported.

"What's happening in the camps I would call forced concubinage," Mr. Reeler, now a human rights activist in South Africa, said in a recent telephone interview. "It's much more in line with the 'comfort women' of the Japanese and Philippine armed forces" of World War II.

Still, the Amani Trust reported a rising incidence of sexual assault on political opponents of Zimbabwe's government before disputed elections in March 2002, which granted a new term to Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's president since 1980.

Mr. Reeler and others say politically driven assaults, opportunistic rape and the sort of forced servitude experienced by women like Ms. Siyangapi continue unabated.

In Bulawayo, Jenny Williams, the leader of the feminist organization Women of Zimbabwe Arise, said in a recent interview that the ranks of women within the youth militia were only increasing, a function of Zimbabwe's collapsing economy and social structure.

"There's a big recruitment drive," in advance of the next presidential election, in 2008, she said. "And right now, youngsters are going voluntarily to these camps, for two reasons. One is that they have nothing to do — they're bored out of their little skulls. And two, because there's no food in their homes, their parents are not stopping them from going because it's one less mouth to feed. That's the sad reality."

Ms. Williams, who said she knew Ms. Siyangapi, said her story was consistent with that told by other women who have been enrolled in the youth militia, widely called the Green Bombers after their olive-colored fatigues.

Mr. Mugabe's government cast the Green Bombers as a sort of domestic Peace Corps when the militia's creation was announced in 2000.

The reality, say human rights observers and some Green Bombers who have fled to South Africa, is different. In the last three years, they charge, as many as 50,000 young men and women have been encamped in Zimbabwe's interior, subjected to crude and grueling military training, indoctrinated in government propaganda and dispatched to ensure government control of the population.

The enrollees, male and female alike, are said to range from as young as 11 years old to their early 30's. They are said to be generally ill-fed and poorly trained, and they usually live in large dormitories.

The youths' major duty, they say, has been to smother support for the Movement for Democratic Change, the rival of Mr. Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, by terrorizing its leaders and their supporters, especially during elections. Mr. Mugabe's disputed victory in Zimbabwe's 2002 presidential election has been attributed in part to militias in at least 123 bases that discouraged voting by supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

In its September report, the Solidarity Peace Trust called the youth militia "one of the most commonly reported violators of human rights" in Zimbabwe.

The Green Bombers' camps are tightly protected, and there is little firsthand information about activities there. In a two-hour interview at a safe house several hours outside Johannesburg, Ms. Siyangapi said she was released from captivity by militia commanders in July 2002 because she was pregnant. She gave birth to a girl that September and fled Zimbabwe after intelligence operatives heard her describe her experience to witnesses at the Anglican church service in Bulawayo.

Ms. Siyangapi and the human rights advocates sheltering her, who refused to be identified for fear of reprisals, contend that she is in danger from operatives of Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organization, the domestic security agency.

Ms. Siyangapi said she had been forced into the militia after a group of youths beat her, then threatened to burn down her house unless she joined them. Her description of militia life mirrored that of the others who fled: a boot camp marked by endurance runs, push-ups and beatings; a sporadic diet of horse meat and ground corn; indoctrination with hundreds of others in pro-government songs; and widespread drunkenness.

During much of her time in the militia, Ms. Siyangapi said, she was raped virtually nightly by at least one of 50 paramilitary soldiers who were favorites of the camp's leader. After one unsuccessful attempt to escape in April 2002, she said, she was ordered to dig a hole. Paramilitary soldiers buried her up to her neck, she said, and left her there for a day.

After she left the Green Bombers in the summer of 2002, seven months pregnant, Ms. Siyangapi said, she learned from her doctor that she was infected with H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS. Now on antiretroviral drugs, she appeared healthy in a recent interview, but said that she did not yet know whether her daughter was also infected.

Asked whether she enjoyed life with her daughter, Ms. Siyangapi replied, "Sometimes." Asked how she felt about her experience, she said simply and without expression, "I am angry."