

International responsibilities

by Jan Egeland

Rape in war has reached epidemic proportions and the international community needs to take much more far-reaching action – now.

Militaries, militias, men carrying arms, government and non-state actors, neighbours, trusted leaders and men in positions of power have all perpetrated violence against women and girls in times of conflict and displacement. Although rape, sexual assault, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced sterilisation, forced abortion and forced pregnancy are crimes under national and international laws, the guilty usually commit these crimes with complete impunity. The international community is doing too little to protect women and girls from these

heinous acts, yet we know which actions can help to make a difference.

Prevention

First and foremost, we must get more serious about preventing rape and other forms of sexual violence. Most sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls in conflict is committed by armed groups and local people. Governments must demand discipline of their uniformed personnel. All armed groups must respect international legal principles prohibiting the targeting of civilians.

Just as law enforcement actors play a critical role in deterring sexual violence in more stable communities, so do peacekeepers have a critical role in protecting civilians in conflict situations. Used all too often as a weapon of war, sexual violence must be seen as an imminent threat to peace and stability and must trigger an immediate response in terms of providing physical protection and security. To this end, the mandates of peacekeeping operations need to be drawn up in such a way as to ensure the right kind of engagement for specific situations. The UN should work closely with other international, regional and inter-governmental organisations to ensure that these considerations underpin all peacekeeping and related operations.

A group of armed rebels north of Kaga Bandouro, Central African Republic, December 2006.



Unfortunately, even humanitarian and peacekeeping staff – military and civilian alike – have been responsible for acts of sexual violence and exploitation. This is unacceptable. The UN must uphold the highest standards of conduct in its work. Those who come to protect and assist must shun any form of sexual exploitation and abuse of the population and be held responsible for their behaviour if they violate the code of conduct.

Deterrent actions in and around camps can be effective, such as patrolling firewood collection routes, providing alternative cooking fuels and improving lighting. Supporting women's economic empowerment through improved livelihoods and skills building can also help by increasing family incomes and reducing exposure to rape outside the camp.

Appropriate response

In addition to preventing sexual violence in the first place, the international community, and its individual members, must take serious steps to respond appropriately when sexual violence occurs. Governments must provide training for police, the military, judges and community and religious leaders. They must bring in laws to protect the survivors of sexual violence, to uphold the rule of law and to provide justice.

Impunity – widespread in far too many places – must be eradicated. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has classified rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy and enforced sterilisation as potential crimes against humanity or war crimes. Investigations have begun into possible violations of international humanitarian law in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda and Darfur.

Too often the international community continues to dismiss gender-based violence as an inevitable consequence of war. In Sudan, for example, although the government (under massive pressure from the international community) no longer denies that rape is being perpetrated in Darfur, it refuses

to acknowledge the magnitude of this scourge, or that rape and other forms of sexual violence are being used as a weapon of war against the civilian population. Too often, this attitude has denied survivors access to treatment, as those brave enough to seek medical care or to report the rape to the authorities have been harassed and even arrested. Unmarried pregnant women are treated like criminals, victimised not just by the initial act(s) of violence but again as they are arrested and subjected to brutal treatment by police.

In DRC, which I visited in early September 2006, sexual violence against women and girls is rampant and impunity for the perpetrators almost assured. At one point in 2005, more than 20,000 incidents of rape were recorded in one province of eastern DRC alone; the real figure is undoubtedly much greater. Visiting the Panzi clinic in South Kivu province, I met with some of these survivors of sexual violence. One woman told me how she'd been held for more than a week, tied by her arms and legs and repeatedly raped by a group of armed men. She lost the use of her hands due to the tightness of the bindings. Hers is not one of the worst tales from DRC. She has been able to seek treatment at the clinic, one of only two facilities in the country with a doctor with the surgical training to repair the fistulas and other severe physical trauma that mark the survivors of such abuse. All too often, these women and girls receive no medical attention.

Worse yet, hardly any perpetrators of such violence are punished. I promised these women that I would bring their stories of suffering to the world and I began by urging every authority I met in DRC – from President Kabila to the provincial authorities I met in Katanga, Ituri and South Kivu provinces – to put an end to the reign of impunity that has destroyed the very basis of the country's social fabric.

Assistance for survivors

Even if all these – and more – preventive and punitive measures are taken, the total eradication of rape in conflict is unlikely to happen. Resources must therefore also be

devoted to treating the survivors of violence. Survivors must have assured access to medical care, including to drugs that can prevent pregnancy and the transmission of HIV. Trained medical personnel must be available to perform the complicated surgeries necessary to repair injuries caused by sexual violence.

Support for survivors must extend beyond care for their physical wounds. Many women and children need culturally sensitive psychosocial counselling to deal with the psychological impact of sexual violence. Training for survivors is often required to help them learn to support themselves in new ways, as all too often they are forced out of their homes and communities. Awareness raising within communities is also needed so that survivors, including children born as a result of rape, are helped, not ostracised.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) supports a coordinated response, whereby healthcare providers, police and other security personnel, legal/justice actors and the local community (including men) are brought together on a regular basis to plan a multisectoral programme to address gender-based violence. The IASC's guidelines¹ set out the minimum package of activities that need to be put in place from the early stages of an emergency. UN Member States, international and non-governmental organisations and concerned individuals must give these guidelines the support they merit.

Women and girls already traumatised by displacement or affected by conflict deserve our attention and support. No one actor or group can do this alone. It requires a joint effort.

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1. The IASC's *Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings: Focusing on Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence in Emergencies* are online at: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/subsidi/tf_gender/gbv.asp

John Holmes succeeded Jan Egeland in January 2007. See: <http://ochaonline.un.org/webpage.asp?Site=usg>