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350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10118
Telephone: +1-212-290-4700
Fax: +1-212-736-1300
Website: <http://www.hrw.org>



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For further information, please contact:

In Brussels, Juliane Kippenberg (Human Rights Watch): +44-771-252-7119

In Brussels, Immaculee Birhaheka (PAIF): +44-771-252-7119

In Brussels, Mathilde Muhindo (Centre Olame): +44-771-252-7119

In Brussels, Jean-Paul Marthoz (Human Rights Watch): +322-2-732-2009

In New York, Joanne Csete (Human Rights Watch): +1-212-216-1224

In London, Bronwen Manby (Human Rights Watch): +44-207-241-0309

Sexual Violence Rampant, Unpunished in DR Congo War

(Brussels, June 20, 2002) -- Forces on all sides in the Congo conflict have committed war crimes against women and girls, Human Rights Watch said in a new 114-page report released today. The report documents the frequent and sometimes systematic use of rape and other forms of sexual violence in the Rwandan-occupied areas of eastern Congo.

"War continues to rage in eastern Congo. Within that larger war, combatants carry out another war -- sexual violence against women and girls," said Alison Des Forges, senior advisor to the Africa division of Human Rights Watch.

The report, which is based on numerous interviews with victims, witnesses, and officials, details crimes of sexual violence committed by soldiers of the Rwandan army and its Congolese ally, the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie (RCD), as well as armed groups opposed to them -- Congolese Mai Mai rebels, and Burundian and Rwandan armed groups.

These combatants raped women and girls during military operations to punish the local civilian population for allegedly supporting the “enemy.” In other cases, Mai Mai rebels and other armed groups abducted women and girls and forced them to provide sexual services and domestic labor, sometimes for periods of more than a year.

Some rapists attacked their victims with extraordinary brutality. In two cases, assailants inserted firearms into the vaginas of their victims and shot them. In other cases combatants mutilated the sexual organs of the women with knives or razor blades. Some attacked girls as young as five years of age and women as old as eighty.

Assailants often attacked women and girls engaged in the usual activities necessary to the livelihoods of their families: cultivating their fields, collecting firewood, or going to market. By doing so, the assailants further disrupted the already precarious economic life of the region.

Medical services in eastern Congo have nearly totally collapsed, leaving most victims of rape and other sexual torture with little hope for treatment of injuries or of sexually transmitted diseases, including testing and post-exposure treatment for HIV/AIDS. Some experts estimate that HIV prevalence among military forces in the region may be higher than 50 percent. Rape in these circumstances can be a death sentence.

The report also documents the rejection of some women and girls by their husbands, families, and wider communities because they were raped or because they are thought to be infected with HIV/AIDS. As one such ostracized woman told Human Rights Watch researchers, “My body has become sad. I have no happiness.”

With the collapse of official services, Congolese churches and civil society organizations have used their scarce resources to assist the victims. Local organizations which have also documented sexual violence in the region contributed to the report.

“Commanders of regular military units and heads of armed groups alike must get their men in order,” said Des Forges. “Combatants must direct their violence against recognized military targets, not against helpless women and girls who happen to cross their paths. Those who abuse women must be held accountable for their crimes.”

Human Rights Watch will be releasing the report at 9.30 am GMT (10.30 am in Brussels) at Hôtel du Congrès, rue du Congrès 42, 1000 Brussels, Belgium.

Until Thursday, June 20, 2002, the report “The War Within the War. Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in eastern Congo” will be available online at <http://docs.hrw.org/embargo/drc02/index.htm> using the username: ‘econgo’ and the access-code: ‘violence2k2’.

Beginning June 20, the report will be online at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/>.

Sexual violence in Eastern Congo: Recent Testimonies

Below are excerpts of testimonies on sexual violence in the Congo war. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the victims and witnesses.

Delphine W., twenty-one years old, about her rape in September 2001 in Goma:

I don't know what time it was, I was asleep. Four men, soldiers, came to see what they wanted to steal. They were armed with knives. They spoke Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili—the two languages of the military. Some were Rwandan and some Congolese. Some were in civilian clothing and some in military uniform. There was just me and my mother in the house. They forced the door open. I was in bed. When the door opened I cried out. They said they needed the girl. Three of the men raped me. They did not rape my mother. They said they didn't need the mother, just the girl. They asked if I was married and I said no. They asked me if I had ever been taken by a man and why. [One of the men] said, "What girl has never been taken by men?" It was the first time I had ever slept with men. They said if I refused, they'd kill me. The first one who took me hit me with his hands; he took me by force. I asked for mercy. He said that if I didn't let him do it he would kill me. I refused. He hit me so I accepted. I was still in bed. The others didn't hit me. The second one wanted to put his thing in my mouth—I refused. The three raped me, the fourth left. When they took me, I felt sick. In the night I cried and said to God: "Why did you want it to be like that? I refused so many men. Then I had to accept men I had never met before, I didn't even know their faces." My mother told me I should thank God I was still alive. She told me to be brave and not say anything to other families so as not to lose my reputation. She said if I talked about it, I might not get a husband. They could say I have illnesses because I was with soldiers. I was sick for three days. I felt cold. It felt as if they had put chili in me—it burned. There was lots of blood running out. In the morning my mother gave me water to wash with, just water. I haven't seen a doctor or a nurse.

A mother about the murder of her daughter Monique B., aged twenty, in Kabare:

On May 15 of this year [2001], four heavily armed combatants—they were Hutu—came to our house at 9 p.m. Everyone in the neighborhood had fled. I wanted to hide my children, but I didn't have time. They took my husband and tied him to a pole in the house. My four-month-old baby started crying and I started breastfeeding him and then they left me alone. They went after my daughter, and I knew they would rape her. But she resisted and said she would rather die than have relations with them. They cut off her left breast and put it in her hand. They said, "Are you still resisting us?" She said she would rather die than be with them. They cut off her genital labia and showed them to her. She said, "Please kill me." They took a knife and put it to her neck and then made a long vertical incision down her chest and split her body open. She was crying but finally she died. She died with her breast in her hand. RCD officers came and looked at the body. But then they went away and I don't think they ever did anything about it. I didn't talk to other authorities because I thought it was a military matter. There is no electricity there, and we couldn't see much, but we could hear her scream and see what happened when we saw the body in the morning. I

never saw the attackers again, but I couldn't even see them well that night. They didn't stay after they killed my daughter.

Sophie W., a mother in her thirties from Shabunda, about her abduction:

We went into the forest at the beginning of the war. My husband thought the forest was safer, and there was nothing to eat in town. But we moved back to town in 2000. In July 2000 the Mai-Mai came and took my husband. They beat me up and shot him and then cut up his body in front of me. They said my husband was a spy for the Tutsi. There were eight Mai-Mai. Two of them held me down and the others raped me. They put two knives to my eyes and told me that if I cried, they would cut out my eyes. The Mai-Mai [took me back to the forest. They] spoke Kiswahili, Kilenga, Lingala, and Kinyarwanda. They were filthy—they had fleas. We had no shelter. There were only leaves to sleep on, and when it rained, we got soaked. We had mats with us, but the Mai-Mai took them away. There were many of them during the time I was in the forest—even 150 or more. They sometimes fed us small animals that they killed, but they didn't give us much food.

Eléonore R., twelve years old, on an attack by on her home in Goma in August 2001:

Four [men] came into the house and there were more outside. They opened the door, took the papa, tied him up, hit the mama, and took everything in the house. They made a lot of noise. I hid under the bed. They then came to my room. One was very tall, the other fat. I didn't know them and didn't really see them. They had guns and flashlights. They spoke Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili. When I refused one hit me twice with his hand. Then he did the act. There were four other children in the room, all younger. The man who did it told the others to close their eyes. I also closed my eyes. They stopped when the blood came.

A forty year old woman farmer from Uvira on an attack in July 2001:

We were all working in the fields when some Banyamulenge men in uniforms and with arms surrounded us. We ran and hid but they grabbed a Burundian woman who was with us. They accused the woman of being the wife of the Mai-Mai. She said that she had come to seek refuge here. Seven soldiers took the Burundian woman off and raped her. Then they put a gun into her vagina and shot her. When they left we carried her with us. She died on the way [into town].

Générose N., from Kabare, aged twenty, about her abduction:

I was on the road from Kalonge to Mudaka. I had money that my fiancé gave me to buy a wedding dress. A soldier attacked me on the road. He said things in Kinyarwanda. [Later she said he was Hutu]. He took me away to a place in the forest where there were three other soldiers. They roughed me up. This was August 8 [2001] and they kept me until August 25 and each one of them raped me every day. There wasn't a house as such but a shelter under some plastic sheeting. I found out that they had another woman there before me and I was sleeping where she slept, and then later they would get another woman after me. I wore the same clothes all

the time. If I tried to speak, they hit me. They were all the same—horrible men. They finally just sent me away when they were tired of me.