



# Women and Peace-building in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: An assessment of their role in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue

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## **Abstract**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a country that has never truly experienced peace or democracy. As a result, achieving peace through negotiations has proven to be an extremely difficult process. This paper assesses the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) process, especially concerning women's contributions to peace-building in the DRC. The role of women at the ICD has rarely been discussed. However, increasingly we are witnessing the importance of women at the peace table. This is critical given the impact of war on women during and after the conflict. The women of the DRC have indeed endured

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many years of gross violations of human rights, and their participation in peace-building in the DRC is therefore critical for the future of the country.

## **Introduction**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the third largest country in Africa, covering an estimated 2 345 000 square km (Office of the Facilitator for the Inter-Congolese Dialogue 2001:2). The population of the DRC is estimated at 52 million, but it must be borne in mind that there has not been a national census conducted for at least 10 years. Since 1996, two successive wars have wrought havoc amongst the population of the DRC. In May 2001, a study by the International Rescue Committee indicated that 2.5 million people had died as a result of war during the previous 33 months of unrest, solely in the eastern part of the country. Of the 2,5 million, approximately 350 000 deaths were directly attributable to violence, while the others were a result of disease, malnutrition and the collapse of the health system (International Rescue Committee Mortality Study 2005).

The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, stated, 'One of the biggest challenges currently facing Africa and the United Nations is the challenge of bringing peace and stability to the DRC' (Secretary-General of the United Nations 2001). In an attempt to resolve the crisis, the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) took place from 2000 to 2003. The Lusaka Agreement, Chapter 5, mandated the Dialogue process. After six months of negotiations Sir Ketumile Masire, Former President of Botswana, was eventually chosen as the neutral Facilitator to the ICD.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the critical role of women in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and the efforts towards achieving peace in the DRC. In addition, the paper will also discuss the particular impact that the conflict in the DRC has had upon the women of the country. Women in the DRC have been victimised, but at the same time have demonstrated self-empowerment. This effort has rarely been highlighted, and even less has been written with respect to this contribution towards peace by the women of the DRC. Unlike their male counterparts, women from all sides of the conflict found mechanisms

to work within towards peace, regardless of their political affiliation or ethnic background. But problems were encountered with respect to the involvement of women in the peace process.

At the same time, peace in the DRC has yet to be realised, despite the peace agreements. This paper will also look at how the exclusion of women after the ICD may be a contributing factor to the continued instability. Women continue to endure gross violations of human rights on a daily basis within the DRC. The role played by women in peace efforts has often been underplayed, but it is increasingly important to the achievement of resolution to any conflict. The case of the ICD and the DRC will help to illuminate key issues related to peace-building and gender equity in Africa.

### **Peace-building and Women**

It is striking that men are often the planners of war and yet also expected to be the designers of peace processes. How do we expect to attain peace at a negotiation table surrounded by only those involved in the destructive violent process of war? What we need are 'peace promoters' at the negotiation table, and most often this means the inclusion of women (Hunt & Posa 2005). While most men come to the negotiation table directly from the war room and battlefield, women usually arrive straight from civil activism or family care duties. Cynthia Enloe asked, 'To what extent is the status of a local woman, any woman, in the postwar setting, defined by influential decision-makers chiefly in terms of what they were during the recent war?' (Enloe 2002:29). If women are only viewed as victims of war or as care givers then it is difficult for them to be taken seriously as peace negotiators. Several women's organisations throughout Africa have been involved in peace-building efforts at the grassroots levels to ensure that a gender perspective is taken into consideration in the signing of peace accords, thus bringing to the surface women's needs and expectations in a male-dominated process (Puechguirbal 2005:1).

Women are crucial to ideas of inclusive security since they are often at the centre of non-governmental organisations, popular protests, electoral referendums, and other citizen-empowering movements whose influences have grown

with the global spread of democracy (Hunt & Posa 2005). This has also been recognised by international organisations involved in peace-building. On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 1325, urging the Secretary-General to expand the role of women in UN field-based operations, especially among military observers, civilian police, human rights workers, and humanitarian personnel. This resolution also relates to many facets of the protection of women and girls during and after conflict. It recommends that constitutions and electoral systems require strong language pertaining to gender equity within such mechanisms as the Bill of Rights, Parliamentary composition, and the judiciary. Resolution 1325 also calls upon all parties to take action in four areas:

- to promote the participation of women in decision-making and peace processes,
- to integrate gender perspectives and training in peace-keeping,
- to protect women in armed conflict, and
- to mainstream gender issues in UN reporting systems and programmes related to conflict and peace-building.

Women are often associated with maternal capacity only, thus keeping them secluded from outside political activities and official peace negotiations (Puechguirbal 2005:4). But, this may be seen as a major asset for peace-building. Social science research supports the stereotype of women as generally more collaborative than men and thus more inclined toward consensus and compromise. Ironically, women's status as second-class citizens is a source of empowerment, since it has made women adept at finding innovative ways to cope with problems (Hunt & Posa 2005). Women are not generally the perpetrators of the crimes committed in a war and hence are viewed as less threatening to the opposing side. In addition, women have roles in society that cut across ethnic, religious or geographic divides, such as that of mothers or caregivers. Within these roles, women have a large interest in ensuring safe environments for their children and their communities.

Although international observers regularly praise the work done by women in peace-building efforts, very few of them give us an account of structural obstacles within societies that prevent women from being recognised as full

actors in a process led by men in power (Puechguirbal 2005:2). UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan remarked in October 2000, 'For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls' (Hunt & Posa 2005). Women have been instrumental in conflicts ranging from Sudan, to the Former Yugoslavia, Burundi, Northern Ireland and India and Pakistan. In the case of Sudan, the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace met with the military leaders of various rebel groups and secured access to areas where men could not venture to deliver humanitarian aid (Hunt & Posa 2005). Often, women provide a great deal of untapped knowledge about the territories in which they reside and the attitudes held by its peoples. Women in Northern Ireland have often bridged the divide between the Protestants and the Catholics by bringing together key members of each community as mediators to calm tensions (Hunt & Posa 2005).

Former South African President and mediator in the Burundi peace negotiations, Nelson Mandela, suggested at the Arusha peace talks on Burundi, that if Burundian men began fighting again, their women should withhold 'conjugal rights' – like cooking (Hunt & Posa 2005). This is a powerful method of control that women in conflict zones possess.

It was once stated that if you educate a man, you educate a man. But, if you educate a woman, you educate a family. The same adage can be applied in the realm of peace-building. Women are concerned about their families and their communities, whereas the men involved in peace-building most often are only interested in how it affects them personally. Despite the fact that common sense indicates women have a great deal to bring to the peace-building process, they remain marginalised in many peace efforts. As Cynthia Enloe observes: 'Men, like it or not, are the "key players" in the making and unmaking of any society's governability – as party leaders, funders of political activists, clerics, business investors, militia leaders – so it is THEY whose security relevances needs to top the agenda' (Puechguirbal 2005:9). However, some suggest that the key reason women are marginalised in peace processes often has to do with the fact that women are better at forging peace. A UN official once stated that, in Africa, women are often excluded from negotiating teams because the war leaders 'are afraid women will compromise' and give too much away (Hunt & Posa 2005).

It is crucial that those conducting the negotiation processes address the role of women in peace processes. Embassies and diplomats in conflict zones should ensure women are included in any negotiation process. Cultural boundaries should not be an excuse for non-inclusion of women, particularly given the fact that women are often the victims of war. In 2005, 90% of the casualties of the ongoing conflicts were civilians. At the time that Resolution 1325 was passed by the UN Security Council, Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh, stated, 'Finally, the voices of women have reached the Security Council. The onus is now on the Council to act. We must send a powerful message that women need peace, but more importantly, peace needs the involvement of women' (UNIFEM 2001:49).

### **The ICD Process**

In July 1999, the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement was signed with the aim of ending hostilities in the DRC. Chapter 5 of the Lusaka Agreement called for a national dialogue and reconciliation. Within chapter 5 of the Agreement there was a call for a neutral facilitator to lead the inter-Congolese dialogue political negotiations. These negotiations were to bring about a new political dispensation in the DRC. The Agreement also identified the Congolese parties who would take part in the dialogue and set out the principles to govern the dialogue process. Paragraph 5.2 provided that the inter-Congolese political negotiations shall include, the Government of the DRC, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), the political opposition and the *forces vives*,<sup>1</sup> and that all participants shall enjoy equal status.

It took six months for the Congolese Parties to the Lusaka Agreement to agree upon a neutral facilitator. On 14 December 1999, Sir Ketumile Masire, Former President of the Republic of Botswana, was appointed by the Organisation of African Unity as the Facilitator of the inter-Congolese dialogue.

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1 *Forces vives* refers to the civil society groups within the DRC.

The duties of the facilitator included: making necessary contacts pertaining to the organisation of the inter-Congolese dialogue; organising, in conjunction with the Congolese Parties, consultations with the view to inviting representatives of political opposition and *forces vives* and lastly, conducting the discussions leading to the establishment of a new political dispensation in the DRC.<sup>2</sup>

As with any peace process, the inter-Congolese dialogue encountered many setbacks to the original timeframe set out within the Lusaka Agreement. However, conflict resolution is not an exact science and precise timelines will inevitably never be met due to the nature of human beings and conflict. One of the greatest challenges to the Office of the Facilitator was the lack of funding at the beginning of the process. This led to inadequate representation within the DRC during the beginning of the Facilitator's work. Attempts to get the dialogue process off the ground were halted in 2000 due to the unwillingness of the DRC government to co-operate on many levels. Communication between the Office of the Facilitator and the DRC government was practically non-existent at the time due to disagreements about the DRC government's role in the dialogue and their expectations of the outcome of the dialogue. Hence, during the year 2000, much of the Facilitator's work was concentrated on communication with rebel-held areas of the DRC. Things changed in 2001 after the assassination of Laurent Kabila on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January and the assumption of power by his son, Joseph Kabila.

In April 2001, the Facilitator undertook a trip to the DRC. The main objectives of this trip were to meet with the DRC government in order to obtain consensus on a Declaration of Fundamental Principles that would guide the dialogue process. In addition, the Facilitator wished to take the opportunity to meet with *forces vives* and political opposition members in Kinshasa, Kananga and Lubumbashi (all government-held areas at the time). Prior to this trip, the Facilitator had not enjoyed a good relationship with the DRC government due to a strained relationship between his office and President Laurent Kabila. With Joseph Kabila in power, the mood began to change in the DRC government quarters.

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2 See Chapter 5.3 of the Lusaka Agreement.

The signing of the Declaration of Fundamental Principles took place in Lusaka, on May 4, 2001. It proved to be a valuable initiative that gave the necessary impetus to re-start the dialogue process and reaffirmed the commitment of the Congolese Parties to the inter-Congolese dialogue.

The next step was for the Office of the Facilitator to undertake a mission to all eleven provinces of the DRC to supervise designation of the representatives of the Political Opposition and *forces vives* to the dialogue and the preparatory committee meeting. The aim was to ensure a democratic process with respect to the selection of the participants. It was decided that each province would be allowed to designate four representatives at the inter-Congolese dialogue itself, and one of the four would represent the province at the preparatory meeting. However, some adjustments were made to these numbers, in order to reflect the reality on the ground. Representatives from religious groups, human rights associations, trade unions, youth groups, professional organisations and women's groups were added to the delegations. In total, 55 representatives were chosen as a result.

The Preparatory Committee Meeting was then held from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2001 in Gaborone. It brought together a total of 74 delegates from armed opposition, Government of DRC, political opposition and *forces vives*. At this meeting, consensus was reached on the number of participants and level of participation at the inter-Congolese dialogue, the draft agenda, draft rules of procedure, venue and date of the dialogue. At this point, it had been decided by the Congolese delegates that the dialogue should take place from the 15<sup>th</sup> of October in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Many obstacles in the preparation for the ICD in Addis Ababa were encountered by the Office of the Facilitator. As always, the tight timeline presented difficulties in terms of logistics. In addition, the financial situation needed to be addressed adequately. The dialogue was to take place for a 45-day period, hence requiring sound financial backing. It should be noted here that the push for October 15<sup>th</sup> was one pursued by the armed opposition, since they were afraid that momentum would be lost and they wanted to ensure there was no backtracking by the Government of the DRC. The Government of the DRC on the other hand, pushed for the venue to be Addis Ababa, and not South Africa



(as pushed for by the armed opposition), hence the date of October 15<sup>th</sup> was a compromise they agreed to, but were not ultimately committed to upholding.

Several meetings took place between the Facilitator and the groups to be represented at the ICD in order to discuss the difficulties with upholding the October 15<sup>th</sup> timeline. However, it was ultimately decided that the opening ceremony in Addis Ababa should still go ahead on October 15<sup>th</sup>. From the outset there were problems with this meeting. Disagreements about the nature and the agenda of the meeting emerged between the parties. Delegates could not agree to continue the meeting as constituted. The alternative was to transfer the dialogue to South Africa in the beginning of 2002. Consultations on various issues did take place and the draft rules of procedure and the draft agenda were discussed by all delegates, except the DRC Government.

On February 25, 2002, the inter-Congolese dialogue resumed in Sun City, South Africa. Once again, negotiations had encountered many interruptions by the Congolese delegates who were displaying stalling tactics. Military movements between the Mouvement de Liberation du Congo (MLC) rebel group and the DRC government forces (FAC) were taking place, which would ensure agreement between the two parties on key issues at the dialogue. After two weeks, substantive work began in Sun City in the various commissions that had been created. These commissions included: the Political and Legal Commission, the Defence and Security Commission, the Economic and Financial Commission, the Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commission and the Peace and Reconciliation Commission. Individuals from each of the delegations present named their representatives to each of the commissions. The aim was to provide forums for working expeditiously and effectively on the major issues, which needed to be resolved at the inter-Congolese dialogue.

The process in Sun City ended on 19 April 2002 with major agreements signed, a total of 34 resolutions. However, there were still a few outstanding issues with respect to the political dispensation to be implemented and the transformation of the military. These aspects were then carried forward and negotiated with the help of the South African Government and the United Nations. After almost three years of negotiations, the inter-Congolese dialogue came to an end and the final documents were signed. On April 2, 2003, the Pretoria Peace

Agreement was signed in Sun City, South Africa, by all of the parties to the inter-Congolese dialogue. This Agreement called for the installation of a transitional government for the next two years in the DRC. The objective of the transition was the reunification, pacification, and reconstruction of the country, the restoration of territorial integrity and the re-establishment of the authority of the State throughout the national territory.<sup>3</sup> The Presidency was to be composed of the President and four Vice-Presidents. The President of the interim government was Joseph Kabila. The four Vice-Presidents were chosen from the following components: RCD (1), MLC (1), Political Opposition (1) and the Government delegation (1). The implementation of the Agreement was to take place immediately following its signature on April 2, 2003.

### **The Role of Women in the ICD Process**

The inclusion of women at the ICD process was not an easily achieved objective. The Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement signed in 1999 does not make any mention of the inclusion of women in the ICD nor does it strongly condemn violations against women. Chapter 5 guides the conduct of the ICD process and was devised purely by the Congolese men involved in the conflict.

The process of choosing the candidates to represent the Congolese at the ICD, during the tour conducted by the Office of the Facilitator throughout the 11 provinces, was marred by difficulties on many levels. However, one of the key problems was the exclusion of women from many of the selection procedures. Since the selection procedure was conducted via first-past-the-post elections, women were at a disadvantage. Out of 73 delegates chosen to participate at the preparatory committee meeting in Gaborone, only six were women.

In addition, some of the six female delegates that were in attendance were specifically instructed by their heads of delegations not to promote gender related issues. For example, when one of the female delegates from the *forces*

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3 See Chapter 2.1 of the Pretoria Agreement, 2003.

*vives* stood up to promote protection of women in humanitarian situations, one of the female delegates from the RCD group stood up to condemn her for wasting time on issues that are not relevant to the ICD process. Some of the female delegates were also appointed by their delegations because of their relationships – as wives or girlfriends – to key members of their group.

The women delegates joined forces to issue an open letter to the delegates of the preparatory meeting in Gaborone. They stated, ‘This under representation of women does not respond to the principle of equality between the sexes.’ The open letter recalled commitments by the DRC government to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and the SADC (Southern African Development Community) Declaration on Gender Equality. The women demanded that the 30% participation quota of women delegates, set by SADC, must be met. In addition, they recalled how in the South African peace negotiation process one out of every two delegates was a woman and what success this brought in terms of women’s participation in the newly formed government of South Africa.

This low level of representation at the preparatory committee meeting was disappointing. Prior to the meeting, the Facilitator of the ICD had called upon parties to the meeting to increase their representation of women to their delegations. Sir Ketumile Masire then held meetings with UNIFEM (The United Nations Development Fund for Women) to discuss possibilities for promoting women’s participation in the dialogue process. UNIFEM held sessions with women in the DRC on the gender dimensions of constitutional, electoral and judicial reform. This is crucial to any peace process as many women delegates may not be adequately educated or informed about the gender dimensions that should be promoted to ensure women’s equality. Having women at the peace table is important, but having women who actively promote women’s issues is even more important.

As stated in the previous section, adjustments were made to the selection of *forces vives* candidates for the ICD to rectify the inequalities in representation, after which women comprised 25% of the *forces vives* delegation. Eventually, 40 women in total participated as delegates at the ICD in Sun City (UNIFEM 2002:84). These 40 delegates only made up a total of 9% of all the delegates at the ICD. One of the difficulties was that despite calls by the Facilitator to increase

the representation of women at the ICD, it was not a mandatory requirement for those delegations participating. However, in addition to the 40 delegates, UNIFEM sponsored 14 consultants and experts to assist the women delegates during the dialogue process with technical expertise.

Prior to the dialogue, from 15 to 19 February 2002, women from the various delegations met in Nairobi. This meeting was organised by Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) and Women as Partners for Peace in Africa (WOPPA) – DRC. The delegates agreed upon a declaration and plan of action for all women at the ICD. This was a significant step forward for the women of the ICD process as it signalled the beginning of their harmonisation of views on key issues at the dialogue. Sixty-four participants were in attendance at this meeting in Nairobi. The declaration and plan of action were submitted to the Facilitator.

At the beginning of the dialogue in Sun City, Madame Ruth Perry, Former President of Liberia, made a statement to the Congolese women delegates to show her solidarity and UNIFEM's support of their participation. She stated, 'As mothers of the nation, you have a duty and the right to take a much stronger stand in pushing for the resumption of the talks. The women of Africa are behind you ...do not let us down.'

UNIFEM assisted the women delegates from all parties to the ICD to meet on a regular basis and discuss key issues and strategies with respect to the inclusion of gender-sensitive issues while at Sun City. The women were encouraged to forget about their political affiliations or regional divisions and to work together in an aim of creating peace in the DRC. After the initial breakdown in talks was over, the resumption of official talks in Sun City provided a unique opportunity for the women delegates. They organised themselves to participate at the plenary session by performing a play which highlighted the damage of war in the DRC and sang a song of peace. The women helped to set the tone that, above all, peace in the DRC was paramount to any ethnic, regional or political divisions that existed.

In addition, the women created a temporary office for the administration of their duties. They met regularly to caucus about decisions taken at the Commission level. Five Commissions were created to devise the resolutions that would guide the new dispensation of the DRC: the Political and Legal Commission, the Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commission, the Defence

and Security Commission, the Economic and Financial Commission and the Peace and Reconciliation Commission. The women delegates were divided into each of the Commissions as were the delegations of each of the major Parties to the dialogue.

Under the Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commission specific recommendations were made concerning women. It is interesting to note that Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, newly elected President of Liberia, headed this Commission and was the only woman to head a Commission at the ICD. It was agreed that rehabilitation centres need to be established for women and young girls traumatised by the war. The Commission also determined that the dignity of women needs to be restored in the DRC, so that they may fulfil their valuable roles in society. In addition, the Commission called for the creation of a National Watchdog body on Human Rights, which should enforce and monitor compliance by the authorities in the DRC with national, regional and international measures relating to human rights. It was also agreed that the identity of women should be reinforced by concentrating on the equality and complementarity with regard to their effective integration in all vital areas of national life through the application of the 30% quota for participation of women in all levels of decision-making at the national level. All laws or customs that may discriminate against women or contravene international legal instruments relating to women must be repealed or modified. It was also agreed that the marriageable age of girls should be increased to 18 years of age.

The Peace and Reconciliation Commission determined that there should be a National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. The Commission recognised that women should be appointed to the TRC to ensure women's concerns are properly taken into consideration. Resolution DIC/CPR/04<sup>4</sup> states: 'the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission is empowered to hear any person involved in the crimes and large-scale violation of human rights, including the rape of women and girls in times of war.' The Commission recognised that the attainment of peace and reconciliation in the DRC could not be achieved without respect for women and human rights.

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4 Inter-Congolese Dialogue, Peace and Reconciliation Commission

The Political and Legal Commission was hindered by many major disagreements, as it was to guide the very political institutions and legal systems of the new dispensation. The absence of women on the organisation of the Commission was notable, as not one resolution dealt with any issues related to gender. The specifics of the electoral system and the judiciary were not agreed upon at this meeting. The Defence and Security Commission encountered the same fate. The creation of the new national army could not even be decided upon in this Commission, and had to be resolved outside of the ICD process following the closure in Sun City. No mention was made of punishment for those who committed violations against women, nor any mention of those women who participated in combat.

Despite the high stakes involved, the Economic and Financial Commission dealt with many controversial issues. Resolution DIC/CEF/01<sup>5</sup> dealt with the costs of the wars on the DRC and recommended an examination of the costs in terms of financial, environmental and human costs. In addition, Resolution DIC/CEF/05 suggested emergency economic and social programmes that needed to be put in place. However, neither of these resolutions specifically addressed the needs of women or the effects of the economic situation on their rights.

Without a doubt, the most significant contribution made by the women delegates of the ICD came on the final evening in Sun City. The signing ceremony was set to take place on that evening. However, disagreements over technical issues were still being discussed at the eleventh hour by the delegations. It looked as though the delegates were going to back out of signing the agreements at midnight. However, the women delegates rose from their seats and formed a human chain to block the exits to the committee room. They demanded that the men would not leave until they signed the agreements before them at Sun City. The women succeeded and the agreements were signed!

Following on from Sun City, there were further negotiations that led to the Pretoria Agreement, the Final Act, in April 2003. These agreements clearly

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5 Inter-Congolese Dialogue, Economic and Financial Commission.

outline the composition of the transitional government structures, the defence and security structures and the duration of the transition. One important aspect was the creation of a Ministry dealing with Gender and Family Conditions. Specific aspects related to the new constitution, the judiciary and electoral system, however, were to be devised by the transitional authorities.

### **Human Rights Violations against Women in the DRC**

Women have suffered disproportionately from the conflict in the DRC. Many have been subjected to sexual violence and rape, others murdered, tortured and captured by armed groups. In addition, many women have had to cope with supporting families on their own due to the death of their husbands or their active duty in the conflict. Villages have been destroyed and targeted by those who pillage and plunder for their own profit. Most people do not have access to the basic necessities of life such as water, sanitation, medical supplies or food. The majority of the DRC's people live on around 20 US cents per day and eat less than two thirds of the calories needed to maintain health (Amnesty International 2004). Communication and transportation networks within the DRC are either non-existent or destroyed completely.

Mass rape is one of the biggest crimes committed within the DRC. It is estimated that tens of thousands of women and girls have been raped by government and rebel forces in the DRC. Reports of sexual violence and rape by the DRC army persist even after the peace agreement has been signed. Amnesty International has denounced widespread and unpunished rape in the DRC. Marie Madeleine Kalala, Minister for Human Rights, said, 'The Government is determined to deal with impunity of all kinds, adding that it would be attentive to sexual aggression, particularly rapes in the east, which were especially unacceptable in the absence of war' (IRIN 2004). Her announcement followed the arrest of 12 suspects of the regular army forces who had been detained for allegedly beating and tearing off clothes of women in public places in Kinshasa (IRIN 2004). These arrests are an isolated case and most rapists do not get brought to justice in the DRC.

However, despite such movements there remains harsh criticism over the lack of action by the government on rape and sexual violence in the DRC. Most members of the DRC transitional government have displayed indifference to sexual violence and mass rape.

We had thought that it was because their attention was focused on political questions in a situation that was so difficult that it was impossible to formulate an adequate response; but now we are in a period of pacification of the country, we would have thought it was time to talk about sexual violence against women (Amnesty International 2004).<sup>6</sup>

The government claims it has limited resources to cope with the issue of rape and that it is not an epidemic, but isolated incidences. Less than 0.1% of the government's health budget has been allocated to the care of the victims of sexual violence (Amnesty International 2004). Their priorities need to be revised. In a joint initiative by non-governmental organisations and the UN, agencies in the DRC developed a framework plan to halt sexual violence in the East of the DRC. The plan estimates that more than 30 billion USD will be needed to comprehensively address the issue (Amnesty International 2004).

Rape is stigmatised in the DRC and many women are rejected from their families and communities as a result. This carries not only social exclusion but also economic consequences for these women. The belief that exists is that somehow the women are responsible for what happened to them and are viewed as shameful. Slowly, women's organisations and rape survivors are discussing their experiences and challenging the discriminatory attitudes they face (Amnesty International 2004). Estelle, a girl of 12, was raped by a combatant in February 2004 and can no longer face attending school. She stated, 'I don't feel brave enough to go. The other girls in the neighbourhood make fun of me. They call me the little girl who sleeps with soldiers in the forest' (Amnesty International 2004).

Rape has also impacted the women economically. Agricultural workers and traders have been raped and find it impossible to continue their activities because the rapists stole their work tools and because they have been physically

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6 The quoted words are from a UNAIDS officer in Kinshasa.



and psychologically weakened by the injuries and trauma of the rape (Amnesty International 2004). A great number of homes have been destroyed by those soldiers that rape and pillage villages of the DRC. Many women are often left little choice but to resort to prostitution for survival. Only two hospitals in the DRC currently have the capacity to provide surgery or support to rape victims (Amnesty International 2004).

Many rape victims are forced to see their perpetrators on a regular basis in the streets of their villages. The Congolese authorities or the UN peacekeeping forces do not protect victims. This results in women being fearful of their safety should they report their rape. Instead they live in perpetual fear and endure the humiliation associated with rape.

UN peacekeepers in the DRC have also been accused of committing rape. 'Sexual exploitation and abuse appear to be ongoing, thereby highlighting the inadequacy of current measures to address the problem in peacekeeping operations,' stated Prince Zeid Raád Zeid Al-Hussein, Jordan's permanent representative to the UN (IRIN 2005b). Some of the worst abuses have taken place in Ituri, northwest DRC. The UN has been severely criticised for not investigating such situations adequately and for failing to punish the soldiers responsible.

A significant aspect to the conflict in the DRC has been the participation of women and girls in the armed forces. Some are forcibly recruited and used as 'wives'. Approximately 12 500 girls participated in armed conflict according to Save the Children, accounting for 40% of all children involved in armed groups in the DRC (IRIN 2005c). The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process has been criticised in the DRC for not addressing the needs of these girls. Girls have reported that community members have assumed that they have been sexually abused and are therefore carriers of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and that they thereby 'lost their value' to their communities (IRIN 2005c). Many of the girl soldiers were forced to become sexual slaves. An effective demobilisation and reintegration programme needs to address the concerns of these girls. This would include: mediation with the communities to explain that girls were coerced or forced to participate, access to school, networks that can provide emotional support, and medical assistance (Save the Children 2005).

## **Women and the New Political Dispensation**

Despite the efforts of women at the ICD process, women are still under-represented at decision-making levels in the DRC. Women are far from attaining 30% representation in decision-making bodies of the Government of the DRC. At the moment there are just 9 women among the 61 ministers and vice-ministers in the transitional government, and only 60 women sit in the two chambers of the 620-member parliament (IRIN 2005a). In addition, UNICEF reports that only 49% of Congolese girls attend school. This number will have to drastically increase in order to address the gender inequalities prevalent at the level of decision-making.

Sexual violence against women is prevalent within the DRC. 'Though it is the woman who is, in many cases, the sole breadwinner of the family in times of crisis aggravated by war, she is the victim of sexual violence,' said Marie-Ange Lukiana Mufwankol, senator and Vice-President of *Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction* (IRIN 2005a). It is documented that in reconciliation processes, the most under-reported abuses are those experienced by women. Truth and reconciliation commissions or post-war tribunals rarely seek out testimony from women and hence this needs to be addressed in the DRC.

Reparations for widespread physical and psychological trauma, economic loss and the destruction of property also need to be addressed in the DRC. Any reparations programme must recognise the human rights violations endured by women in the DRC.

## **Conclusion – the Future of the DRC**

Joseph Kabila was sworn in as the interim President of the transitional government of the DRC on April 8, 2003. It is hard to see how the transitional government can succeed when the current transitional President is still sponsoring fighting in various parts of the country. It is significant to note that Joseph Kabila did not see the necessity of his presence in Sun City on April 3, 2003 for the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement. Much like his father, Joseph Kabila has always wished to depict himself as superior to the rebel

leaders, his presence at the signing ceremony would have placed him on an even standing with his rebel counterparts.

The future of the DRC is uncertain and plagued by continued hostilities in the east of the country. Elections have not yet taken place due to the many obstacles associated with organising elections of such a large territory and a population that has been ravaged by war and corruption. The elections were to be held 24 months after the beginning of the transitional period, but the time limit may be extended by up to six months.

It is clear that the DRC government must address the discrimination against women in Congolese society. Rape is a crime that cannot be ignored in the DRC due to the serious consequences it imposes. More money and commitment must be given to programmes that address the needs of rape survivors as well as contribute to women's empowerment in the DRC. Education needs to take place for the victims, perpetrators and societies as a whole about rape and human rights.

The participation of women in the peace process did yield some positive results in terms of gender awareness. However, due to the low level of representation in the process and the difficulties of changing Congolese attitudes towards women, the road to equality is yet to be attained in the DRC. The international community must support and actively encourage the inclusion of women in the new dispensation of the DRC as well as the prosecution of those responsible for crimes against women. The lesson to be learned for future peace processes is that adequate provision must be made for the inclusion of women in decision-making mechanisms and this must be done at the earliest stages possible.

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