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Inclusive Security: Hope for Congo

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The War in the Democratic Republic of Congo officially ended in 2002, but the atrocities continue. Since 1998, nearly 4 million people have died, not only as a result of violence but also from disease and famine triggered by war. Every 24 hours means another 1,000 senseless deaths, largely ignored by the world.

Donor governments, including the United States, provide more than half the budget of the transitional government that took charge after the war. However, many government members are former warlords who will do anything to maintain power. They struggle with each other for Congo's rich natural resources and control thousands of militiamen roaming the countryside.

Political instability poses long-term consequences for citizens of Congo, particularly women, with militia gangs posing daily threats to their safety. Human Rights Watch reports that many Congolese women and girls have been raped by men on all sides of the conflict. Despite the 2002 peace agreement, sexual violence as a weapon of war persists. Amnesty International reports widespread genital mutilation with sticks, knives, and even gunfire. Gang rapes and forced incest are rampant.

Most survivors are vulnerable economically—often their tools, clothing, and homes were either stolen or destroyed during the attack. Physical trauma often means chronic infections, and emotional trauma leaves many too afraid to work the fields or travel to school. Their fear is well founded, for rapists attack with impunity. According to Human Rights Watch, only about half a dozen offenders had been tried as of March.

Even international assistance intended to help has sometimes added to women's vulnerability. This spring, the United Nations was castigated for allowing its peacekeeping troops there to use food to buy sex from hungry girls. Despite the fact that women bear the brunt of violence, competent Congolese women leaders have been shut out of governance by men who battle over natural resources and control of militias. Monique Kandy, a founding member of the Congolese Women's Caucus, which insisted on equal rights in the transitional constitution, says women are untapped resources for achieving "inclusive security."

In conflicts throughout Africa, women have helped stabilize regions plagued by warfare. Rwandan women help lead the *gacaca* court system prosecuting war criminals since the 1994 genocide. Additionally, the Rwandan local and national governments have been structured to ensure significant participation by women because they are perceived to be less corruptible than men and are not tarnished by the genocide. (Only 3 percent of those accused of participating in the Rwandan genocide are women.)

Many nations in Africa—including Botswana, Cameroon, Somalia, South Africa, and Sudan—employ affirmative measures, such as set-asides, to ensure women are represented in government. In Congo, several laws will be discussed in the coming months that could guarantee greater representation for women. Congolese voted overwhelmingly Dec. 18 to adopt a new constitution aimed at paving the way for national elections by the end of June 2006 and that instructs the new government to "guarantee the establishment of equal representation between women and men in state institutions." Nothing is said, however, about a time frame for this goal and many women's organizations say the language is too vague. An electoral law, which is currently being debated in parliament, is silent on women's representation: a clause guaranteeing 30 percent of spaces on the electoral lists was removed several weeks ago. It should be returned to the text.

Long-term stabilization requires coordinated, wide-ranging disarmament and integration efforts that involve *all* stakeholders, men and women. A critical first step is disempowering militias. "Security sector" reform was agreed to in the peace agreement in 2002, but it is moving at a snail's pace. The militias must be disarmed and demobilized far more quickly than they are now, then sent to school, employed, or integrated into the new Congolese army or police force. Demobilization and disarmament have been undertaken without sufficient involvement of women leaders and attention to women's needs. It is unlikely that the transitional government will undertake this process willingly, so donor governments must apply significant pressure to ensure the transitional peace process is taken more seriously.

In March, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared, "[We] send a clear message to the women of the world who are not yet free. As you stand for your rights and for your liberty, America stands with you." The United States should fulfill that commitment and stand with the women of Congo, for the sake of that country and the continent.

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