

IRISH COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Violence against women in war - We cannot remain silent

We are living through a genuine human tragedy that, as a silent genocide, is being carried out under everyone's eyes. The large-scale massacres of the civil population, the selective extermination of young people, the systematic violations carried out as a weapon of war, have again been unleashed with unthinkable cruelty and virulence against the local population that has never asked for more than a tranquil and dignified life in their lands. (The Catholic Bishops Conference, Republic of Congo, 14 Nov. 2008)

Echoing Pope Benedict XVI's comments (9 Nov. 2008) in which he condemned "the systematic atrocities ... the destruction, pillage and violence of every sort that have forced tens of thousands to abandon what little they had to survive", Congo's Catholic Bishops further observed that what is most deplorable is that the widespread massacres, targeted killings of the young and systematic rapes are taking place "under the impassive gaze of those who have received the mandate to maintain peace and protect the civil population" (14 Nov. 2008).

On the very same day as the bishops issued their statement (14 Nov. 2008), in Goma, situated on the borders of Rwanda and the Republic of Congo, people stood amazed at the sight of a demonstration from a large gathering of women from the surrounding refugee camps. Dressed in black, these women had come together to speak out publicly against the rape and sexual violence that they suffer daily in the course of this conflict. They demanded to be heard and they demanded protection.

A plea for assistance to the UN Security Council and international leaders was recently issued by forty-four non-governmental groups in the Eastern Congo. The groups highlight the increase in forced recruitment of boys and men by armed groups as well as the increase in sexual violence "as military forces and armed groups have reduced women to a battlefield."¹

The particular character of the current tragedy in the Congo – a country the size of Western Europe – that is unfolding before our eyes, underlines the horror of war.² In particular, it highlights the manner in which women are systematically targeted to humiliate and instil fear in the indigenous population.

As the all too recent conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Darfur remind us, the Congo is by no means the only zone of conflict in which violence against women has been

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/19_11_08_congo_letter.pdf

² As recently as 1 Dec. 08, at a special session of the UN Human Rights Council, a resolution was adopted that expressed serious concern at the deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation in eastern Congo and condemned the acts of violence committed, in particular sexual violence.

systematically employed as a weapon of war – a fact highlighted in the following extract from a submission by the Vatican to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, that was delivered as recently as four years ago.

Sadly, when armed conflict emerges at any level, women become the special target of combatants in ways that dehumanize their dignity. The time has come to condemn and sanction vigorously all sexual brutalities perpetuated against women. (New York, 4th March 2004)

Although violence against the civilian population is as old as the history of war itself, the systematic targeting of women as a weapon of war demands to be named and confronted for what it is – a crime against humanity. It is simply unacceptable to allow this pernicious form of violence to be subsumed under the larger heading of the mistreatment of innocent civilians. Women caught up in wars become prey to rape, sexual slavery and other forms of gender-specific violence. The deliberate and systematic nature of this violence must be emphasised, for it is part of a strategy in war. Violence against women is upheld by aggressive militarism and misogyny. It distorts masculinity, configures sex in terms of power and dominance, and is grounded in contempt for the bodies of the vulnerable. While women and children are the primary victims of such sexual violence, these crimes also have long-term demoralising and damaging effects on families and communities.

What must be acknowledged is that violence against women in war cannot be divorced from the larger issue of domestic violence and the violence associated with the trafficking of young women and children to work in the sex industry. In this context, one should not forget the high level of these crimes in Ireland today that is well documented³. Those who stand up for these voiceless women and children in Ireland deserve our wholehearted support.

The United Nations has denounced gender-specific violence in situations of armed conflict, as a war crime. The growth of this crime, which includes the abduction of young girls with all the attendant appalling levels of brutality, has been highlighted in a series of landmark UN Security Council resolutions over the past ten years.⁴ These resolutions underline the seriousness of this issue, one which affects not only the health and safety of women but also the social cohesiveness of the communities in which they live. One of the most disturbing aspects of the legacy of sexual violence in war is the quasi-normalisation of this dysfunctional behaviour in the post-conflict communities. Many of the causes of this societal malaise can undoubtedly be traced to the breakdown in the moral and social order that is symptomatic of communities touched by this form of violence.

United Nations Security Resolution 1325, which was unanimously adopted in the year 2000 explicitly “calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence” (art.10) and emphasizes “the responsibility

³ See *Violence in Irish Society: Towards an Ecology of Peace*, Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs (ICJSA), Veritas, Dublin, 2008, pp. 7 - 10

⁴ The most celebrated of these resolutions are UNSCR 1325 (2000) and UNSCR 1820 (2008)

of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for ... war crimes including those relating to sexual violence against women and girls” (art. 11).

Despite the unambiguous condemnation of gender-based violence that is contained in UNSCR 1325, the past eight years have witnessed an alarming increase in the incidences of this crime against humanity. According to UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, “in some societies the problem has reached unspeakable and pandemic proportions”. (UN News Centre, 25 Feb. 2008) What is equally disturbing is the almost total lack of justice and dignity that is afforded to those who have survived these appalling attacks. The issues of weak governance structures which fosters a culture of impunity relating to rape and sexual violence is an issue that cannot be side-stepped.

Faced with this increase in gender-based violence and the lack of effective sanctions that have been employed against the perpetrators of this crime, the Security Council (2008) unanimously adopted resolution 1820 which demanded an immediate and complete end to acts of sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones. In addition, it went some way to addressing the issue of impunity by announcing its intention “to consider imposing targeted and graduated measures against parties to situations of armed conflict who commit rape and other forms of violence against women and girls” (art. 5).

Echoing the language of 1325, it states that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.” (art. 4) What is new about resolution 1820 is that for the first time it sets out a clear action plan and timescale for the implementation of the resolution. In this, it was implicitly acknowledging the failure of previous Security Council resolutions to halt or even stem the growth of this pernicious form of violence. Specifically, article 15 requests the Secretary-General to submit, by June 2009, a report on implementation of the resolution that would include, among other things, (a) information on conflict situations in which sexual violence has been widely or systematically employed against civilians; (b) proposals aimed at minimizing the susceptibility of women and girls to such violence. In addition, article 9 requests the Secretary-General to develop effective guidelines and strategies to enhance the ability of relevant UN peacekeeping operations to protect civilians, including in particular women and girls, from all forms of sexual violence.

Accounts of the current rape and violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – targeting females from infancy to old age – are too horrific to be outlined in this short statement. Action in response to this sexual violence is a moral imperative that cannot be ignored by all who believe in the dignity of every human person, male and female. For all who believe that the human person is made in the image of God, *Imago Dei*, this moral imperative is deeply rooted in our faith commitment. As is stated in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “being in the image of God the human individual possess the dignity of a person, who is not just something but *someone*.”⁵

⁵ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Veritas, Dublin, 2005, par. 108

RECOMMENDATIONS

Inasmuch as you have done *it* to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done *it* to me (Mt. 25: 40)

Conscious that this year (2008) marks the sixtieth anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the sober recognition of the gross violation of human rights that violence against women constitutes, the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs (ICJSA) wishes to acknowledge the work of the countless number of individuals and organisations who dedicate themselves to countering such abuse and to the promotion of human rights.

In memory of the estimated 5.4 million who have lost their lives in a series of conflicts that have gripped the Congo since 1998 and respecting those Irish soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of peace in the Congo 48 years ago, the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs (ICJSA),

- unreservedly condemns the targeting of women as a weapon of war in the Congo and adds its voice to those who strive to end such crimes against humanity
- calls on the Irish Government to support those countries who call for the immediate deployment of EU troops to support the UN mission in the Congo
- calls on the Irish Government to use its influence at the United Nations and in the EU to maintain political pressure for renewed peace talks involving all groups based on commitments enshrined in the Nairobi Communiqué and the Goma Peace Agreement

Acknowledging the work of the Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violence (which comprise 13 Irish human rights, humanitarian and development agencies, as well as Irish Aid and the Irish Defence Forces) and noting the Consortium's report, *Stepping up Ireland's Response to Women, Peace and security: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, published 17 November 2008, the ICJSA

- calls on the Irish Government to take a lead role in the United Nations to ensure that measures outlined in UNSCR 1325 and UNSCR 1820 are implemented and on schedule
- calls on the Irish Government to prioritize the work of combating gender-based violence in war by continuing to ensure that a proportion of the development and humanitarian work of Irish Aid is directed to providing sustainable assistance to victims of sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations
- calls on the Irish Defence Forces and NGO's to continue to prioritize the development and implementation of appropriate training programs for all peacekeeping soldiers and aid workers to help them better prevent, recognize and respond to sexual violence and other forms of violence against civilians