

Comments on Africa

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When protectors turn predators: The surge in sexual violence reflects flaws in army reform in the DRC

By Margot Wallström

'A dead rat is worth more than the body of a woman.' These were the words of one distraught young woman who I met in Walikale in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) last year. As the world was once again outraged at recent reports of mass rapes in early June in South Kivu of the DRC, her words came back to me. These latest attacks marked the fourth incident in a series of mass rapes which have taken place in the last 12 months in the country, resulting in hundreds of victims comprising children, women and men. If mass rape used to not be part of life before the conflict in the Congo, why is it that it has become endemic now? And more importantly, how can it be rooted out?

A close examination of the DRC's national army appears to hold the key. The Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) is made up of roughly 50 different armed factions, stitched together as a consequence of various peace deals through the country's long history of war. While this has understandably been a price of peace, in this composite of groups with varying histories of human rights violations the rights of the people have often been trampled upon. Many former rebels with criminal pasts and with a still strong

allegiance to their former leaders have been placed in high command positions. Salaries meant for the soldiers are often diverted. There are no means of transport to move troops around, obliging soldiers to often walk for up to two weeks in order to carry out military operations, often with a rifle slung over their shoulder, a baby on their arm, kitchen utensils on their head, and with their wives walking a few feet behind. When deployed in remote areas, they are often provided with no food, no pay, and housing which at best resembles a refugee camp. In such circumstances, the army is unable to re-supply its troops, leaving them to fend for themselves, and generally to live off the population. In the worst-case scenario, the troops go on a rampage, destroying property, pillaging and committing acts of violence to protest their living conditions – in the footsteps of which rape often follows.

The FARDC has been described as an 'income generating army,' but this is only true for some of its members: Whereas many of the commanding officers keep enriching themselves by engaging in lucrative businesses such as mining and lumber or by requiring a 'commission' from soldiers under their command, the majority of the 150,000 to 200,000 FARDC rank-and-file soldiers live in abject poverty. This misplaced focus is to the detriment of the national army role to protect civilians and ultimately results in villagers creating proxy armies for their own protection. In turn, these proxy armies entertain the ambition of being integrated into the army for financial and political gains, continuing what has become a vicious cycle. If the FARDC is to be a credible force for peace and protection, it has to be completely recast.

Army reform is a delicate task in post-conflict situations, often requiring that various factions are brought

together as a single army in a process called integration. The pre-requisite for a successful reform of the army is the inclusion of safeguards such as vetting and training. This presents a huge challenge in a country such as the DRC, and the Congo needs outside support to have a chance of successfully achieving this.

The international community has for a long time supported security sector reform in the DRC, investing in the defence, judicial and police sectors. Since 2003, it is estimated that Angola, Belgium, China, France, the Netherlands, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and the World Bank annually spend an estimated figure of at least USD 40 million to help reform the Congolese national army.

Unfortunately in the DRC, essential aspects of army reform have been ignored. The main reason is the lack of a coordinated strategy or common doctrine for security sector reform in the country. Competing to lead the reform agenda, donors engage in incoherent and piecemeal bilateral projects. Instead, they should agree together with the DRC government on a set of benchmarks, specifying the action needed. Assistance will then be conditioned on the completion of these benchmarks. The common doctrine must address issues such as a cut-off date for the integration of new armed elements into the army, vetting mechanisms, a common approach to training, and finally the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of members of this bloated army who are not fit to serve. Those deemed ineligible should be moved into other sectors of labour-intensive work, notably infrastructure and road-building, or agriculture. The doctrine would have to be discussed at the inter-ministerial level and be endorsed by the national parliament, after a thorough and open dialogue with civil society representatives.

Without a coordinated approach, the national army can hardly be transformed into a positive force capable of protecting its citizens, including against sexual violence crimes. The continued association of offenders with the army tarnishes its image and perpetuates bad practices. The FARDC cannot be allowed to be a place where perpetrators seek refuge from prosecution for atrocities they committed. War criminals and other offenders must face the law and be excluded from the army. A vetting mechanism must be put in place to ensure that new integrants into the army do not have criminal precedents,

and the government must ramp up its capacity to address human rights violations committed by members of its armed forces both through discipline and prosecution.

The key decisions about the size of the army and how it functions rests with the government of the DRC. However, the government also has the responsibility to protect its citizens from acts of violence, including rape. In most incidents of sexual violence, members of the army were either directly involved in committing these crimes or negligent in preventing them. Sexual violence can constitute a war crime and a crime against humanity, not lesser in gravity compared to other offences. We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the victims of sexual violence in the DRC who continue to wait for a protection force that has been in the making for eight years and counting.

When an army turns on its own people, the world must be united in denouncing this and commit to finding remedies to correct the situation. Donors who continue to support security sector reform must hold the Congolese government accountable for ensuring respect for human rights. I challenge the DRC Government to genuinely engage in a completely new approach, and I challenge all major donors to accept nothing less. ■

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