Beat: News

SEXUAL VIOLENCE PLAGUES WOMEN DISPLACED BY DR CONGO'S M23 CONFLICT

TNH Report by By Sophie Neiman

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By Sophie Neiman |

Women escaping the M23 conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and seeking safety in mushrooming displacement camps are at risk from rape and sexual assault as an underfunded humanitarian response fails to keep them safe.

A lack of food aid is forcing displaced women – especially the heads of households – to venture outside of camps in search of supplies and work. This is exposing them to predatory men, according to women uprooted by the conflict.

"We don't receive assistance, so we are obliged to go to the field," said Furaha*, who lives in a camp in Masisi territory in North Kivu province. She said she was raped by a landowner after stealing bananas in March. "If they catch us there, they rape us," she said.

The Rwanda-backed M23 rebels have been battling the Congolese army since late 2021. Regional and international peacekeeping and mediation efforts have failed to resolve the conflict, though hostilities have abated since an April ceasefire.

Women and girls have been especially impacted by the fighting. There have been reports of dozens of rapes by M23 fighters and other armed groups, as well as assaults inside displacement sites and by unknown armed men in areas outside the camps.

Across North Kivu, where the M23 and dozens of other militias are active, there has been a 37% increase in gender-based violence in the first three months of 2023 compared to the same period last year, with several thousand cases reported.

Despite that increase, international protection programmes, which include trauma counselling and other services to survivors of rape, face a countrywide financial gap of some 70% for 2023, according to the UN's emergency aid coordination body, OCHA.
The lack of support has placed a heavy burden on local volunteers, known as protection officers, to look after survivors of sexual violence. These volunteers, who are displaced themselves, operate without funding from NGOs, yet are often on call at any moment.
"Sometimes, I can be just sleeping in the night, and they call me to say there is a case," said 55-year-old Clautilde Harerimana, who works as protection officer in Masisi's Kalinga displacement camp, which predates the M23 conflict.
Harerimana said most of the women she has assisted were raped while looking for food outside of their camp. She added that she had personally documented 19 cases of sexual assault in the first five months of 2023.

A 'catastrophic' number of cases

DRC has long topped lists of neglected humanitarian crises, but the situation has worsened significantly since the M23 – which is led by Congolese Tutsis and claims to be protecting the community against threats – re-emerged after a 10-year hiatus.

Up to 2.3 million people have been displaced in North Kivu since the conflict escalated around March 2022. Vast numbers are clustered around Goma – the provincial capital, and a hub for UN and NGO offices – and across the more remote Masisi territory.

Despite ballooning needs, the World Food Programme (WFP) currently has a funding gap of around $750 million. The agency has reached under a third of the 6.7 million acutely hungry people in the east so far this year.

When interviewed in April and May, displaced people told The New Humanitarian they had only received one distribution of food this year. Though local mutual aid groups are on hand in some camps, women said they have been leaving sites to ask for help in nearby farms or to gather firewood from forests, which they then sell for a small profit.

In recent months, reports of sexual assaults targeting these displaced women have reached a “catastrophic scale”, according to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which described the problem as a “medical and humanitarian emergency” in a May statement.

MSF said it cared for 674 victims in the last two weeks of April in the Goma area alone, amounting to roughly 48 patients a day in six of the camps where MSF works. The NGO told The New Humanitarian it also treated 123 rape cases in April, from its base in Masisi town.

“The figures are alarming, but we have to consider that many women do not look for healthcare, because they are afraid of being stigmatised by the community,” Alessandra Guidiceandrea, MSF’s head of mission, said from the capital, Kinshasa.

Hunt for food makes women vulnerable

Mwamini*, who is 27, told The New Humanitarian she escaped attacks by the M23 in a rural part of Masisi in January and arrived in Kalinga camp, which is perched on slopes surrounding Masisi town. By early May, she said she still had not received any food aid.

In April, Mwamini left the camp with four other women looking for food. It was early afternoon when about seven armed men appeared, wearing a mix of military uniforms and civilian clothes, Mwamini said. They beat the women with sticks. Two raped her.

Mwamini said she received treatment at an MSF-supported hospital in Masisi town and was also counselled by Harerimana, the camp-appointed protection officer.

A similar story was shared with The New Humanitarian by Kavira*, who fled her village in Masisi in January with her children. The family settled in Mahyutsa camp in the town of Sake, just to the west of Goma.

One day in May, Kavira left her camp to find food. She said she had only planned a short trip, but outside the camp she was attacked by two armed men who demanded sex and threatened her with weapons when she refused.

They covered her mouth, held her down, and raped her, she told The New Humanitarian. “They were tall, they wore uniforms, military uniforms”: This is all Kavira, who is 30, was able to recall.

Traumatised and in pain, she returned to her camp and sought out Picuna Mitutso, another volunteer protection officer who assists displaced women who have been sexually assaulted.

“She was in a bad, bad situation,” Mitutso said. “I stopped all that I was doing and immediately brought her to a nearby hospital.”

Later, Mitutso wrote Kavira’s name in a small notebook. Her handwritten accounts describe how two other women were raped after leaving the camp in March, and another three were raped in April, including a 16-year-old girl.

Continuing conflict

In an email to The New Humanitarian, WFP said it was attempting to “scale up and strengthen” its activities, but did not directly answer written questions about the links between the lack of food aid and sexual violence.

UNICEF says it is providing medical and psychosocial services in four camps in Goma, and has partnered with Heal Africa, a local hospital and foundation, to establish safe spaces for women and girls.

Still, such programmes do not tackle the lack of food and poor living conditions that displaced women blame for forcing them to venture into dangerous areas often multiple times over.

Attempts to resolve the M23 conflict are also falling short. M23 leaders say they will continue to fight until their grievances are heard, but the Congolese government appears unwilling to engage in a political dialogue.

Though an April ceasefire led the M23 to retreat from some of its holdings in Masisi and Rutshuru territories, the group has kept its administrative wing in vacated areas and continues to occupy the trading town of Bunagana, which is on the Ugandan border.

In the absence of reliable assistance for sexual violence survivors, Mitutso, the protection officer in Mahyutsa, said she would like support to open her own meeting space, so she can counsel women who have been assaulted safely and in private.

“I have been trained for this. It is my work.” Mitutso said, explaining that she had previously served as a sexual health adviser in her home village. “My community has chosen me.”

Mwamini, the survivor from Kalinga camp, said she worried about the possibility of future attacks. “I expect that this thing can just happen again,” she said, “I am afraid of going to the field to look for food.”

*Names have been changed to protect identities due to security reasons.

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