

UN Commission on the Status of Women 2008

IANSA Women's Network and UN Office for Disarmament Affairs

Joint event: 'The impact of guns on women's lives'

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The Impact of Guns on the Lives of Congolese Women

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Esteemed Guests, Mr Chair, and members of the panel

It is an honour for me to be invited to a panel with the U.N. Office of Disarmament Affairs.

Please forgive my modest English. I am glad to be able to share my message with you today.

On behalf of the Network of Congolese woman, I thank the Women's Network of IANSA for the chance to bring to this important meeting the voices of women from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

I have been the responsibility from these Congolese women to inform you about the situation in the east of DRC, and to describe the terrible drama that is consuming the whole country.

We have many reports from the UN and other organisations. It is clear that the human cost of the conflict and instability in the DRC has been cataclysmic.

The number of people who have died is estimated at more than 4 million.

Small arms have been a big factor in the brutality of the ten years of conflict that has destroyed the east of the DRC and brought so much insecurity to the west of the country.

The Security Council has imposed an embargo of arms to the DRC, but it is documented that the majority of weapons have come from outside.

The weapons include AK-47 rifles, revolvers, and grenade launchers.

They come across the borders from our neighbouring countries – Angola, Chad, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, South Africa – but they originate in America, Europe and the old Soviet Union.

This traffic happens because the borders are very 'porous'. And because of corruption in the region.

It has been reported that some UN civilians have been trafficking gold and weapons – and even some peacekeepers, who should be protecting the people and ensuring peace.

The Chief of UN Peacekeeping has been criticised because the investigation report is very 'narrow', because of the absence of transparency, the slow progress of the investigation, and a general absence of control.

Somebody is making profit from this traffic in arms. In fact it is my opinion that a rationale for conflict, or a conflict industry has been created – the people who sell the weapons want to keep the conflict going.

The consequence for the Congolese population has been insecurity and death.

The bodies of Congolese women have been used as a battle ground. Rape is used as a weapon to intimidate, terrorize and eliminate whole communities.

Where is the conscience of the arms trade? Why sell so many weapons to a country where the poverty is beyond comprehension?

The UN Security Council made an important resolution in 2005. The resolution recognises the connection between illicit exploitation and trade in natural resources and the arms traffic in the DRC.

The Security Council resolution has changed nothing. Four million deaths deserve more than silence and indifference.

This is a crime against Humanity!

How can we remain silent when arms have generated a permanent situation of insecurity for victims?

I belong to an NGO called SOFEBU, or Solidarity of the Women of Burhale, a village in the east of Congo. This is an association of more than 4000 women. Many members have been terribly affected and have been subjected to rape and other violence.

In this situation it is impossible to work for our living, which puts at risk the survival of these women and their families.

I have seen too many women and girls in sexual slavery, who were kidnapped at gun-point, raped and suffered genital mutilation. They become human garbage – they have nothing, are good for nothing, they represent nothing, they are nothing.

Many have ‘Fistula Obstetrica’. The vagina is completely destroyed because of gang rape by soldiers. The short term consequence: these women are incontinent. In the long term, if they are pregnant, it is probable that the mother will die in giving birth.

Even children of three years and grandmothers of 75 are among the victims.

Women have been put into a state of non-existence. On top of the physical damage from rape, these crimes are not recognised or punished. Women lose their self-esteem.

They are silent. They suffer shame and rejection by the husband or community. They have no possibility of a social life. Their poverty is made worse. They cannot seek any justice, even if they know who the guilty person is.

The conflict has made a situation of anarchy.

The International Community must recognize that the conflict in the east is NOT ethnic and that rape is NOT part of the culture in the DRC. Our problem is a culture of impunity.

The DRC government has no control over the east of the country where the mineral Coltan is mined. This area is controlled by illegal armed groups with financial support from outside Congo.

The UN and international donors must address the causes and long-term consequences of the arms trade. This is critical for the security and stability of the Great Lakes region of Africa. If we have conflicts because of the exploitation of mineral resources, there will always be the demand and illegal traffic of small arms.

And the UN embargo on the DRC cannot operate if our neighbours keep supporting the conflict in DRC.

We have five recommendations:

- 1) Set up a system of observation and control for the weapons traffic in the DRC. Bring to justice and punish the traffickers.
- 2) Identify and disarm all armed groups, and punish all criminals and rebel groups
- 3) Provide adequate assistance to mobilise and integrate women in the peace process and in the DDR program.
- 4) Pay special attention to prevent the explosion of the bomb which is child-soldiers – and also children born from rape victims.
- 5) Build solidarity and synergies of action between organisations of the North and South, with a long term global vision.

Despite the difficult situation of Congolese women, we continue to work for peace and disarmament. Our work needs to be recognised, our voice needs to be respected, and taken into consideration at the International level.

I thank you for your attention.