

## Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Urgent Action Needed to Respond to Recent Fighting and Displacement

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After years of fragile and uncertain stability, fighting and displacement have erupted again in the eastern province of North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Over 100,000 people have fled their homes after clashes between the Congolese army and a rebel faction composed of ex-CNDP army deserters (led by war criminal Bosco Ntaganda) broke out in April. Pillaging, sexual violence and other human rights violations are of critical concern. A number of assessments and monitoring reports reveal incidents of sexual violence as well as the use of sex as a survival strategy to obtain food.

Much of the recent upheaval has occurred in areas of North Kivu, such as Masisi and Walikale, where basic services are lacking and emergency programs to address sexual violence are critically needed. Donors, UN agencies, and NGOs must ensure that prevention and response efforts are swiftly implemented, and that efforts are coordinated effectively through the Protection Cluster as well as through the National Strategy on Sexual and Gender Based Violence, specifically the Multi-Sectoral Assistance pillar led by UNICEF, and the Protection and Prevention pillar, led by UNHCR.

### KEY ISSUES

- The current security situation in North Kivu has drastically reduced the areas to which humanitarians can safely move to provide essential services. The general lack of infrastructure, roads and communication networks are a particular challenge to accessing newly displaced populations in more remote areas of the province.
- The State and other actors (including MONUSCO) have limited capacities to ensure protection of civilians in all affected areas.
- The reach of quality medical and psychosocial support for survivors of gender-based violence is limited and often unavailable in conflict-affected parts of North Kivu.
- Government institutions have limited capacities to address gender-based violence prevention and response effectively and holistically.
- As new rounds of fighting occur, all parties to the conflict are perpetrating human rights violations, including sexual violence. Sexual violence is widespread and continues to be used as a weapon to demoralize and control communities.
- There continue to be significant barriers to reporting sexual violence, including fear of rejection by a spouse and/or family members and communities.
- Women and girls are being assaulted while gathering food, water and wood in order to provide for their families. Though many men are aware of the risks to women and girls, they fear being recruited or kidnapped as well and therefore women and girls are left to go to the fields on their own.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. UN agencies should prioritize gender-based violence in emergency response efforts and ensure its inclusion in inter-agency assessments and funding appeals.

2. Donors should ensure sufficient funding for emergency and longer term gender-based violence prevention and response interventions. Emphasis should be placed both on rapid response to outbreaks of violence as well as building the capacity of organizations across North Kivu in gender-based violence emergency programming so that assistance is available immediately when conflict occurs, even in more remote areas.



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3. Donors must support an expansion of gender-based violence prevention and response interventions to have greater coverage across eastern DRC. The Protection Cluster as well as the Multi-Sectoral Assistance pillar (led by UNICEF) and the Protection and Prevention pillar (led by UNHCR) of the National Strategy, must be supported to strengthen coordination of prevention and response programs with the aim of improving geographic coverage, quality of essential services and emergency response.

4. UN agencies and NGOs must implement gender-based violence initiatives that tackle the immediate as well as the root causes of sexual violence. Sustained efforts must be made to address practices and attitudes towards gender-based violence to reduce stigmatization and rejection of survivors as well as to raise the status of women and girls and promote gender equality across the DRC as a long-term strategy for preventing sexual violence.

5. The government of DRC must enforce the Zero Tolerance Policy. In addition, it is critical for the government to recognize gender-based violence as a public health and development problem and ensure that inter-ministerial responses are put in place with sufficient budgetary allocations.

6. Support from both the DRC Government and the UN Stabilization Mission (MONUSCO) is needed to support the State to implement security sector reform (including regular and timely pay and also training for soldiers and police), ensure humanitarian access into areas of fighting and displacement, and increase the protection of civilians through foot and vehicle patrols.