

Victims as pariahs: Rape attacks in the Congo

by [Kathleen Kern](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

Since 1996, nearly 4 million people have died in the Congo as a result of an international war—more than in any other country since World War II. Various militias, and armies from Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda, have perpetrated gruesome atrocities on Congolese people and villages in an effort to claim the Congo's land and mineral resources.

One of their weapons is systematic rape. Militia members rape women in front of their husbands and children. Afterward, the husbands or the husbands' families drive the "contaminated" women and their children from the village. Even when the women are not forced to leave, the husbands may demand that children born from the rapes be killed; caring for these children is considered acquiescing to the assault. The children of rape who survive become pariahs. Many end up as street children in the cities—a phenomenon unknown before 1996, according to several Congolese who spoke to our delegation from Christian Peacemaker Teams.

Rape as military weapon has also led to an increase in sexual assaults among civilians. "Something in our society is unhinging," says Jeanne Muliri-Kabekaty, head of the Protestant Women's Society of North Kivu, which documents stories of rape and sexual assault that were unheard of before the war. Muliri-Kabekaty tells of girls, some as young as 18 months, being raped by their neighbors, brothers and teachers.

One young woman delivered a stillborn baby the day after her three-year-old child died. She was too weak to move when five militia members entered her house, and the men raped her while the cadaver of the stillborn child lay in the room. She needed five operations and cannot have any more children. Her husband fled when the militia men arrived and has married someone else.

The Congolese government has barely functioned in the east for the past ten years, and it has always neglected the needs of women and children. Religious leaders

such as Muliri-Kabekatyö try to fill the void, and there is strong ecumenical cooperation between denominations. A Pentecostal pastor in Goma took our delegation to visit a woman with whom he works: a devout Catholic who heads UWAKI, an organization that provides counseling, medical care and housing for raped and rejected women. When I noted that in the U.S. it would be unusual for Pentecostals and Catholics to collaborate, they looked puzzled. “We work together because our activities are human activities,” said the pastor.

Pastors try to counsel the husbands who spurn their violated wives. “Jesus Christ is love; he died for us,” some pastors say, holding up the crucifixion as a model of sacrificial love. “Men who have heard the word of God cannot do these things,” or “The church permits only one wife,” or “When you made a commitment, it was for better or worse, sickness or health.” But the pastors acknowledge that their arguments persuade fewer than half the husbands they counsel to reconcile with their wives.

Those who assist raped and displaced women are overwhelmed by the staggering numbers of victims. The UN and human rights groups estimate that hundreds of thousands of women have been raped since 1998. Christian leaders feel that their work with these women is happening in a vacuum, that no one outside of Africa cares about what is happening to the women.

A Lutheran pastor—who, along with four staff members, is caring for 250 rape survivors—asked us to tell North American Christians to pray for them. One old woman among the survivors then told us, “We need help, because our pastor is very tired.”