

## The Congo Crisis: Women and War

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MICHAL MACHNOWSKI

**Featured Speaker: Pax Christi International Peace Prize Laureate Justin Masika Bihamba**

September 2010

Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs

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**"The most dangerous woman in the world"**

Justine Masika Bihamba, founder of Synergy of Women for Victims of Sexual Violence, a coalition based in the Democratic Republic of Congo that consists of 35 women's organizations that help victims of sexual violence, and a Pax Christi International Peace Prize Laureate, advocated on behalf of women affected by violence and rapes as a weapon of war in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Washington, DC, on September 24th. Ms. Bihamba became the Pax Christi International Peace Prize Laureate by being a witness to and standing against violence; promoting the option of nonviolence as means of resolving conflict in homes, communities, nations and between nations; providing peace education materials and programs; ensuring the message of peace is heard by decision makers and those working in their communities; providing networks, practical skills, resources and support, and working with other individuals and organizations to bring an end to violence against women.

Pax Christi International selected Ms. Bihamba because she represented the ideals of the Pax Christi movement and because she has worked in an exemplary manner for the construction of a world more committed to peace and reconciliation.

In eastern Congo, the prevalence and intensity of rape and other sexual violence is described as the worst in the world. Women have been raped during warfare and kept as slaves for soldiers. When the women were released, most killed themselves or checked into a hospital where they would die. Justine Masika Bihamba and her family have been attacked because of her work as coor-

dinator of a women's human rights organization. In September, 2007 soldiers forced their way into Ms. Bihamba's home while she was out, and tied up her six children at gunpoint. One of the soldiers assaulted her eldest daughter, then sexually assaulted and attempted to rape another daughter. Although Justine and her children were able to identify the soldiers, they have not been arrested or brought to trial.

Violence against women seems to be perceived by large sectors of society to be normal. A phenomenon of 'pendulum displacement' has developed, where people hasten at night to safety. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence, Yakin Ertürk, who toured eastern Congo in July 2007, violence against women in North and South Kivu included "unimaginable brutality. Armed groups attack local communities, loot, rape, kidnap women and children and make them work as child soldiers and sex slaves.

During her September visit to Washington, DC, Ms. Bihamba spoke to members of the National Press Club, and met with the Obama Administration officials and Members of Congress about the role of the role of the new U.S. Special Envoy for the Great Lakes (eastern Congo), and the need for a U.S. response that addresses the root causes of sexual violence in conflict. Ms. Bihamba also visited the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and described her efforts towards reducing violence against women in the DRC.

Ms. Bihamba spoke of the war and also of the peace efforts her own organization and network has been pursuing. Her insights about the war were unique and startling.

She cited the monetary interests of the 8 neighboring countries, which have designs on mineral wealth and wish to reconfigure the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo and divide up the two eastern provinces (Kivu and North Kivu). The Congo is the world's largest producer of cobalt ore, and a major producer of copper and industrial diamonds and smuggling of the conflict minerals, has helped fuel the war in the Eastern Congo. She decried that unscrupulous multinational corporations fund armed groups to keep the region in chaos.

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She also objected to the lack of will for the government in the Congo to establish calm, peace and civil law. Particularly, she was very disappointed in President Kabila who she says has not done enough to stop the violence. Specifically, she faults President Kabila and his government for not implementing UN Resolution 1325.

UN Resolution 1325 calls on governments to put an end to impunity and prosecute perpetrators of sexual and other violence on women and girls; increased participation of women in peace process; the protection and respect of women and girls post-conflict; and a framework for engendering peace negotiations, peacekeeping, planning of refugee camps and reconstruction. The Security Council proposed penalties for perpetrators in the form of prosecution and targeted sanctions as well as strengthening the mandates of peacekeeping operations to prevent sexual gender based violence and to remind parties in conflict of their responsibility to protect women. But most women do not know of UN Resolution 1325, what rights and protections it gives them, and what they can do to get the government to enforce the regulations of 1325.

Ms. Bihamba also mentioned that it is not enough to ask women to participate in elections-meaning that all they do is vote. It is also necessary for women to be informed and educated on what it takes to participate directly in elections, so as to be an active actor in an election. Women must also be involved in seeking solutions to peace. Ms. Bihamba said that women look at societal solutions to the problem of violence against women and not at individual solution, as men would.

The role of the media has also been non-existent. The official government media uses propaganda while independent media receive death threats many journalists are kidnapped killed, in particular, women journalists.

Lack of aid is another issue of concern. USAID money is hard to access by small and local groups as compared to large NGOs. The reasons are many. Some smaller groups and organizations, especially if they are based in the Congo, may not know how the application process works, are unfamiliar with international practices, may not be able to understand English (as the vast amount of paper work is in English) and cannot match the lobbying efforts of big NGO groups. Ms. Bihamba sees these large NGOs as harmful because they use the money to pay their operating costs in the country rather than sending that money straight to the needy locations and individuals.

Finally she named the armed forces outrageous lack of discipline and professional military standards. Too often marauding

armed bandits are simply co-opted into the national army. Civilian populations, especially young women, suffer from wild looting, violent rape, and rampant destruction. Even good-willed and patriotic Congolese soldiers, fearing no reprisal from a weak government, also fall into the same patterns of violence as their comrades. High ranking members of the army and government officials participate in the rapes, the judiciary is non-existent, and families of soldiers almost always travel with the army (as there is a lack of barracks and bases to house the soldiers family), making women a direct target of war.

She also mentioned the corruption within the Congolese army. Specifically, she mentioned that reforms need to be enacted with regards to payments made to soldiers. Currently, the government pays the top officers, who are then entrusted to pay their soldiers. Instead, the banks need to pay each soldier individually and directly. The dual roles of generals also need to be addressed. With the consolidation of the various rebel groups into the main Congolese army, the generals who are in charge of such consolidated groups have competing loyalties. Generals have dual role interests and promote personal interests over the national interests of the army and government, usually leaving local populations with no protection or rule of law.

The response of the international community has been incommensurate with the scale of the disaster resulting from the war in the Congo. Its support for political and diplomatic efforts to end the war has been relatively consistent, but it has taken no effective steps to abide by repeated pledges to demand accountability for the war crimes and crimes against humanity that were routinely committed in Congo. United Nations Security Council and the U.N. Secretary-General have frequently denounced human rights abuses and the humanitarian disaster that the war unleashed on the local population. But they had shown little will to tackle the responsibility of occupying powers for the atrocities taking place in areas under their control, areas where the worst violence in the country took place. Hence Rwanda, like Uganda, has escaped any significant sanction for its role. Ms. Bihamba specifically noted that those who have in the past perpetrated rapes and other inhumane crimes, such as Rwandan General Laurent Nkunda, have to be brought to trial, and that they cannot escape from justice by hiding in a neighboring country. Those neighboring countries have a responsibility to bring the accused to trail.

In addition to speaking out, Ms. Bihamba has helped women create platforms for expressing themselves, meeting and holding rallies and demonstrations, visiting local and national authorities to protest their grievances, providing informational material on voting and educating women on the issues

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and challenges of the day, and staging sit-ins and protests. In giving her address, Ms. Bihamba boldly and directly challenged the government of Congo to better government accountability, protection of civilians, and a new professional formation for the army. She also called on the international community to put pressure on the governments of Congo, Uganda, and Rwanda, as well as to continue to bring international awareness to the plight of women in the Congo.