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16 Days of Activism: Countering sexual and gender-based violence across the Congo

News Stories, 10 December 2013

KINSHASA, Democratic Republic of the Congo, December 10 (UNHCR) – With sexual and gender-based violence an acute problem in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNHCR offices across the country have been spreading awareness about the scourge in a series of events marking the annual 16 Days of Activism against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

Thousands have been taking part in the campaign, including many forcibly displaced people. Many events have focused on this year's theme, "Safety in School." Here in the capital Kinshasa, for instance, UNHCR and its partner ERUKIN, which supports urban refugees, have been organizing awareness presentations on SGBV as well as debates between boys and girls at Bolinga School in Kinshasa.

The students became quite animated, taking part in role play situations and absorbing information about a problem that threatens many at-risk groups, including forcibly displaced women, girls, men and boys in the east and north-east of the country. "What happens if a girl is abused at home but her family does not allow her to talk," asked one female student, touching on a sensitive subject – the stigma attached to rape and other forms of SGBV, which causes many survivors to continue to suffer in silence and without access to help.

Similar questions have been asked at other events organized by UNHCR and its partners during the 16 Days of Activism in the provinces of Equateur, Katanga, Kinshasa, North Kivu, South Kivu and Orientale. These have also included the participation of more than 10,000 people, including students, parents, teachers, community leaders, traditional chiefs, police officers, the military and government officials.

Many have become inured to SGBV over the years of conflict, violence and lawlessness, but UNHCR believes it is an issue that needs to be addressed by everyone because of the suffering it causes, the impunity of assailants, and the scale of the problem. During the first nine months of the year, 4,012 cases of sexual and gender-based violence were recorded through UNHCR's protection monitoring system. The real figure is likely to be much higher; SGBV goes largely under-reported due to stigma, fear of retribution and other obstacles.

Most of the cases of SGBV reported are linked to conflict. A total 1,478 of the cases were perpetrated by civilians. Sexual violence at home or by civilians remains a taboo subject and is largely unreported. Most of the time, families settle the cases between themselves, which often leads to an unjust or even hurtful outcome for survivors.

In Equateur, an area of return from the Republic of Congo for refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, only 73 cases of sexual and gender-based violence were reported in September this year and 94 in October, but this does not mean that SGBV is a small problem there.

"The number of cases reported remains very low. People do not denounce cases of sexual violence. We are trying to increase awareness through sensitization activities," explained Guening Massama Kiliouto, head of UNHCR's field office in Buburu, a small town in Equateur province.

During a sensitization session last week in Buburu with children, teachers and local authorities, organized jointly by UNHCR and its partners AIDES (Action et Intervention pour le Développement et l'Encadrement Social) and IEDA Relief (International Emergency and Development Aid), participants recognized that sexual violence is a widespread problem but that it remains hidden. "It's a reality on the ground, even if it is not officially recognized," said IEDA protection official, Elvis Welende.

"In the case of a rape, they [the family of the victim] invite the family of the rapist to say that they don't want to go to the police or to the court. In this case, the family of the man accepts to pay," said Julie,* a 45 year-old widow whose 15-year-old daughter was raped by an older man. She said she had heard of one case where US\$600 was paid to the victim's family.

Early marriage is another way to settle rape cases discretely between two families. "The parents ask the perpetrator to pay for the years that the girl will miss at school. One grade is 20,000 Francs CFA [US\$40] and a bottle of local pastis or a crate of beer," Julie added.

During the campaign in Buburu, IEDA stressed the need to denounce rape and sexual violence. "It is for us, the parents or the victims, to report the cases to make sure that the perpetrator is brought to justice. I invite you to be very careful and denounce the cases of rape, to discourage all those who are tempted to commit such crimes," Welende told the audience of students, teachers, parents and local officials.

Through protection monitoring, IEDA tries to identify and make a record of sexual violence cases or those involving other forms of SGBV, to ensure that they can be linked with the support services they need, including access to justice. "...[One] problem we face is that protection monitors who [identify] cases have access to less than a quarter of the territory due to poor road conditions and logistical challenges", explained UNHCR's Kiliouto.

At the end of each awareness session in Buburu and surrounding villages on the banks of the Oubangui River, the participants asked for more sensitization activities on the prevention of sexual violence, as well as support to develop curricula on the subject in schools.

In this remote part of the country, access to justice is another challenge. The closest court is in Mdandaka, which is more than 200 kilometres away and accessible only by the river. Both the authorities and the population highlight the need for mobile courts to fight impunity.

The 16 Days of Activism is an international campaign originating from the first Women's Global Leadership Institute in 1991. The 16 Days of Activism ends today on International Human Rights Day. It brings together UNHCR, partners, people of concern and host communities worldwide in a united call to end sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms.

**Names changed for protection reasons*

By Céline Schmitt in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo