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KANIOLA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO – In Kaniola, they have coined a new term: reviolé.

Re-raped.

At the Catholic parish office, on the cramped and crowded ledger pages where they list rape victims, at least half the names appear more than once: women who have been victims of sexual enslavement or public gang rape by rebel groups or the Congolese army; women, 30 in an average month, who have come to the parish to get help reaching a hospital to repair their injuries; women who have been healed, come home and a year or two or three later, been gang-raped again, during another small surge of the conflict.

The youngest victim on the list is 6. The oldest is 74.

Enlarge Image

A woman has her hair braided last year in a centre for rape victims in the Congo. (Lionel Healing/AFP/Getty Images)

The epidemic of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, without doubt the most horrific and persistent abuse of women anywhere in the world, has flared in a vicious new outbreak in recent weeks with renewed fighting in the country's troubled eastern region.

Mass rape began here with the civil war in 1996. That conflict quickly sucked in all of Congo's neighbours, and killed an estimated five million people. "And it brought systematic, planned, ordered, collective public rape – rape used as a weapon of war – it is a war within a war," said Mathilde Muhindo, who heads Centre Olame, one of Congo's oldest women's organizations, founded nearly 50 years ago. Rape was used as a tactic by every single armed force here – each with their signature style: some raped women with guns and shot them off as a finale, some raped girls, some forced sons to rape mothers.

Congo moved into a fragile peace in 2003, and the rate of rape declined. Much of the country came under the nominal control of the central government – but not the volatile, mineral-rich east, home to no fewer than 23 armed groups. Here the conflict simmered for years, and flared once again into full-on fighting in late August because, it seems, a glacial peace process threatened to cut off warlords and neighbouring-country governments from their access to the illegal mineral trade.

With the fighting came a resurgence of rape.

Admissions at the two hospitals in the east that can repair the injuries of rape victims have spiked in the past six weeks. Many more victims are assumed to be, as in previous years, trapped deep in the bush, cut off from help by the lack of roads, lack of transport, lack of any money or by the fighting.

That fills Congo's women with panicked despair.

"When will it end?" Ms. Muhindo asked. "This is shameful, not just for Congo, but for all humanity."

Since The Globe and Mail published one of the first in-depth examinations of Congo's epidemic of rape four years ago, the gravity of the situation has become better known internationally, with more media coverage, more investigations by human-rights organizations and even charities formed abroad - such as Social Aid For the Elimination of Rape (SAFER) at the University of Toronto - to support Congolese rape survivors.

Where, four years ago, no one in eastern Congo wanted to talk about rape, today there are local organizations ostensibly dedicated to caring for victims in nearly every town, and much more donor funding available for the issue; la lutte contre la violence sexuelle has, in fact, become something of a cottage industry here.

And yet for Congolese women, almost nothing has changed. There is a better system in place to refer them for medical care, as the Kaniola parish does. And that is it.

Places such as this town, which is near the edge of a vast national park, are all but under the control of a Rwandan rebel group made up mostly of remnants of the interahamwe, the Hutu militia that committed Rwanda's genocide in 1994 then fled into Congo. They routinely descend on Kaniola to pillage goods and abduct women whom they force-march up to their forest base camp and sexually enslave, submitting them to brutal, daily rape, sometimes branding their buttocks for amusement.

"On a Friday in September, 2007, I heard a knocking on the door in the night and a voice told us to open and when we did, they caught me," said Esperance, who was a 19-year-old student at teacher's college when she was abducted. She did not give her surname. "One tied me to him with a length of cloth so I could not run. They took all our cows, and they took me." She was held by the militia for eight months, until she was heavily pregnant and they were paying her less attention and she found a chance to slip away and run for home.

Esperance, who hunches over her knees and rocks back and forth when she's not speaking, remembers one other detail about the night she was taken: the interahamwe were accompanied by soldiers she recognized, members of a Congolese army brigade stationed nearby. After the combined forces looted her whole village, they moved up the road and divided the spoils, before the soldiers went back to their posts and the rebels dragged her up into the forest.

That was not an aberration: Congolese soldiers are frequently implicated in rapes, and the Congolese government, both feeble and uninterested, has done nothing to address the problem.

"The issue is not taken seriously by those in power - the state doesn't get involved," said Vénantie Bisimua, who founded the Network of Women for the Defence of Rights and Peace in eastern Congo. "The rape here has never been discussed in parliament or by cabinet. Our penal code still doesn't include being raped with a gun or an object, or being shot in the vagina. We have a weak administration in a dysfunctional situation and they think it's a women's problem; they have other priorities."

Kaniola sits just a half-hour's drive down the road from a large base of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Congo - known by its French acronym MONUC - the largest in the world with 17,000 peacekeepers. But none of them were around the night Esperance was taken.

"We have a MONUC base but we can't turn to them. When we have a problem they say, 'We are here for observation only,'" said Marie-Jeanne Rwankuba, who maintains the Kaniola parish rape-victim ledger. In fact, the UN mission in Congo has a Chapter 7

mandate from the Security Council that authorizes it to use any means necessary to protect civilians. It almost never does.

International groups have tried to bolster the judicial system in eastern Congo, in the hope of prosecuting rapists, and organizations such as Ms. Bisimua's have tried to help women file cases. "But it's difficult to do many dossiers because we can't identify the perpetrators, and when we do take forward a case, the victims find it does little for them - it's a long process, it takes place far from their homes and there's no guarantee of their security," she said. "If convicted, the perpetrator may go to prison for a short term, but the prison is essentially open and he can walk out. No one is punished."

But ending rape here depends on more than pushing the state to protect or prosecute. "Unless the war ends and unless the militias stop fighting, we will be sewing up vaginas for eternity - and unless the foreign governments who are benefiting from the resources in the Congo face pressure to cease the fighting and withdraw the troops, we will be here forever," said Eve Ensler, the New York playwright best known as the creator of *The Vagina Monologues*, who has become an impassioned advocate for Congo's women over the past two years.

"Everyone says the war in Congo is complicated. It is not complicated - it's an economic war that has been fought on the bodies of women - it is the systematic destruction of the female population of the Congo - and it's conscious and it's intentional," she said in a telephone interview from London, where she was lobbying on the issue last week.

Ms. Ensler's organization, V-Day, in partnership with Unicef, has organized truth-telling sessions in 90 villages, where women stand up to tell what happened to them, forcing men, particularly officials, to acknowledge the rapes. They have staged street demonstrations, and are working on a list of demands for women's safety and a possible civil-disobedience campaign. Congo's government must do more, she said, but international action is also crucial, including the arrest of "war criminals orchestrating this war from abroad."

There is no sign, to date, of any such moves. Rebel troops are now on the move across the eastern part of the country, and as each group takes new territory, there is more rape. At least 100,000 people have been displaced by the renewed fighting, yet for many women, the place they seek shelter is no safer than the one they left.

Esperance is staying put in Kaniola, for now; she lives with her infant daughter, born weeks after she escaped the rebels, and her mother. Her father was killed by rebels years before, and after the night last year that her home was looted, the two women and baby girl have no money to go anywhere else.

"I'm really afraid because the interahamwe are still in the bush," she said. "And if they come back, they may take me again."