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# Those Who have been Raped raise your hand

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**For the UN, 'Congo is the rape capital of the world'. Attracted by the huge budgets at stake, dozens of humanitarian organisations have launched themselves into the 'market'. In Bukavu, which is in the east of the country, rape has become big business.**

**On the clap-o-metre, Denis Mukwege would beat Angelina Jolie hands down. The Congolese doctor parts the crowd. People touch him, applaud him, congratulate him with a handshake or – forgetting protocol – a hug. He takes to the stage and immediately the audience falls quiet. The room knows he is the one to impart the shocking truths drawn from direct experience on the ground. A future Nobel Peace Prize winner. At his side, Brad Pitt's wife, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' Special Envoy, graces him with her kindness.**

**In London, during the month of June 2014, The Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict assembled 123 countries, 80 ministers, 900 experts and hundreds of NGOs, doctors, lawyers and religious representatives. Each delegation brought along its 'raped women'. Women who were sometimes illiterate, had sometimes never even left their own village or country, were asked to take a plane and come and tell the world about the aggression meted out to them, its intimate details. "Rape is fashionable", whispers an American lawyer to me.**

**At the lectern, Denis Mukwege repeats what he has been saying incessantly for the last 10 years: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, rape is used like a weapon of war. He recently operated on – 'repaired' is the official term – a little girl of 2 whose vagina had been destroyed by her aggressors. In his country, rape is used to destroy a population and control a territory. The barbarity has got to stop; women's bodies can no longer be a battlefield. Stop now. Arrest them all. "Red line".**

**I hear these 'keywords' which will later be taken up by the world media: 'rape as weapon of war', 'the fight to end impunity', -because 'victim' is now outmoded, too detached from the necessities of communication. It needs slick slogans for slick coverage.**

**Congo. 'The rape capital of the world'. Really? Is it more terrible to be a woman there than in Egypt or India? 'At least' 500,000 women have been raped in the east of the country. I hear the figure brought up at every possible opportunity. It is mind-numbing in its horror. In the region, that would represent one woman in eleven. It is either a horrendous fact or a**

grotesque distortion. So why hit you between the eyes with it? Because I want to understand.

A few months after the London summit, I cross over the wooden bridge which straddles the Ruzizi, the river that separates Rwanda, the smaller country from its larger neighbour, The Democratic Republic of Congo. In a few metres, I exchange immaculate asphalt for potholes and Rwandan order for Congolese chaos. In 1994, it was this little frontier post that saw tens of thousands of Rwandans flee from the Tutsi genocide. Amongst them were both the foot soldiers and leaders of the slaughter, but also civilians, families, women and children. All of them were abandoning a country devastated. A country made silent.

Bukavu, the capital of the South Kivu region where Doctor Mukwege practises, is situated right here, just after the bridge over the Ruzizi River, at the border between the two countries, the edge of two worlds. At his dusty sentry box, a Congolese government official records my entry. The mud seeps in and soils the traditional cotton wraps and people's flip flops. The rain has come down relentlessly all night. It is 7am. Congolese street vendors are already trying to sell their paltry selections to the Rwandans from the other side.

The main road – the only one which is concrete – crosses through Bukavu following the southern side of Lake Kivu, with its red orchids and holiday village airs. On the other side of the road, dirt tracks lead to the shacks of the impoverished. In these poor neighbourhoods, the huts huddle higgledy-piggledy against the hillside, ready to tumble down the slopes when the rain comes. A series of roundabouts lead to the city centre. It takes you past faded colonial buildings, pre-paid phone card shops, renaissance churches and women flogging bananas. Shops flow by with hand-painted names: 'At Papa Edy's', 'Unisex Salon with Master Luc', 'For Sale, Fashion Fabrics, Vaseline', 'Pharmacy Vodacom 3G+', 'God is here with Kadhafi'. Then abruptly, they start to leap out at me, the large colourful signs at each roundabout, all with the same message: 'No to rape', 'Rape is never OK for the victim' 'if you've been raped, speak up'. In Bukavu, rape is sign-posted everywhere.

**“In Bukavu, rape is sign-posted everywhere.”**

Mathilde Muhindo, is sixty-two and one of the oldest activists in the town. She receives me at the Olame Centre, an association for the defence of women, located in the hills overlooking the town, already in the sprawl of the forest, but in a clearing where the rain pours down on us. She offers me some tea and a bar of chocolate. In her cramped office, she has to raise her voice each time the rain pounds the window. She was here in 1994, when the people of Bukavu welcomed the Rwandan refugees “as our brothers and sisters”. She remembers the collections for them, the loaned beds, the plots of land freely offered and the refugee camps, which slowly transformed into rambling towns.

She was also here in 1996, when Kigali forcefully dismantled these camp-cities held by the genocide ringleaders. Thousands set off back to Rwanda, but thousands fled into Congo’s interior. Hidden by civilians who they used as shields, the genocide perpetrators were tracked down by groups of Rwandans supported by Congolese rebels. The depths of the forest hid many crimes. Mathilde Muhindo smooths her Bubu, the elegant African robe, and closes her eyes: “the war had no rules, life turned upside down”. And she shakes her head, suddenly silent, the square of chocolate suspended between her fingers.

The conflict tore East Congo apart. Like all of her neighbours, Mathilde Muhindo was dragged into a war she could not grasp. She took refuge with friends. In the villages, killing, raping, burning, kidnapping, torture, in that order or another, took over. It was pure chaos. “Ayayay!” she continues, looking upwards, imploring the heavens. “Why so much barbarity, after we had welcomed them in? We never understood.”

From 1997, she started to see women turning up who had been raped, injured or mutilated; they had walked for days, had quit the midland plateaus of Kivu clinging to the back of a motorbike rider as if clutching a life-raft. “We took them in as we could. At the beginning, we gave them a clean wrapper, offered them a roof over their head and a meal; we paid for their treatment at the hospital and so on. I listened to these women and I started to become traumatised myself. Raping little girls, raping women with a rifle or a tree branch, how could this be possible?”

The rapes seemed to conform to a deliberate strategy. On tapes she is keeping “for history”, the activist Mathilde Muhindo recorded their accounts. An elderly woman shared with her how “I was raped by one, two, three men and then the commander said, “Leave her now, she is old.” For Mathilde, there is no doubt: “These testimonies prove there were orders, a hierarchy.”

When Peace agreements were signed in 2002-2003, Mathilde Mahindo thought she could breathe easy again. The war in its overt form subsided. In truth, when the rebel groups split up, local militias took shape from their ashes. Criminal factions began to proliferate. A first report published in 2002 by Human Rights Watch drew attention to how rape was

being used as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It immediately created interest.

In just a few months, NGOs and UN agencies descended on Bukavu, colonising it in a way that saw their numbers jump from a dozen to around the 300 mark of today. “All those who wanted to make money launched themselves into the sexual violence field”, Mathilde Muhindo tells me. The Local associations felt dispossessed. “We smaller ones no longer seemed to matter. The big ones took over and carved up the pie”. Disgusted, many Congolese NGOs withdrew from sexual violence programmes. The Olame centre was one of them.

Doctor Mukwege, the star of the London summit, was then unknown outside the Kivu region. An excellent surgeon, he founded the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, where he operated on victims of sexual torture thanks to a hitherto unknown technique in Congo: keyhole surgery. He eventually caught the attention of backers and from 2004, benefitted from European funds for the programme ‘Victims of sexual violence’.

The Panzi Hospital became a meeting place, a kind of hub for sexual violence. Colette Salima, in charge of the hospital’s communications, was overwhelmed. Not one day passed, she said, without some outside character, cameraman, emissary, researcher, agent, campaigning politician, NGO in search of a partnership, ‘expert’ of every kind, turning up in her office in the hope of meeting

Doctor Mukwege and his ‘victims’. “What is that if not rape tourism?” says the activist Mathilde Muhindo disapprovingly.

The doctor ramped up the number of appeals. The rape of Congolese women made a big splash on television screens in 2009, when Hillary Clinton visited the region, in order to share her ‘preoccupation’ with the world: “This country has witnessed one of mankind’s greatest atrocities”, the US American Secretary of State announced. One year later, UN special Envoy for victims of sexual violence in conflicts, Margot Wallström, followed in her footsteps: “Congo is the rape capital of the world.” From this caricatured description, the media created a headline, some ten years after the violence had reached its peak in the country.

“Sexual violence is sexy. The emotional factor is huge...” explains Alejandro Sánchez with a resigned shrug of his shoulders. He is the Women’s Protection Advisor for Monusco, the UN’S peacekeeping force in the Democratic Republic of Congo. His words are underlined by the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) legal director, Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier: “Ever since Rwanda and Bosnia, two stereotypes of the ‘ideal’ victim will guarantee you donations: Child soldiers and raped women.”

Doctor Mukwege's Panzi Hospital lies thirty minutes from the centre of Bukavu, towards the south. The route there makes the swaying vehicle jump and jolt even more. The stalls and booths pass me by, selling wood, bricks, tyres, doughnuts, basins and sugar cane, this latter chewed like an intravenous dose of glucose. The road heads into the hills and narrows, as below, in the valley, the river seems to accompany me.

Protected from the outside din by guards and metal gates, the hospital looks like an American residential neighbourhood, with white lanes and houses surrounded by flowers. Denis Mukwege receives me on the patio that runs the length of his office. With his big smile and wise eyes that seem to have seen it all, he immediately attracts your sympathy.

The great man came back disappointed from the sexual violence summit, although in London, they were selling Panzi coffee, Panzi T-Shirts and his partnership with Angelina Jolie took the focus on rape "to stratospheric levels", according to Susannah Sirkin, from the NGO Physicians for Human Rights. After the summit, The World Bank announced it was releasing 60 million euros for a 'holistic' approach to the treatment and care "of at least 500,000 women and girls" who had been victims of sexual violence. And yet, he had hoped for more: "I was expecting the red line for rape..." he says.

In a neat and tidy meeting room, the doctor, dressed in a white tunic, very quickly begins his oft-repeated plea, the one made in London and in all his interviews: "weapon of war", "rape destroys the woman, the community and the family line" "extreme acts of barbarity". I interrupt him. I have not come to Panzi for this. What I want to understand is the nature of the reality behind these words.

I ask him for the hospital's activity report. He is happy to show it to me. I read that between 2004 and 2013, the programme 'victims of sexual violence' received 32,247 women, but this wording also includes 13,071 women who were received by the hospital for what he calls 'specific' gynaecological treatment, meaning surgery for obstetric fistulas, a tear in the vaginal wall which can arise during a difficult birth.

I am surprised: "So these women were not raped?" the doctor confirms this and is open about the explanation: "We do not want a woman to lie by telling us that she was raped in order to receive free surgery. We included them in our programme even if, as you can see, our statistics have two very distinct categories."

The hospital therefore received 19,176 women who were the genuine victims of sexual violence. Why then does the world media repeat that he has "repaired 40,000 raped and mutilated women?" "I do not know. Journalists like a juicy story", he replies.

He is clearly a man of goodwill. He strikes me as overwhelmed by the situation. On TV or radio, when he is introduced with the line that he has treated “40,000 women”, he does not refute the statement.

And the “500,000 women raped in the East of the Congo?” It’s the same thing. The number doesn’t mean anything. According to the UN, 200,000 women have been raped since 1998 across the whole of the Congolese territory. For the American Journal of Public Health in 2007 alone, it is 400,000 Congolese women who have been raped, which amounts to 48 women per hour. These are just two estimates amongst dozens that do not match up.

So 500,000 is just a shot in the dark! Why get caught up in such details? Why explain that it is impossible to get proper statistics in the Congo? Why explain that it is a stateless country, that it had its last census in 1984, that there are no identity cards, that everyone has two or three different first names let alone the names of their mother’s and father’s families? And finally, that it is a country without roads and where a large part of the population evades being officially registered in any way?

In this impersonal meeting room where we have our discussion, I question doctor Mukwege about the raped and tortured children he so often talks about in his speeches. Cases which he says are “absolutely traumatic for our staff”. About thirty children were attacked in Kavumu, a town which had been spared conflict for several years. Rumours about the events speak of magical acts, men wishing to gain riches and glory by deflowering little girls. It had nothing to do with the war rapes. “Well, in a sense yes, it was, it is the same thing. The remaining cancer of war!” he insists to me.

I am reminded of what Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier of MSF told me in Paris: “There are mad people in Congo just like everywhere else. If you are a children’s judge in France, It’s just the same, hell on earth.” Doctor Mukwege frowns at this: “I don’t like this tendency to trivialise the issue”.

It is at this point he silences the discussion by bringing out the big guns. He’s had enough of people trying to quibble with him about the daily horrors he has to deal with. “It is just people who want to say negative things, who have twisted minds, who want to believe that rape is fashionable. I see victims every day and I find it unethical that people want to discuss statistics, numbers, money, when it is human dignity being attacked here. I find it sickening.” He gets up. The interview is over.

Outside, the air is muggy. In front of the hospital, a kid hails passers-by to fill a taxi which is waiting in the middle of the road, blocking traffic. In Bukavu, there is no public transport and just a few public services. The taxi drivers listen to Radio Okapi, the UN’s excellent radio station. The stories it tells, like the ones I have been gathering since my

arrival, confirm that rape as weapon of war is not its most common form. Far more often civilians commit it.

For example, Judith, a baby-faced 17-year-old in her school uniform, tells me she was raped by “a civilian” in her village. Her round face contorts as she recalls the memory. Later, I am told about a child raped by its uncle, the family actually having fled from the fighting to seek sanctuary in his home; or women who are raped each time they go to fetch fire wood, but they continue to go back because they must sell it to feed their families; girls who prostitute themselves near the mining sites and the moment they find out they are pregnant declare to the NGOs they have been raped, in order to get some help.

I interview a lawyer, Patient Bashombe, who works with the Panzi hospital. He launched himself into defending the victims of sexual violence because, as he freely admits, it was a “profitable niche”. Of the 64 cases he has dealt with, three were perpetrated by foreign army groups, two by Congolese soldiers and the other 59 by civilians.

And to the question how many of these women were “mutilated”, or needed to be “repaired”? It transpires the majority came to Panzi because they needed a morning after pill, a pregnancy test, antibiotics and anti-virals. They were entitled to a few sessions of physiotherapy and a meeting with a psychotherapist, after which they left. Operations due to rape are rare. “In our MSF archives in Congo, it is less than 10%”, Francoise Boucher-Saulnier informs me.

Of course, this would be far less spectacular for the international community than “rape as weapon of war”. It is far less glorious for the Congolese government too, which prefers to incriminate armed groups over its own civilians and far less rewarding for Doctor Mukwege. “It’s as if we can only understand “rape as instrument of war”; rape “plain and simple” now seems beyond our comprehension”, says Francois Bouchet-Saulnier with some regret.

So why are these staggering numbers and stock phrases constantly brandished by the international community, financial backers and the media? Nzigire, a forty-year-old from Walungu, a village 50 kilometres from Bukavu, has his own explanation: “So that whites can get the money!”

“Get the money”. A few thousand kilometres away, in France, I find the same anger and explanation coming from the legal director of the MSF, “Today, in Kivu, the NGOs no longer take care of people; they just go in search of statistics. They look for raped women, in order to create statistics, in order to make more pleas for money, to have bigger budgets to undertake more identification programmes for raped women. It is a never-ending loop!

These programmes on the ground are idiotic, but while the budgets keep coming, everyone is happy”.

**“Today, in Kivu, the NGOs no longer take care of people; they just go in search of statistics.”**

And the budgets are colossal. According to a study by two Dutch researchers, Nynke Douma and Dorothea Hilhorst, titled *Fonds de Commerce?* (Trans: A Business?) , more than 70 million euros have been allocated to sexual violence since 2010, without even including the previously mentioned financing from the World Bank, which only takes into account its last round of funding. Between January 2010 and December 2011, considering just the missions piloted by the UN in Congo, the fight against sexual violence received 7.4 million euros. This is double the budget accorded to the Congo’s security sector reform initiative, and half of what is assigned to the nation’s overall peace programme. This for a country destabilised by armed groups for nearly 20 years...

In Bukavu, it is impossible to see or benefit from these millions. Each day is a harsh and constant reminder. Here you live by the “taux du jour”, a local way of saying you live day-to-day. There is no employment, no industry, no agriculture and no electricity unless you pay a ‘bakchich’. A man follows me: “Madame, Madame! Wait. Let me introduce myself: I am making a collection. I am a fundraiser. Money, change, notes, everything. I have come from Shabunda, in the forest. I have come here to find people like you, the ‘Muzungus’, the whites, see!”

The Muzungus are a group set apart, living all together in the east of the town, near the Rwandan border, like they needed to be ready to flee. They live in elegant villas with views on the lake, with its part-Swiss, part-African allure. They are surrounded by high walls and barbed wire. They drive around in jeeps, never travel on foot, go out very little into the

town and when they do go by foot, it is on well-trodden routes they know by heart, to-and-from, linking the big hotels with their offices. They are very busy. They have meetings.

Their presence and establishment in the town has not been without its conflicts. For several years now, the Bukavians say: “No rapes, no jobs”. You could find the Franglais funny, but the phrase disturbs. Their report, “Fonds de commerce?” (Translation: *Business?*) is not just the title of Nynke Douma and Dorothea Hilhorst’s report, it’s the word on everybody lips. The rapes brought the NGOs, which in turn brought their ‘programmes’. There is a lot of money circulating, a lot of ambition, a lot of appetite and many sources of corruption.

**“There is a lot of money circulating, a lot of ambition, a lot of appetite and many sources of corruption.”**

“If there were no more rapes, what would become of all these NGOs, all these hotels that house the whites, all of these construction companies who build houses taller than the Eiffel Tower? A Congolese journalist asks me, preferring to remain anonymous. You can ask the question, but I can’t. Touching on this subject will get me into trouble’.”

I decide to travel into the ‘interior’, closest to those who should have benefitted from this financial manna from heaven: the raped women. An hour and a half from Bukavu, Walungu is a village that suffered for a long time at the hands of armed groups. The dirt road there offers a bumpy ride, but still remains navigable even with the torrential rain. The road snakes around the hills, leads across wooden bridges and runs the length of tea, cassava and corn plantations. The sun pierces the leafy branches overhead. This is accessible Congo, easy Congo.

And yet, on the side of the track, children collect wood, and men, overwhelmed by the relentless heat bake bricks in ovens. Women stoop under the loads they bring back from

the fields or the markets, walking in single file. Their gazes are empty, their feet bloodied.

In Walungu, the main street seems to swarm with organisations: UNDP, War Child, Jehova's Witnesses, IEDA Relief (International Emergency and Development Aid), the Panzi Foundation's legal clinic, APEO (trans: Action for forgotten Children), Action des femmes pour la justice et la paix (Translation: women's action for justice and peace), Save the Children, The Belgian Development Agency...

A group of women await me in the library. The books here, tucked away behind a counter, are ones generations of French or Belgian people have read and annotated, before the book's despatch to the DRC by an association that wanted to 'help' Congo. The women, twenty odd, have been mobilised by Venantie Bimswa and her network, Women for the Defence of Rights and Peace (RFDP).

As I listen to them, I am struck by one detail: in their stories, rape is just one element of a sequence, in time, cataloguing murder, torture, pillage, threats and kidnap. For example, Benite, who is "around 40", tells me in March 2005, 'natives of Rwanda' attacked her village, killed one of her brothers and kidnapped six people, setting off to the forest with them. She is more precise: "two women and four men", as if to underline we should not forget the men in all this.

On the way, they freed one of them to go and ask for the ransom which would save the others. During the 8-hour journey to the forest, beatings rained down on them: "Some of them even jumped up and down on the people's bodies." After arriving at the camp, they were held prisoner, shackled. In the evening, the kidnappers asked Benite's brother to "have sex" with her. He refused, and both of them were severely beaten. "They stuck their guns in my side, piercing me. That night, the four kidnappers came and slept with each woman that was there", she tells me.

Her family did not have enough money to pay the 130-dollar ransom and they had to sell their field. Benite was freed eight days after she was kidnapped. "When my husband, a miner, came back from the mines, he was suspicious about why the field had been sold. He thought I sold it to make money, and now we argue. That is how he expresses his shame that I was raped. If one day I could buy back the field, it might help our married life. At times, I sit down and fall apart. I break down about the trauma and I cry about the field."

Benite has told her story "dozens and dozens of times", but nobody has helped her to buy back her field or a new life: "I have been on many of those lists, it makes no difference".

# **“I have been on many of those lists, it makes no difference”.**

All the Walungu women talk about the ‘lists’, the ‘statistics’ which sort the raped women and enables the NGOs to ‘evaluate their needs’ in order to raise funds. In Bukavu, Venantie Bisimwa explained the system to me: “When I still attended the coordination meetings, each NGO or UN agency would arrive with their list of victims as if it proved they were doing good work.”

Strong-headed with a heart of gold, Venantie Bisimwa is angry: “These lists are of no use whatsoever! It is always the same names on them, even false victims. And even if it shows they have women who have been raped, does it prove they have helped them? There was absolutely no coordination and absolutely no honesty in how they worked”.

In Walungu’s run-down library, another woman, Nzigire, added: “These lists are a market for the NGOs. They come here because they know we have been victims and that they will get the same list as the NGO next door, a nice big list. And us, we repeat our stories because we are disturbed; we don’t know how to defend ourselves. And then no one helps us. IRC, Sodeka, Vopad, Sarcaf, Vico, Arche D’Alliance... All of them. They left with their lists and they never came back.”

What to say to this woman standing in front of me, so dignified in her multi-coloured Bubu. The international Rescue Committee, the IRC she had just mentioned and which still refuses to answer my questions, was the main beneficiary of the allotted funds after Hilary Clinton’s visit in 2009, to the tune of 5.7 million euros no less. I wonder how many fields 5 million euros would buy for her friend Benite?

Benite explains how the NGOs identify their victims: “The strangers would come to us to organise a discussion in a school or church and afterwards they would ask their representative to target the women who had been raped.” A practise which still shocks Mathilde Muhindo from the Olame centre: “Do you think it’s normal that a woman who has been raped raises her hand in public to say: ‘me, I have been raped!’ I do not know how it is in France, but this is not normal to me.”

**“Do you think it’s normal that a woman who has been raped raises her hand in public to say: ‘me, I have been raped!’”**

**She still bristles with indignation: “I am not saying that all these women were false victims. I am questioning the structures which pushed them to raise their hand like that, in front of everyone. The women must have really been thinking to themselves: ‘My only hope is them! It doesn’t matter if I have been raped or not, because I have nothing.’ But where is the respect in all this?”**

**The women of Walungu put their names down on numerous lists. Their names added up, without being further verified, and became numbers, which in turn boosted statistics. “Without us really knowing what the influence of this inaccuracy was”, says Marie-Noel Cikuru from the NGO Action Hope (Trans: Action of Hope): “There are so many villages, in the forests, which have never even been approached...”**

**Martin Birindwa Balyahamwabo is a Pentecostal follower in his 50s. Dressed in an impeccable shirt, he clings to a satchel neatly balanced on his knee. He acted as one of the “representatives” for several NGOs in Nindja, a village scarred by fighting, which lies a few dozen kilometres from Walungu. He was one of the individuals who fed back information, determined what victims required. He is certain that as well as duplication, the lists contain false victims.**

**Looking like an A-grade student, he explains: “Sometimes, I would hear on the radio that a hundred women had been raped when in fact only 18, maybe 20 had. People would come through the village preparing women to say they had been raped.” – “Who did?” – “Associates of the NGO. For example, the German Association Malteser would pay for representatives in the village to bring them raped women. So, they absolutely had to find some! If not, the satellite office would close and no more work ... So the representatives would go from house to house to raise awareness. It is hardly a secret you know. There is a**

kind of complicity in the community going on. The women agree to put themselves on the list and then they share the NGO's food supplies amongst themselves. This bothered me, it did not seem right."

I take these claims to Johan Bultinck from Malteser. He confirms that the representatives were paid around 20 dollars each month, that for a long time after their rape, women tried to continue to receive extra help, that they did have to assess them to discern who should be included in their emergency programmes. And that the health centres deliberately bumped up the numbers to receive more financial aid. But with regard to Malteser, he is adamant, saying: "We never had a case of a hundred women being raped in Nindja and we do not give food to the women. I do not think this is about Malteser, or they are telling you nonsense."

I pursue my research in Kaniola, thirty kilometres away, in the hills above Walungu. The road gets progressively narrower, the land and stones making for a bumpy ride. I see straw and clay huts, wooden houses, corrugated iron and brick ones and an endless horizon of Eucalyptus trees. I am in search of the forest. The stories of abuse unflinchingly begin with: "I was taken into the forest..." But I do not see the haunted spaces of these nightmares. Father Maurice Bisimwa, who is accompanying me, points his fingers to the mountain on our right: "For example, there, that was the forest." I do not understand. The mountain is now covered in a light green prairie, scarred by a few brown patches. He explains; "In ten years, deforestation has changed the landscape. The people blame the forest. They kill it..."

Right at the centre of the village of Kaniola, a pink brick turret is dedicated to the victims of the war. Inside, the names of the slaughtered, with date and place of their death, adorn the walls. The killing took place between 2004 and 2005. I look through the window into the mausoleum. In the small locked room, I see photos of disembowelled women, men with their tongues cut out, an arm or genitals cut off. The priest Maurice Bisimwa has listened to the agony-ridden secrets, the shame of the parish's rape victims. He knows there have been "false ones" but he understands them: "If a NGO gives a goat to a raped woman and another woman needs one too, then she will say she has been raped. It is all down to poverty..."

Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, of MSF, concurs with this: "I would not say that the business of rape profits the victims. It profits us, the humanitarian organisations. If the victims lie to us, it is to survive, it as an adaption strategy, not a business one." She shakes her head, choosing pretty harsh words for her NGO peers: "It's in the humanitarian world that the cycle of impunity needs to be broken!"

**“I would not say that the business of rape profits the victims. It profits us, the humanitarian organisations.”**

She recounts a story about Médecins Sans Frontières’ experience: “We noticed that raped women came more easily to us for a consultation on market days. They felt more reassured coming to town with a group of friends and they would only lose one day of work. But when we began to reimburse the taxis to make it easier for them to come to hospital, the number of consultations on market days exploded. These women were coming forward as raped in order to get a free ride to the market! We had no idea. It is a permanent headache for us. We have to constantly keep an eye on the negative effects of our actions. It requires professionalism and courage, attributes sorely lacking in all these token helpers who are playing at ‘Tintin in the Congo’.”

In Kaniola, lightning cuts up the sky and for a few minutes the roar of the rain blots out the sounds of our voices. I stand under the shelter of a former school with Batunike Mn’tunga, one of the female representatives, accused by Martin, the Pentecostal Christian. She wears a T-Shirt brandishing the name of a toothpaste. She also feels swindled because the NGO set targets and insisted she identify 50 to a 100 raped women at each location she had to visit. “They asked us to go and visit Luhago, 50 kilometres by foot, where there militias are. To go in there with a list, you had to hide it in a basket, or under sweet potato leaves, so that militia members would think we were just coming back from the field. It was dangerous for us...” Batunike went from house to house: “On the lists, I noted ‘raped sexually’ or ‘raped physically’.” I am surprised.

–“Raped physically? What does that mean?” –

– “For example, it could mean torture.”

– “But torture, that is not rape!”

– “Of course it is. If someone cuts your hand, you don’t consent.”

– “And when the NGO asked how many women had been raped, what did you reply?”

– “The total number.”

- “And if they asked for the number of women who were victims of sexual violence?”
- “Then I would give the number of the women raped sexually.”

I am dumbfounded. Is his how the female representatives have been trained? Were their results checked? Has there been confusion about different forms of aggression? “That is the first time I have heard this” says the activist Mathilde Muhindo, alarmed and astounded in equal part by this truly nonsensical situation.

On questioning, several NGOs admit to me they do not check out the women’s stories. It is not their role, they tell me, they need to listen to the pain of those who have been attacked and to question it would worsen the trauma. Johan Bultinck, of the German NGO Malteser; “In treating the victims, issues exist like confidentiality and consent... verification is not easy.”

Just a semi-built built building protects Kaniola’s little group of female market sellers. Suddenly, Batunike, the female representative, and a few others come to fetch me. They want me to question a man here, in a brown shirt. Guillaume Mushagaloca steps forward, his eyes glued to the ground. He is clutching a shopping bag. We sit down on the benches in the old school, while the women remain outside, in a cluster, and shout to me from afar: “Go on listen! We can’t hear any more about the horror.”

Guillaume Mushagaloca is a man. He therefore does not correspond to the NGOs’ ‘ideal victim’. He was not raped, or at least chose not to confide that with me. And yet, he delivers the most stomach- churning story I have heard yet in the Congo. He too was taken into the forest, with 40 other prisoners. But only he came back out alive. The others were burnt, roasted, boiled, had their throat slit, were scalped, whipped or tied to a cross. Some had their eyes ripped out and salt put in the eye sockets, an arm was cut off, which they were made to eat. I can no longer listen to him, sorry, I just couldn’t hear any more of this.

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**This man makes it clear that apart from some emergency care, he received no other help. Nothing. Not ever. In the NGO-laden village of Kaniola, funds were available for his female neighbours but not for him. “I am jealous of raped women. Yes, I can say that without any shame.” I close my notebook, and leave the village with a dreadful feeling. I want to vomit.**

**On my return to Bukavu, I have to ask the question about where did all the huge budgets go. Who ‘ate the money’ as they say in Congo. The international organisations reply to me with phrases that skirt the subject. For Alejandro Sanchez of Monusco, it is “The filter effect of the organisations” (read: ‘expatriate salaries’); “Lack of coordination” and “a country difficult to work in” for Johan Buntnick of Malteser (read: ‘corruption’).**

**In the archives of the newspaper Le Souverain, I track down an article from May 2012 called ‘Who profits from the sexual violence of East Congo?’ The journalist analyses the case of Mamas for Africa. This Belgian NGO targeted a little Congolese association which received and looked after rape victims. They got access to their photos, their rape testimonies and put in place a mailing list and fundraising for them. But very quickly, the Congolese outfit realised that “less than 1% of the collected funds were actually injected into their centre.”**

**In 2008, Mamas for Africa said it needed a larger house to receive the women who had been raped. The director of the Congolese NGO pulled out all the stops and raised 360,000 dollars to build a new centre with a view of the lake. But the building was rapidly transformed into a place for Belgians in transit, visiting Bukavu. “An unusual concept”, the journalist commented drily, also revealing a letter sent to the donors which announced that Mamas for Africa wanted to create a training centre to insure an income for the women who were housed there. When in reality “the house was just a place for the women to stay in transit before they were sent off to the Panzi hospital.”**

**I wanted to meet the directors of the centre. I first received a slightly strange email from Hilde Mattelaer, the head of Mamas for Africa; “First of all, the lady who you mention, Rosalie, stopped working here a long time ago and she is falsely using our name”. After this, our meeting was put back several times until finally, I learn the centre director has too much work to be able to see me.**

**The name Mamas for Africa figured again when talking Doctor Mukwege’s colleague, the head of human resources at the Panzi hospital. He mentioned the Belgian NGO as one of the most efficient, the one which brought them the most women who had been raped...**

Along with women who falsely claim to have been raped to receive help, the systems which exaggerate the statistics to receive more funding, the misappropriation at every level, the speeches totally divorced from reality, I discover Bukavu also has its fair share of false-perpetrators. Men who are rotting in jail erroneously, victims too of the business of rape.

Nynke Douma's investigation in *Fonds de Commerce* grew out of observing this. In September 2008, the Dutch researcher was able to witness the proceedings of a mobile military court – one which had relocated to a village – in offering the local population “a show of justice”. A man was sentenced to 10 years in prison for rape. “It was false imprisonment, completely false. There was no evidence in the case. How could they imprison people on such flimsy grounds?”

She quickly discovered this was not an isolated case. “Today in Kivu, the right to a fair trial has been made a joke”, says Faustin Cirhuza, who works in Bukavu for *Avocats Sans Frontières*. The NGOs set up to protect raped women “buy justice” according to him. They organise the cases, pay the judges' and lawyers' per diems and encourage the hearing of cases in places profoundly marked by the conflict...

In 2013, Faustin Cirhuza worked as a consultant for a programme financed by Cordaid, a Dutch NGO which set a target of 60 cases of victims for the Kabare area: “finding this volume of cases in one year was quite simply impossible! So they rushed to identify cases, cutting out all the usual procedural rules. There were flagrant examples of insufficient evidence, cases turning out to be false. They lost about 30 of the cases. It was a mess!”

Why didn't they downsize their objectives? “It creates employment. If you don't achieve your objectives, the funders won't renew your contract”, says the lawyer. He was not impressed by the whole affair: “It is not done with people's interest at heart. NGOs are not interested in getting compensation for their clients. They just want a copy of the judgement to send to the funders, to be able to say they have done good work and that they are fighting against 'impunity'. I heard so many women say they regretted having gone to court. It was quite dramatic.”

Questioned about this issue, Astrid Frey, from Cordaid, said: “Women who lie, who took us on a wild goose chase in order to sell us their story, sadly exist... One has to be very careful; one has to evaluate the programmes. It was a challenge!” She added: “In any case, Cordaid was not a direct actor in the field, we were only funding the programmes of our partners...”

“The fight against impunity”. The buzz phrase of international organisations' brochures has yet more perverse and pernicious effects. In towns, rape is still instrumental in ransoming the rich. The journalist Egide Kitumaini tells me the following urban fable: “You are young and you have a girlfriend who lives in the neighbourhood. She falls pregnant but

you have insufficient means to marry her. So you hatch a plan together. She will seduce a rich man. They do what couples do and afterwards she says: 'Look I am pregnant, give me money otherwise I will accuse you of rape and your reputation will be ruined.' And off she goes with enough money to pay for her marriage. “

Bukaru buzzes with these kinds of stories. A rape accusation allows a cuckolded husband to bring down his wife's lover, cupid-playing parents to take advantage of their daughter's affair, a student to buy a Blackberry. “We condemn, we tolerate, we permit, we use it as an instrument. In this jumble, values no longer exist” says Mathilde Muhindo with a sigh.

My thoughts turn back to the petite Marie- Noël Cikuru, from the Congolese NGO Actions d'Espoir, who in her little high-pitched voice told me: “There are no absolute victims or absolute torturers. The two can't just be seen in opposition, in a kind of irreparable antagonism. In a conflict, there is always circularity, a moving back and forth between the two identities“.

**“There are no absolute victims or absolute torturers. The two can't just be seen in opposition, in a kind of irreparable antagonism. In a conflict, there is always circularity, a moving back and forth between the two identities“.**

**I cross through Bukavu for the last time. The light of the low morning sun shimmers on the orchids, imparting a rosy glow on the facades. At the port, I meet Alejandro Sánchez from Monusco. He tells me he will soon be leaving his job: “I am going back to Colombia. It is too crazy here for me.”**

**At the European parliament, Doctor Mukwege wins the Sakharov Prize. And in soundproofed radio studios and under the lights of television newsrooms, he repeats that in his country, rape is used to destroy a population and control a territory. The barbarity has got to stop; women’s bodies can no longer be a battlefield. Stop now. Arrest them all. “Red line”.**

Share “Those Who have been Raped raise your hand” on:



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