



## **Crisis in Eastern Congo**

### **World Vision Statement to the UN Security Council**

25 November 2008

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Arria Formula Meeting on the DRC  
November 25, 2008  
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Distinguished Minister, Karel De Gucht, Excellencies, esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of World Vision, and other local agencies partnering with us in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, let me express my deepest gratitude for this important consultation today, which comes at one of the most testing and critical points in the recent history of the DRC, the Kivu provinces in particular.

I thank my colleague from Oxfam for accurately portraying the gravity and the enormity of the humanitarian crisis, which has resulted from the more recent escalation of armed hostilities in North Kivu. I will therefore not take more time to go into greater detail, except to state that considering the size and the severity of the humanitarian crisis, World Vision is in the process of doubling our presence and operations in the Kivus.

Permit me please to address two issues in particular this afternoon:

- sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls;
- recruitment of child soldiers.

#### **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls**

Since the end of August, in parallel with the piercing sounds of the guns and artillery of CNDP, the Mai-Mai, the FDLR, the FARDC militias among others, a silent, aggressive war has been waged against women and children yet again in eastern DRC. Women and girls in untold numbers have been targets of dehumanizing and opportunistic campaigns of rape and other forms of gender-based sexual violence.

This past week alone, according to the provincial health services, 20 cases of sexual violence were reported just in Goma.<sup>1</sup> We know that this number only represents a fraction of the actual sexual violence, as most cases go unreported.

World Vision works in a number of IDP camps in North Kivu. In a recent survey conducted in the Magunga camp with a population of 10,000 IDPs, nearly half of whom are children, World Vision found that a devastatingly high percentage of girls were reported to have been raped by rebel groups. Your Excellencies, that amounts to hundreds of girls having been victimized through rape and sexual violence in one camp alone!

In another camp close to Goma, where World Vision operates a Child Friendly Space, a place of protection for children where they can play, be creative, and receive informal education, a 16-year-old girl was raped by four soldiers when collecting firewood. She was living alone in the camp having been separated from her parents. Soon, she found out she was pregnant. World Vision has since helped her access medical care and psychosocial support.

Heal Africa, a medical DRC-based NGO that World Vision supports and partners with, has reported a significant increase in the average number of patients it receives at its center in Goma who have been victims of rape; increasing from one to four women or girls per day at its center in Goma alone.

While determining hard numbers is always challenging in such contexts,<sup>2</sup> we can say with absolute certainty that across six camps where World Vision works in Goma, Shasha and Minova, there has been a considerable increase in the

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<sup>1</sup> OCHA Sit Rep 18-19 Nov, 2008.

number of girls reporting rape since the beginning of this phase of the conflict. Between April and June, a total of five cases of rape were reported by girls participating in the World Vision “Child Friendly Space” programmes in these camps. In October 120 cases were reported by girls in these same camps.

Rape perpetrated against women happens often when they are forced to leave the relative safety of camps to gather firewood, or search for food. A World Vision assessment team visited the Bulengo camp earlier this month and found that cases of rape were rampant. The following women shared their stories, insisting on using their real names. By sharing their stories and their identity, it was their chance to tell the outside world of their plight.

### **Furaha, 35**

Furaha lives with her three children in the Bulengo IDP camp. Faraha was raped just outside the camp. This is her story:

*I was gathering firewood in the afternoon when I was raped. I was three months pregnant at the time. There were two men. I tried to run, but I fell down. When I fell down, the two men came on me, one after another.*

*I was near the camp, in the bush not far from the camp. One of the men was holding a gun... I tried to cry out. I screamed, but the other women who were with me ran away.*

*When I finally came out of the bush I was bleeding. I knew that something like this could happen, but I never expected it. I never thought it was going to happen to me.*

*I did not report it at the time. I did not seek medical help. I went to my bed and tried to sleep, but the bed was becoming covered in blood. In the night I went to the doctors and they helped me.*

*The rapists did not beat me, but what they did was enough I think. I don't know why they did this. I don't know the reason they came to me.*

*We aren't sure of what has happened to us.... Life was better before because we could go to our fields and we could harvest and have food to eat and even some to sell, but now everything is destroyed.*

### **Mutari, 35**

Both, Mutari and her 14-year old daughter were raped. This is her account:

*One of the militia groups came to our village. They took my husband and son.*

*They came back and took my 14-year-old daughter to the bush where they raped her. They came back to me. I was lying in the bed because I was sick, but they raped me the same as my daughter. My daughter is pregnant from these men.*

*I could not fight them because I was sick. My husband tried to run away, but they caught him and took him away somewhere I don't know.*

*I think if peace comes, and life goes back to what it used to be before... I will have hope again*

Excellencies, these stories and the increase in reports of rape and sexual violence noted above relate directly to the increased vulnerability that families and communities face in the context of massive displacement in the eastern region of the DRC. In a recent joint survey conducted by World Vision, Oxfam, Save the Children, ActionAid and Merlin, we found that “over half the people displaced by the latest round of fighting in eastern Congo have become separated from family members in the chaos of war.”<sup>3</sup>

The survey showed that 63% of displaced people in the camps and shelters around Goma had lost contact with one or more close relatives as they fled the fighting. Over a quarter of those surveyed had lost a child, and 17% had lost their husband or wife.

In an environment of such displacement and massive separation, the vulnerability of girls and children in general is increased exponentially, both in terms of being easier prey for rape and other forms of violence, as well as recruitment by the various armed groups.

To quote a colleague of mine who works with rape victims in the Congo: “There are guns and rape. You cannot stop rape until you stop war.”

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<sup>2</sup> World Vision recently lost significant data and analysis when a team was looted by armed groups. Our base in Rutshuru was looted in October by CNDP militia, and all assessments and data analysis from that area was lost, making it difficult to come by accurate figures.

<sup>3</sup> Disasters Emergency Committee survey, November 2008.

As many times before over the years of conflict in eastern Congo, we have recently seen the most horrific abuse of women and girls, systematically being terrorized by armed gangs as a strategy to depopulate geographic regions and in the process consolidate territorial gains.

### **Recruitment of Child Soldiers**

Just as gender-based violence has become a tool of war, the increased recruitment of child soldiers has become an equally worrying reality, especially since major hostilities resumed at the end of August.

#### **A quote from the ground:**

“These people are using our children as soldiers. They force them to join the army and fight against the Government. Once they controlled the region, they took children from school and they forced them to join the rebellion.” – Gakuru Nisahu, chief of Kibumba area.

Child protection agencies have reported that Mai Mai militia in the town of Rutshuru recruited 37 children into military service the week before last. Two weeks ago, 150 children were estimated to have been forcibly recruited since heavy fighting resumed in August.<sup>4</sup> Today, that number is even larger.

UNICEF has recently reported that more than 500 people between the ages of 14 and 40 have been recruited into armed groups since the fighting started. Many of these are children below 18 years of age.

A centre for separated and abandoned children in Goma, reported close to 1,500 new displaced people have arrived since recent fighting broke out – around 1,000 of these are children. Sixty-eight former child soldiers are also at the centre.

Former child soldiers are a particular concern for us and other child protection partners, as they are much more vulnerable to re-recruitment because they are seen as “experienced” fighters. In the zones of displacement in North Kivu, there are an estimated 5,500 children formerly associated with armed forces and groups, who are right now vulnerable to re-recruitment.<sup>5 6</sup>

Recruitment persists until this very day through the usual methods of forced abduction, by coercion, and in some cases by being “volunteered” by families or villages, who still seem to believe that by volunteering their children the particular militia group will no longer attack them. Children as young as seven continue to be forced to fight.

Reintegration and resettlement of ex-child-combatants is a key priority of many agencies, including WV, working in the country.<sup>7</sup> However, with new recruitments and re-recruitments of children rising, the gains that we made in the past through DDR are being minimized very fast.

Moses was abducted by armed militia when he was just five-years-old. He is now 12.

*“There was so much fighting in our area, but I was so young I didn’t know who was fighting who,”* he said.

One day men with guns stormed his village. The rebels came door-to-door, knocking and opening by force. But Moses and his family refused to let them in. In the morning the rebels started abducting children.

*“Our mothers were crying as they took us away,”* he said.

*“We were led to a lake full of boats – about 40 boats – each boat was full of children.”*

“Charles” was only 9 years old when he voluntarily joined the Mai-Mai militia, after his father abandoned his mother and his 5 other siblings. They struggled to meet their basic needs and Charles was unable to attend school because his family could not afford the fees. Encouraged by his other friends who had been recruited as child soldiers, they would frequently say: “You are suffering, why not join us at the training center?” So Charles ran away to the Mai-Mai training center in Virundo. Every evening his friends would show him how to use a gun. Because Charles quickly learned how to use a gun, after a few weeks, he was made an “officer”. When his mother finally learned of his whereabouts, she urged him to come home. After almost a year of being a child soldier, at the age of 10, Charles returned home, but the continued state of poverty and destitution that his family was in, tempted him to go back to the Mai-Mai, and he even contemplated suicide. His mother’s forgiveness combined with WV child rights programming, helped Charles go back to school and to envision a different life for himself and for other children.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/fromthefield/220803/1c6c79a78bd05cae42f178dd489fc557.htm>

<sup>5</sup> 8,500 children have been reunified of which 2/3 live in areas affected by the current crisis.

<sup>6</sup> World Vision Internal Document, ‘HEARD FY08-10’.

<sup>7</sup> World Vision Internal Document, ‘DRC Development Context 1072006 VI’.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with WVI staff, Beni, N. Kivu.

While there are many cases of child abductions, children, with stories similar to Charles, become child soldiers because of a lack of food and access to education or vocational training, and in times such as these are a particular target for re-recruitment. The recent increase in displacement, and the extreme pauperization of the population, further increases the vulnerability of children to being recruited as child soldiers. Even in the midst of conflict, it is imperative that informal and emergency education be funded to give children an alternative to recruitment by armed forces.

### **World Vision Recommendations to the UN Security Council:**

We call on the Security Council today to use the heightened attention to this crisis as an opportunity to address the gaps in the international community's actions and responsibility to protect those in dire need and danger, as well as to help accelerate the implementation of the urgently needed responses to these two pandemic problems, by ensuring prevention, protection, access to care and justice for the victims.

Specifically...

- MONUC and relevant UN agencies must take urgent measures to more effectively protect and if necessary evacuate and relocate women and children under imminent threat of sexual violence and/or recruitment. As MONUC is reconfiguring itself, and as the surge of 3000 troops and police is readied for deployment, there should be a specific focus in the planning and the preparations of the surge on the prevention of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) against women and girls.
- As MONUC reconfigures its capabilities, it must plan for regular monitoring and patrolling of areas around IDP camps, as well as places, roads and routes of highest civilian frequency, where women and girls are most likely to be targeted and raped.
- As MONUC is reconfiguring itself, and as the surge of 3000-strong troops and police is readied for deployment, the Security Council and DPKO must ensure that more women are embedded at the highest levels of MONUC's leadership and that MONUC's leadership as a whole remains fully committed to uncompromisingly address SGBV.
- The Security Council should also push for the implementation of UNSC 1325 which calls in Articles 9 and 10, for all parties to armed conflict to adhere to international law and protect women and children during armed conflict. The Security Council, through the UN agencies, should ensure the Guidelines on Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings (2005) which call for the establishment and coordination of multi-sectoral interventions to prevent and respond to sexual violence during the early phase of an emergency, and specifically that the UNHCR Guidelines for Prevention and Response on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons are fully implemented. These guidelines call for help to victims to include legal redress, and access to medical and psycho-social support.
- The Security Council must increase its efforts towards further strengthening of the Monitoring and Reporting mechanism on all of the grave violations against children, with a particular attention given to the recruitment of children by armed groups at this time of growing vulnerabilities.
- The recruitment of children under the age of 15 violates the Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions. The DRC has been a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child since 2001, which legally binds the DRC to not accept voluntary recruits under the age of 18, and is also party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court which defines the recruitment of children under the age of 15 and the use of children in active hostilities as war crimes, and therefore the government of the DRC must be expected to abide by these obligations.
- The Security Council should push for greater efforts and resources to be invested towards a more effective DDR program in eastern Congo.
- We welcome the June 2008 adoption of the draft amnesty law for North and South Kivu by the National Assembly in DRC which specifically excludes SGBV and child recruitment from amnesty. The UNSC should work to ensure that this exclusion remains. Amnesty for SGBV would fly in the face of the recently passed UNSC Resolution 1820 which recognizes that rape and sexual violence can constitute war crimes and should be dealt with as such. The situation in the eastern region of the DRC represents the clearest opportunity for the international community to take seriously its commitment to implement UNSC 1820 since it was passed in June of this year.
- As the work of the UN Special Envoy, former President Olesgun Obasanjo, continues, the Security Council must ensure that there is an unqualified exclusion of sexual violence and child recruitment crimes from any possible amnesty provisions in the context of the current and any future conflict resolution processes.
- The culture of impunity and widespread human rights violations has to be addressed by putting greater pressure on the government of the DRC to ensure that perpetrators are apprehended, prosecuted and punished, as well as make it possible for the victims to seek redress, as per the spirit of UNSC 1820.

○ The Security Council must do more to ensure a more effective and accelerated reform of the Security Sector in the DRC, in particular the judicial system.

○ Your Excellencies, we call on the Security Council to lead the international community so that it would stop to only manage this most awful of crises, but to genuinely and urgently work to solve it. Otherwise, we will be bound to meet again a few months from now, lamenting the pain, suffering, and death of thousands more women and children.

By creating a culture that punishes violence and abuse of women and children, and a culture that elevates women to their rightful role and ensures an environment in which children can safely grow and flourish, we can lay the foundations for lasting peace and stability in the DRC, where women and their children are at last no longer victims of violence, abuse, and exploitation for war purposes, but agents of peace and a much better future.

Thank you again for this opportunity to address this urgent situation. I look forward to your questions.

***For more information please contact:***



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