

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

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April 1, 2008

Statement by Senator Russ Feingold
At the Hearing Before the Senate Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law
on "Rape as a Weapon of War: Accountability for Sexual Violence in Conflict"
Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226
Tuesday, April 1, 2008

I thank the Chairman of this Subcommittee, Senator Durbin, for holding this important hearing on a topic that is painful to discuss but even more difficult to ignore. All of us should be horrified by reports of the systematic sexual violence that millions of women and girls face. And all of us should be outraged by the impunity with which such crimes are committed. This type of abuse is so widespread in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo in large part because the perpetrators know they will not face consequences for their actions. No government of a civilized country can allow crimes of this severity and frequency to go unpunished.

During Congress' August recess last year, I traveled to the Democratic Republic of Congo and visited the embattled eastern regions just days before the major offensive that drove tens of thousands of people from their homes. While in North Kivu, I visited a camp of internally displaced Congolese and a center for victims of sexual abuse. As today's witnesses can attest, the consequences of the ongoing conflict and the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the eastern DRC may mean that there are few worse places in the world to be female. While in North Kivu, I met with a group of displaced Congolese women who had been sexually abused and in many cases raped, causing them to suffer serious physical, social, and psychological pain with little opportunity for healing or redress.

The humanitarian assistance that the United States and other donors offer the victims of this abuse is essential, but it is insufficient. Even more powerful than our money is our diplomacy. The U.S. and the international community must press every government that fails to prevent sexual violence, as well as other war crimes, to hold accountable those who have committed such heinous crimes.

In seeking justice from the perpetrators of terrible violence during Sierra Leone's civil war, the Special Court of Sierra Leone has begun convicting the perpetrators of sexual violence and rape for war crimes. I am hopeful that these historic precedents will set an example and send a message around the world. Today's hearing calls attention to this issue and to what I hope is the beginning of a concerted international effort to make the world safer for vulnerable women.