

Testimony of  
**Lisa Jackson**

April 1, 2008

Testimony of Lisa F. Jackson Documentary Maker and Director of "The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo"

Before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate

"Rape as a Weapon of War: Accountability for Sexual Violence in Conflict"

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Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Coburn, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be asked to come before you to describe from my own perspective some of what I witnessed and heard in the months that I spent in the Eastern DR Congo in 2006 and 2007 shooting a documentary film. During that time I interviewed many women and girls who had survived sexual violence. I talked with peacekeepers, priests, doctors, activists, international aid workers and, most chillingly of all, with a dozen self-confessed rapists, uniformed soldiers in the Congolese army who boasted to my camera about the dozens of women they had raped. What I heard in the Congo has altered the course of my own life, and I hope I can convey to you here today even a small sense of the profound impact that the women - and men - of the Congo had on me.

I want to add a personal note: in 1976, here in Washington DC, I myself was gang-raped. The three men who attacked me that night in Georgetown were never found and the statute of limitations on the crime expired long ago. I shared my story with the raped women I met in the Congo and they all asked about the war that was happening in my country. I explained to them that even in peacetime, women are not safe.

And while I'm grateful that the Subcommittee has taken on this formidable issue of sexual violence in conflict, it is a bit stunning that it has taken until mid-2008 for this subject to be addressed in these halls. The past century offers too many examples of rape being used as a weapon of war: the Japanese rapes during the 1937 occupation of Nanking, an estimated 200,000 women raped by Pakistani soldiers during the battle for Bangladeshi independence in 1971, the horrors of Bosnia and its infamous rape hotels, Rwanda with half a million rapes on top of the genocide deaths, the systematic raping of women by the Janjaweed in Darfur - the list goes on. The title of my film is "The Greatest Silence", taken from the opening of line of a survey co-written, in 2002, by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of Liberia: "Violence against women in conflict is one of history's greatest silences." And, sadly, history proves she is right.

But even in the context of this horrifying litany of the suffering of women in war, what has been happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the last 10 years is beyond the pale of any historical precedent. Congo's war is a war against women, a war in which women's bodies have

become the battleground, where no woman is safe. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been intentionally and systematically targeted, gang raped, mutilated, forcibly abducted for many months to vast inaccessible forest areas and used as sexual slaves. They are attacked by armed militias from Uganda and Burundi, by Hutu genocidaires who fled from justice in Rwanda, by warlords and their thugs, and by members of the very army and police forces that are supposed to protect them. United Nations peacekeepers have also committed rape and sexual exploitation. It is a femicide, pure and simple, and it is my hope that what you hear today will move this august body to action.

There will be other witnesses today who can speak with more knowledge than I about the roots of this conflict, but I have come to understand that it is a war that is being fought over riches, not ideologies. Congo's vast resources have been a curse since it was a Belgian colony over a hundred years ago, and today various national armies and Congolese factions are devastating the civilian population in order to loot the country's resources, the minerals, especially tin, cobalt and coltan, that we all require for our consumer electronic devices. Perhaps another hearing might more thoroughly explore the causes and ruinous consequences of this illegal plundering, but everyone in this room should consider the fact that there is the blood of Congolese women on their laptop computers and on their cell phones.

I first went to South Kivu, a province in the eastern DRC, in the spring of 2006, to investigate what was happening there for a documentary film about the fate of women and girls in conflict. I went in search of rape survivors who might tell me their stories and I found many dozens of raped women, women of all ages, too many women who at times would line up for hours, waiting until after the light disappeared and my camera could no longer record an image, waiting to talk to me, waiting to tell their stories to someone who would listen to them without judgment, hoping that I would relay their stories to a world that seemed indifferent to their horrific plight. I talked to them in their hospital beds, sitting on dirt floors in their mud huts, on the hard benches of a parish church, in the offices of NGOs where a few lucky ones had found skills training and shelter. These women might be just statistics to some, but to me they have names, faces, lives and stories that I will never forget.

Muhindo, a somber, dignified woman of 52 with five children, had been kidnapped from her home, dragged into the bush by soldiers from a Rwandan armed group who held her captive for two months. They used her as a sex slave, raped her daily, and forced her to carry their loads, cook their food and wash their clothes.

Veranda is 35 years old and has survived two attacks; she was first raped by Rwandese militia - the Interahamwe group - and again by thieves dressed in Congolese Army uniforms.

Safi lives in the hills above Bunyakiri and was raped at age 11 while her home was being looted by soldiers. Her huge eyes still have a slightly stunned look as she tells me that when she grows up she hopes to be a nun.

Maria Namafulu was 70 years old when she was raped by three soldiers. When she told them "I am an old woman" they said "you're not too old for us."

Faida was kidnapped from her home in Bunyakiri, enslaved and raped repeatedly by Interahamwe soldiers. She died from the resulting infections in 2007.

These are five out of literally hundreds of thousands of victims. Why is it that we know so very little about these women? Why has the world's press been so silent? Why in the past ten years has there been only ONE front-page story in the New York Times about the epidemic of sexual violence that is devastating the Congo? And why is it that rape in conflict is so infrequently prosecuted in the world's courts for being the heinous crime of war that it is? Where is the outrage? Perhaps there is some explanation in a comment made to me by a colonel in the UN peacekeeping force when I asked him about rape in the Congo. His candor somewhat surprised me:

I think we're all very ignorant of it. I think it's an issue that we want to push to one side. I don't think, as a human, I feel particularly comfortable sitting and talking about it here, for example. But it happens here on a huge scale and I agree, it is not spoken about.

But we can speak about the dead: the DRC is a country where, according to recent estimates by the International Rescue Committee, war has claimed over 5 million lives. Five million. That is more than 10 Darfurs. The conflict in Darfur has inspired countless newspaper articles, op-ed pieces, books, movies, mass demonstrations and the attention of major movie stars.

Why is no one standing up for the people of the Congo, crying out for Congo's dead, or pleading for its raped women, many of whom have literally become the walking dead? Because whether a woman is raped at gunpoint or forced into sexual slavery, the sexual abuse will shape not just her own but her community's future for years to come. Rape survivors face emotional torment, psychological damage, crippling physical injuries, disease, social ostracism and many other consequences that can devastate their lives and the lives of their families I think about Marie Jeanne M'wamasoro, a 34-year-old mother of eight, who was raped by five members of a Rwandan armed group when she was six months pregnant. She has been abandoned by her husband who tells their children that she wanted to be raped. She knows that she is stigmatized for life and says to me, with tears spilling over:

"My heart is broken. I know that wherever I go people will say 'that woman was raped.'"

And Imakile Furha who is now 18 years old and was raped at age 15 by two members of a Rwandan armed group who broke into her home in the middle of the night. She has a daughter, Lumiere, from those rapes, and she lives with a burden no teenager should have to bear:

"There is nothing I can do about the past. But sometimes I spend my days crying. I really don't have a plan for the future. I hope that by the grace of God I will find someone who will marry me."

The lives of these women - and their children - have been forever altered, and some of them destroyed. What I am going to read to you now is a transcription of one survivor's incredible soliloquy. She was part of a group of women who had been kidnapped and held as sex slaves. She stood up, unprompted, spoke directly to my camera and told me:

I am very thankful, because we believe that with your arrival here we will get help. The same painful thing has happened to every woman in this room. They have taken our belongings. We were raped by twenty men at the same time. Our bodies are suffering. They have taken their guns and put them inside of us. They kill our children and then they tell us to eat those children. If a woman is pregnant they make your children stand on your belly so that you will abort. Then they take the blood from your womb and put it in a bowl and tell you to drink it. When we were living in the forest it wasn't just one man. Every soldier can have sex with you. We got pregnant there. We gave birth in the forest, alone, like animals, without food or medicine. We are all alone--our husbands have been killed, or they have denied us. Even our families have denied us. We don't know what to do, where to go.

When she finished speaking, she turned to the wall, covered her face, and wept. Her story was no exaggeration - I heard its variations many times: the cannibalism, the egregious acts of brutal violence, unspeakable degradations, the abandonment, the shame, the total despair.

I thought about this woman, whose name I never discovered, when I interviewed soldiers, members of the national Congolese army, who talked brazenly to me about the rapes they had committed. They were practically swaggering, describing their reasons and methods of rape without shame, guilt or even a hint of remorse, because they knew that in Congo's culture of impunity they would face no reprisals for their crimes.

If she says no, I must take her by force. If she is strong I'll call some friends to help me. I rape because of the need. After that I feel I am a man. I have no time to negotiate; I have no time to love her. I am in need. If I ask and she says no, I will take her by force.

The women were afraid and when they resisted I told them I would use my gun to get what I want and most of the time they ended up accepting.

We rape because God said that man is superior to woman. The man must command, must give the orders, and must do whatever he wants to a woman.

I asked the soldiers how many women they had raped. Five, eleven, eighteen they replied. One man had lost track:

It's hard to keep record of the number of women that I've raped. The thing to keep in mind is the fact that we stayed too long in the bush and that induced us to rape... You know how things are in combat zones. We raped as we advanced from village to village. For an approximate number, I'd say maybe twenty-five.

In my 30 years of filmmaking, interviewing these soldiers was the single, most devastating moment I had ever experienced. I had just recorded men confessing to unspeakable crimes and when the interviews were over they just melted back into the forest. There was no one around to arrest them, they were not talking to me from a jail cell. And as they vanished into the bush I thought to myself, who will be their next victims?

These soldiers represent a tiny fraction of the gruesome overall picture. A common concern that was expressed over and over again in the course of my interviews was that of impunity. The widespread rape and sexual violence is fuelled by a pervasive culture of impunity that the Government of Congo seems unwilling or unable to combat.

When women come together, their anger is palpable. In a meeting I filmed of a support group of raped women in the small village of Bunyakiri, one lamented bitterly:

And more than once we went to our chiefs to explain the problem and they did nothing. They talk about parity between men and women but this is a dream for us. Impossible! We are considered half human beings.

Yes, the government passed a sweeping new law last year regarding sexual violence, a law that, for instance, finally made rape with guns and sticks a crime, but I heard over and over again stories about the futility of enforcement, about rapists who would pay a bribe of 3 or 4 dollars and walk free, about jails with no locks on the cell doors, about sex crime units with - literally - a staff of one, and about women who face brutal reprisals if they speak out about the crimes perpetrated against them or dare to denounce their attackers. They are left to bear the pain alone, without the solace of peace, or the possibility of justice.

As one women's advocate in Kinshasa said to me:

The rapists of yesterday have today become the authorities and they encourage sexual violence because for them it has become a lifestyle. That is why the violence doesn't end.

The international community cannot continue to turn a blind eye to these atrocities or afford to wash our hands of the Congo because an elected government is now in place. We cannot speak of peace in Congo while rampant sexual violence continues unabated and a war continues to rage against women and girls. In the face of the government's impotence or unwillingness to intervene, the international community must act to bring an end to these deplorable crimes.

? A country that allows this to happen to its most vulnerable citizens does not deserve to be counted among the league of civilized nations. Future U.S. aid to Kabila's government should be contingent on Congo's meeting set human rights benchmarks, including insuring the protection of women from sexual violence, assistance to victims, prompt investigation and prosecution of perpetrators and establishing security in all regions so that the women of Congo can live their lives with the dignity and safety entitled to every human being.

? Likewise, U.S. funds earmarked for the DRC's military should be suspended until soldiers accused of - or confessing openly to - rape are brought to justice.

? While progress has been made through the recent UN Security Council's Resolution calling for all members of the FDLR, ex-FAR/Interahamwe, and other Rwandan armed groups operating in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo to immediately lay down their arms, it is imperative to ensure that individuals who are responsible for grave sexual violence and systematic rape -war crimes and crimes against humanity -do not receive protection through repatriation. The search for peace must not include amnesty for these crimes committed against women.

We must use all our leverage to end this violence. The violence must end, for the sake of the women and girls, for the sake of the Congo, and for the sake of the future of Africa.

As an angry and frustrated policewoman in my film comments,

And, so, what is a woman? The woman is the mother of a nation. He who rapes a woman, rapes an entire nation. When a woman is exposed to that kind of violence it's the entire country that is affected by it.

I will leave you all with the words of Maria, the 70-year-old rape survivor from Bunyakiri, who said to me:

Our country will be destroyed completely if this keeps happening. Women are suffering. We have forgotten what happiness is.

Thank you.