

Raped by seven soldiers

'IT'S AS IF THEY HAD RAPED MY MIND AS WELL AS MY BODY'

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It was their first night at home after two weeks of hiding in the bush, sleeping under the waxy cover of banana trees where the folds of the lush mountains rise vivid green with tea. Vincienne and her husband had been told it was safe to go back and were asleep when the chirruping of crickets was interrupted by a hammering on the door.

"We refused to open, so they smashed it down," Vincienne, 30, explains. "They grabbed my husband, dragged him outside. I could see only torches. They demanded money. All we had was two cows. We showed them but they tied my husband to the tree outside. They took a metal instrument like a scalpel and gouged out his eyes.

"There were eight soldiers. One stayed with my husband. The other seven took it in turns to rape me. They inserted sticks in me. My oldest daughter was five. When she tried to defend me they beat her.

"Then they dragged us outside. They shot my husband, covered him in leaves and then put a flame to him and the house. It was all on fire. My twin girls were only two years old. They died inside."

Vincienne pauses. Telling her story is part of the treatment she is receiving now, but remembering it is part of the punishment too.

She was, she says, bleeding heavily when the soldiers dragged her daughter and her towards Nindja forest some 60km away where the militia is based.

"When we got there I was handed over to another man and forced to have sex with him," she says quietly. "We were forced to cook food and dig graves. They beat us every day. I became pregnant from the rape and gave birth in the forest, but still they did not let me go."

In all her ordeal lasted 12 months, until she escaped with her baby strapped to her back and her surviving daughter in her arms.

There is supposed to be a ceasefire in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country the size of western Europe where two major armed conflicts in the recent past have left more than five million dead. In reality, the fighting is still going on. Some of the soldiers have agreed to reintegrate into the Congolese army or return to Rwanda, but their leaders invariably persuade others to remain and fight on. The leaders have nothing to lose: they will be offered no amnesty and some are wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes. Ultimately, it is the women who pay the price.

The Congolese jungle, a riot of vegetation the author Joseph Conrad saw as the heart of darkness, is more light and beautiful than he painted it then, but it still harbours murderous intentions. Some 7000 members of the Forces Democratiques de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) still live in the forest, an armed group dominated by Rwandan Hutu extremists and the Interahamwe who orchestrated the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

"When I got back my brother-in-law had sold our land," says Vincienne. "He said he did not want me back in the village - that I had to leave because my husband was dead. I had to beg to get food. People said bad things because I had been raped."

Compared to some victims, Vincienne has been lucky. She had counselling and help with getting medical treatment from the listening centre at Walungu, about 50km south-west of the provincial capital of Bukavu, which is funded by the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF). She spent five weeks in hospital for internal injuries caused by the rapes. Even so, she looks haunted. Her clothes do not fit. Despite the poverty here, women take great pride in their brightly coloured wraparound pagne dresses. Vincienne wears a man's shirt. Her clothes have been donated by local parishioners and she does not use her real name, fearing the men could return.

"I live as a refugee," she says. "I am being punished for what happened to me. At first I could not sleep. I jumped when I heard the slightest noise. Everything sounded like gunfire. But talking to the counsellors has helped."

In South Kivu, a province in the east of the DRC with a population of just 1.5 million, 14,000 rapes were recorded last year and there is no evidence of the violence abating. In the first three months of this year there have been 4013 cases. To put it in context, Scotland, with a population three times greater, last year recorded 1123 rapes. The actual figures in South Kivu are thought to be far higher because many victims never tell. The attendant stigma means they face being cast out by the community.

"This is not about raping women for pleasure - it is a strategy for destroying a people," says Father Justin Nkunzi Baciynjuze, head of CDJP, the justice and peace commission that runs the listening centres and lobbies for peace. "After raping them they even cut off their breasts or put sticks in their sexual organs."

"It is a strategy of war. Many of the women who have been raped have HIV or are left unable to have children. Without children there is no society. Everything disintegrates."

Many have left and live as refugees in neighbouring countries like Tanzania. For those who remain, says Sifa Judith Mudekeneza, 19, "there is nowhere safe to go".

"This is not peace," she says. "One day is quiet, the next it is war. Women who have not been taken wait and hide. They know that tomorrow it could be them."

A decade ago, when the main threat of sexual violence came from the FDLR and other militias, women felt safer moving away from the forest and towards larger settlements like Bukavu. Where once they feared only the roaming militias, though, now they know there is no escape - even from those supposed to protect them, including the police, the Congolese army and the UN.

What began as a form of warfare has become a way of life: more than 14% of rapes are now committed by civilians. In the village of Bumbalali, South Kivu, the locals live so close to the FDLR they are suspicious of strangers in a country renowned for its friendliness.

The FDLR come down the Kahuzi mountains and raid the villages with impunity, raping, looting and killing. Their presence hangs over the people here like the mountain mists.

Nineteen-year-old Sifa once lived in Bumbalali, but she is an outcast now. Her crime is to have been abducted and forced to live as a sex slave to the FDLR - she was later diagnosed HIV positive. She takes long strides through the viscous, clinging mud of the highlands where the air smells of fresh mint. It is mukabambasi, a wild herb the villagers use to ward away poisonous bugs. This morning she has walked the 10km from Walungu, where she ekes out her existence as a refugee.

Sifa tells how she was just 14 when she was first raped. It happened right here in this compound, where the only protection is the homemade wooden fence encircling the four adobe huts. It was New Year's Day, 2003. She remembers the rattle of machine guns waking her family and the sound of her brother being shot. Her shoulder still bares the scars of where they beat her.

"We hid under the beds and tried to stay silent but they smashed down the door and pulled us out by our arms and legs," she explains. "They tied us up with ropes, beat people and looted everything from the houses and then they marched us away into the forest."

We walked for two days. I was passed to one man who raped me again and again and forced me to be his wife. They kept watch on us and forced us to cook and collect water and firewood. After five months there the Congolese army attacked. I ran away."

Sifa had been at school, hoping to train as a nurse or doctor. Instead she became a mother with no hope of a husband because of the stigma of rape. Months later she gave birth to Pascal. She says she loves him greatly, even though his father was a rapist.

"Even after I escaped they sent notes, threatening me and warning that they would come back and take the child," she says. "They came again but we hid in the bush so they did not find us. Instead they burnt down our house."

The jungle here works so fast to reclaim its land there is not even a charred mark where the house once stood. "My family sent me to stay with a relative in Bukavu where they thought it would be safer, " says Sifa. "I started again. I was selling clothes to make money.

Then one night bandits broke into the house.

There were six men. Two of them raped me. I was so angry and upset. It was as if they raped my mind as well as my body."

Sifa was left pregnant again. Pascaline, her daughter conceived during the second attack, is now nine months old.

Even in Walungu there is no sanctuary for Vincienne, as the HIV she contracted from the rapists has begun to ravage her young body. Codilusi, a local agency funded by SCIAF, is helping her with anti-retroviral medicine. Most victims, like Sifa, do not make it to medical care within the 72-hour deadline for receiving HIV prevention treatment, and even if they could, the medical centres have few or no post-exposure prophylaxis (Pep) kits.

In the rural hospitals that are, in comparison, relatively well equipped, doctors tell us there are insufficient resources to treat the hundreds of women who require complex operations for fistula and other rape-related injuries.

Many are left incontinent. Women queue for weeks to get on the waiting list for Panzi, the one fully funded hospital for rape victims in Bukavu. It is a haven for victims and provides free care, but such centralisation means attention is often diluted dangerously in the outlying areas. SCIAF is working with Codilusi to provide better health care for women nearer to their homes.

Sifa says she cannot forgive these men.

More than anything she wants to earn enough money to pay for her children's food and education. Children born of rape have no legal rights: unless they can persuade a male family member to give them their surname and go through the courts to secure the requisite legal paperwork, they are not even allowed to attend school.